Advances in Organization Studies

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Advances in Organization Studies is a channel for cutting edge theoretical and empirical works of high quality, that contributes to the field of organizational studies. The series welcomes thought-provoking ideas, new perspectives and neglected topics from researchers within a wide range of disciplines and geographical locations.
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**Sheila McNamee**, Ph.D., is Professor of Communication at the University of New Hampshire. She is a co-founder and Board Member of the Taos Institute ([www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net)). She is author of *Relational Responsibility: Resources for Sustainable Dialogue*, with Kenneth Gergen (Sage, 1999). Other books include, *Therapy as Social Construction*, with Kenneth Gergen (Sage, 1992), *Philosophy in Therapy: The Social Poetics of Therapeutic Conversation*, with Klaus Deissler (Carl Auer Systeme Verlag, 2000), and *The Appreciative Organization*, with her co-founders of the Taos Institute (Taos Institute, 2001). Professor McNamee has also authored numerous articles and chapters on social constructionist theory and practice. She actively engages constructionist practices in a variety of contexts to bring communities of participants with diametrically opposing viewpoints together to create livable futures. Professor McNamee lectures and consults regularly, both nationally and internationally, for universities, private institutes, organisations, and communities.
Preface

Dian Marie Hosking and Sheila McNamee

Why this book

Our professional identities include those of organisational and community consultant, group facilitator, course concept designer, and professor. The latter identity is variously defined by the OED as “one who makes open declaration of (her) sentiments…” and/or “a grandiose title” “assumed…by teachers and exponents of dancing, jugglery, phrenology etc” (OED, 1973). ‘Declaring sentiments’ (or indeed, the practice of juggling) in an educational context increasingly calls for an introductory text. However, it must be one of Murphy’s many laws that the ‘right’ introductory text for the very particular particularities of our courses can never be found. Instead we struggle with ‘well it sort of works’. But of course ‘it sort of works’ can be both confusing and frustrating – particularly for those new to the subject and its variations, cross-overs and fusions.

The contexts for which this text is needed could be variously described. For example Dian Marie frequently runs courses that might, in the ‘declarations’ of another be called Organisational Behaviour (OB) or Human Resource Management (HRM). However, as she has said elsewhere (Hosking and Morley, 1991), OB & HRM texts typically treat person and organisation as separate entities, in subject-object relation, where the former aims to know and to form the latter in relation to apparently rational purposes, and relational processes are reduced to input-outcome dynamics. This said, there is a “new psychology” (as Holzman, this volume, calls it) that presents a very different story of personhood in which people are seen to participate in the (re)construction of social realities – not as individual, subjective ‘mind stuff’- but as meaningful social practices. This social constructionist perspective is largely absent from OB and HRM texts – indeed, were it to be present – these subjects would be significantly re-constructed.

Sheila adds another context – communication studies. In those literatures, we are hard pushed to find serious consideration of both communication processes and organisation in a theoretically integrated way – yet this is precisely
what becomes possible when processes of social construction are centred. We could mention many other contexts but we will stop with just one more – the subject of change work. We need constructionist discussions of organisational change work – discussions that assume: ongoing and emergent processes (contrasting with the more usual view of change as a temporary aberration from stasis), multiple social realities (rather than one ‘real’ world ‘out there’) and power relations (not just authority, leadership and ‘dirty’ politics).

So, we felt the need for a text that explicitly took a social constructionist approach to organisational life. The case becomes yet more pressing when we think of the many and increasing number of scholars in European business schools who now refer to their work as ‘social constructionist’. However, Dian Marie’s experience is that the term is often used to refer to what psychology has long called either constructivism or social constructivism, centring individuals, subjective knowledge, and concepts such as perception and mind maps and continuing to position the scientist/narrator as one who can produce objective knowledge (see e.g., Gergen, 1985; Hosking and Bouwen, 2000). In this volume, we have brought together a variety of voices attuned to a version of social constructionism that connects most strongly with postmodern and poststructuralist themes, reflecting “new psychology”, and centring ongoing relational processes as they make people and worlds. Our intention is not to pronounce some orthodoxy but rather to assist those who are relatively new to what is a huge, ever growing, multi-disciplinary field where social constructionism means many different things.

How we have composed this book

Our Overture and three movements are played out through three instruments: chapters, poems, and intermezzo. The first seems to require no further comment. The intermezzo are offered in rather the same way that some introductory textbooks have boxes with little case studies or exercises or short detours to elaborate an important embedded theme. So we have selected a number of important and recurring ‘idee fixe’ (subject-object, power, narrative inquiry, metaphor, dialogue and debate), along with a short discussion of inquiry as it now may be differently understood – as narrative. The poems are different again. We asked Caroline to contribute some of the poems she has written for use in her work with students. As she writes in her chapter, she uses poems for very particular pedagogic purposes that reflect her social constructionist perspective. As it turned out, each of the poems included she wrote here in response to a particular chapter – playing with language, with metaphor, with related ideas – in ways that readers might find helpful and provocative.

This brings us to the story of our Overture and movements. The overture sets the scene; it introduces key themes that will be met in the subsequent
development of the argument. The first movement is entitled Relational Reconstructions of Some Classic Themes. These ‘classic’ themes – for example leadership – emerged from a conception of persons, organisations, knowledge, science … – that is very different from the conception articulated in social constructionism. You could say that this movement ‘starts’ from what seems like a well-known tune but – as with Beethoven’s wonderous variations around ‘God save the King’ – the tune is turned into something else. In the Second movement we have a look at ‘Some Recently Popular Themes’ – themes that perhaps have gained new energy and vitality in the context of the attention directed to postmodernity (globalisation, new ICT’s, the speed of change…) and the increasing attention to texts rather than ‘things’ with properties. The Third movement has the deliberately ambiguous title of Changing Constructions. The five chapters, poems and intermezzo address in different ways various aspects of consulting and change work, and changed constructions of long established instruments such as language, dialogue, multiplicity and performance. We have written no concluding chapter. There is no conclusion other than there is no conclusion.

References


Why do I write about organizations in poetry?
Caroline Ramsey

Introduction
I have found that writing poetry has been a productive way in which I can explore ideas about organizations. I think that there are two key reasons for this. First, writing poetry provides me with a space where the role of ‘other’, in relation to my writing ‘self’, is clearer than in writing prose. I identify two ways in which this occurs (a) in the contribution of poetic form to shaping what I can write in a poem and (b) in the way that some of the tropes used in poetry (e.g. metaphor or imagery), give greater freedom to a reader’s interpretation. Of course, a reader will always interpret anything they read, but poetry allows a writer to be more tentative and handle ideas in a way that encourages multiple readings. This leads to the second reason for my valuing poetry; I find that I can write in ways that would not make sense in conventional prose. I can, for example, turn a subject over and look at it from different perspectives. Different voices can be heard, and I can finish a poem without needing to resolve issues or doubts.

Writing in relation to Other
Poetic form as Other
Since Coleridge there has been debate as to whether poetic form is a structure or a process of writing poetry (Conte, 1991). Historical forms, such as Sonnets, Sestinas or formal rhyming and metrical schemes, undoubtedly shape how a poet can write a particular theme. More recent postmodern or open poetry still has its forms (Conte, 1991; Olson, 1966) but, Olson argues, different energies drive the relationship between form and content, and rather than seeing form constrain the content of a poem, that form and content are inextricably linked.

I do not see poetic form as a constraint; I find it to be a dialogical partner in creating a written practice. Richardson (1994) argues that our self is always present in our writing; or rather that part of our self is always pre-
sent. A relational constructionist perspective suggests that self and other are always present in our writing (e.g., Shotter, 1993) and so exploring ways of writing that ‘celebrate Other’ (Sampson, 1993) is likely to enrich a postmodern approach to Organization Studies. Below is an example of one of my poems. Version 1 was my second attempt. I had liked the imagery and use of metaphor in a first draft, but as a friend pointed out the “rhythm was all over the place”. This second attempt reworked the ideas into new lines.

The band played on with intensity of ear;
each instrument enfolding others
or if standing proud, apart,
accented by the rest.
An audience, attending to a whole of blended parts,
enjoy each separate and the whole,
as each enriches each
in making more with all:
a rhythm of a joint and mutual heart.

The words and themes remained largely the same; I had just worked on line length and order in an attempt to render the poem more rhythmic. Looking at this some 3 months on, I feel that this poem is now going somewhere and that I can work with it, but at the time I felt that it was a lost cause and so I tried again (version 2 below); this time I used one of the great, classic forms of English poetry: the sonnet.

The band played on and so, within their ear,
attend to many stranded stories told.
As each and ev’ry tone another enfold
within, throughout and pervading clear;
the wrapping of the whole by each I hear.
As each enriches each, as given not sold;
a greatness found in following, the truly bold
now drift behind, and cede control to steer.
And so the many into one do blend
as crowd makes space to show the separate,
the troupe move around to play their part
as solo weaves with set to ensure the end
that all and each, with acknowledged weight,
empower the beat of joint and mutual heart.

The particular point that I want to highlight from this version is how the poetic form of the sonnet changed some of the themes of the poem and introduced new ones into it. A new metaphor of the narrative is introduced. I
like the phrase “many stranded stories” but wonder if it is one metaphor too
too? Maybe I’ll hijack that and use it again somewhere else! An additional
problem I found in this version was that the sonnet form was shaping my
writing in what seems a very contrived manner. What I found more generat-
ive, however, was in the lines:

    a greatness found in following, the truly bold
    now drift behind, and cede control to steer.

For in these lines the meter and rhyming scheme of a sonnet pushed me into
an expansion of my working with ideas from improvised jazz. In particular,
an interesting theme for organizational methodologists is in improvised jazz’s
concept of shared leadership, “A greatness found in following” and “the truly
bold now drift behind” would not be images found in popular treatments of
leadership (e.g. Bennis, 1989; Kotter, 2001). So here a poem is able to draw
on images from elsewhere, and the form worked in dialogue with poet to
produce more than I, as the poet, originally intended or expected. The writing
became excitingly dialogic. There is no certainty as to where the poem can go
and what ideas, agendas and possibilities may arise in constructive relation
between the self (Poet) and other (in this case – form); the final poem is included
in this volume. Conte (1991) quotes an interview with the poet John Ashbery
on this generative potential of poetic form:

    “The really bizarre requirements of a sestina I use as a probing tool rather than
    as a form in the traditional sense. I once told somebody that writing a sestina
    was rather like riding downhill on a bicycle and having the pedals push your
    feet. I wanted my feet to be pushed into places they wouldn’t have normally
    have taken.”
    (Ashbery, as cited in Conte, 1991, p174)

The reader as other

Writing poetry can also change the relationship between the writer and their
readership. Bernstein (1986) writes of poetry as a process of writing that is
“tangible, palpable” in contrast to writing that attempts to be transparent;
where stylistic techniques attempt to render the writing invisible; so that all you
have are the contents of the thinking. Elsewhere (Bernstein, 1992), he suggests
that poetry is an “artifice” and takes Olson’s argument that poetry, by its very
opaqueness, moves the self from being ego centric -“observing, accounting
for” – to being in the world, in relation. Making the writing opaque in this
way emphasizes its world making.
“the making invisible – inaudible – of these forms/structures/shapes gives the sensation of a world beyond the page/the language that is already given, assumed; whereas the acknowledgement of these forms as materials to be worked with, as an active part of the writing, suggests ‘our’ participation in the constitution of nature and meaning.”
(Bernstein, 1986,p71)

Writing poetry as an artifice renders the writing visible and can be an authorial discipline which challenges a sense of writing as being an invisible, authentic representation or the author’s thoughts and intentions. As poetry interlinks form and content, so the process of poetry writing/reading is made available for a reader to construct alternative meanings, possibilities and consequences. The emphasis moves from writing as an evocation of researcher’s ideas, account of what happened or what was said, to being the creation of a new constructive relationship – between writer and reader – where research material plays the role of a pador bringing together different parties. Shotter and Katz (1996) speak of a difference between monological-retrospective-objective writing and dialogical-prospective-relational writing. The former allows the writer to adopt an authoritative ‘god’s eye’ position, whilst the latter reflects ongoing involvement and as a result: “our style of writing must be more tentative and open, and less definitive and authoritative, couched in terms of possibilities rather than claimed actualities.”

I am not arguing that only poetry offers this co-constructive writing/reading. Indeed I would accept Barthes’ (1977) point that this joint meaning making process is an unavoidable part of writing. However, a writing genre that ostensibly and stylistically expresses an author’s voice in terms of a beginning (defining what is to be written about), middle (constructing a coherent logic) and ending (if not providing a conclusion then some form of resolution) will unavoidably provide less scope for joint meaning making than a genre where metaphors, imagery and rhythm are offered for the reader to relate to.

If, as I suggest, poetry provides an arena where self and other can clearly construct meaning in relation, then we are offered an active space for co-ordination. Potential co-ordinations of the reader to a poem might include: resonating, responding, provocation, invitation or passing on to yet another (Herd, 2002). In each of these cases the response is potentially active; it opens new space for generative, active theorizing (Gergen, 1994b). Rather than posing questions of accuracy or truth, poetry poses the reader questions such as “what are you going to do with this?” This is inquiry as the generation of possibilities, an incomplete but insightful form for the study of organizations. Daft (1983) suggested that there is a terseness in poetry that allows for a different view of any topic, that gives a brief view of a whole rather than the objectively viewed whole.

My enthusiasm is this; poetry provides ‘Others’ with whom I, as a writer and learner, can co-create a trajectory of ideas. Be it with the rhyme or meter
in formal poetry, or as Olson argues in syllable, breath and line in open verse; still what can be written, said or discussed or explored on the page emerges from a co-production. Strangely, in what might be taken as a contradiction to romantic notions, the Other of poetic form denies the feeling of self-expression afforded to prose writers. This is Olson’s point (Olson, 1997) when he argues that poetry rather than describing enacts the human universe, and that enacting involves engagement with other. Poetic form celebrates Other and in the very process of writing draws attention to process and Other in a way that prose draws attention to logic, argument and conclusion, or narrative draws attention to a “valued end point” (Gergen, 1994a) or coda (Mishler, 1986). In doing so the reader is drawn into the creative process rather than being left to only appreciate the end result.

d’orsay did everything for me
presented the artwork complete.
I was made an extra, supporting, redundant;
my only role to admire:
    nothing expected of me.
And if nothing expected, so nothing achieved.
If nothing required then nothing attempted,
but I want to attempt, and I want to engage.
I want to take part, make a start to an art,
... but d’orsay did it all for me,
    so I just walked around.
Now a line of grey bricks, or bold coloured square,
that I could do, that could be me
and maybe I’d add an idea here and there,
and so for a moment, an exhilarating moment,
    I’d be an artist there too!1

Poetry and the avoidance of conclusion

Many management and organization textbooks have a tendency to look for the real dynamics underlying forces in an organization or to promote something called ‘best practice’. Quite apart from having problems with the implicit epistemology of such efforts; I find that organizations are far too complex and messy for these attempts to be successful. Furthermore, I am increasingly finding that my students, especially those who come with experience of management are skeptical of such descriptions and prescriptions. Poetry appears to add a dimension for incompleteness to learning; it allows – perhaps even encourages – an avoidance of conclusions where they might be illusory. There are three reasons for this – poetry allows: a moving around and about a topic;
the use of different voices, and; a greater freedom to end without closure. I explore each characteristic in greater depth.

Moving around and about a topic

Bernstein suggests that poetry seeks to embody thinking in writing with its “possibilities for leaps, jumps, fissures, repetition, bridges, schisms, colloquialisms, trains of association, and improvisation” (p63). I have already mentioned Ashbery’s use of the poetic form: sestina. It is worth exploring a little more. Pound (as cited in Drury, 1995) suggested a sestina allows for a “folding and unfolding” of a topic. Each line-end word is reused in the six stanzas in a preset order. In Managing Sestina managing me? (also in this volume) I explore concepts of control, work, managing, shaping, action and thought.

In teaching management from a conventional, managerialist perspective such ideas would cause no problem. However, as I was forced to re-use the words in different orders they moved from being verbs to nouns and back again. A question of who, or what, is controlling whom becomes apparent and poses the question is it ever thus for managers? Hacker describes a sestina thus: “A camera on a rotating boom/six words spin slowly round and pan the room.” (Hacker, as cited in Drury, 1995). That is very much the experience I have as I revisit the poem². I chose six words that I thought I could use but as the poem progressed I found that I was constrained and, as discussed above, that constraint produced new and intriguing variants. On reading the poem I still feel the outburst of frustration and exasperation in the 5th stanza. There is a sense here that, although I am doing something very different to Poindexter (2002) I am, like her, finding that poetry gives an immediacy to the emotion and humanity of learning. What becomes apparent with “Managing Sestina Managing Me?” is the emotional involvement of a researcher in exploring a topic, and that there is, especially for an organizational researcher, an intriguing reflexivity of analysis where researchers themselves very obviously become a part of the subject under investigation (Hosking, 1999).

A contribution of the incomplete?

My point is this: writing in prose would not have allowed or facilitated me linking and interweaving these different themes into a whole. I seek, in Shotter and Katz’s term “to strike” my readers, to invite them to attend to possibilities of constructive relation that might not have struck them without the poetic writing of these ideas. Gergen (1994a) and others (e.g. Mishler, 1986; Reissman, 1992) talk of what goes to make a well-formed narrative. I would suggest that there are similar accounts of what goes to make a well-formed
course or book on organization (e.g. Sutton & Staw, 1995), and the leaving of issues incomplete would not usually be applauded. In a poem however, that is possible, indeed incompleteness becomes one of the joys of poetry. Metaphor, imagery and form can open for a reader a spacious environment to develop ideas and practice. Of course, another writer might validly argue that I have not developed and built a coherent argument in the poem. The points I raise in my poems are incomplete, any thoughtful reader would be able to counter them with robust rejoinders. But that is exactly my point: the poem is a contribution to a conversation not a completion of it. In writing a poem I do not seek to convince or overpower alternative treatments of this subject. Instead I invite response in a dynamic form. Nor is this poetic writing to be considered a purely academic endeavor. Shotter and Katz (1996) outline a “social poetics” which gives prominence to distinctions that we commonly overlook. A social poetics, they argue, creates new ways of inquiring through use of images, analogies and metaphors; lifting current ‘grammars’ of understanding by use of similes, similarities or dissimilarities. The work of the researcher, manager or professional in any field is therefore always incomplete, always accepting other ways of ‘knowing’, other language games. In this way a social poetics facilitates socially generative ways of going on in relation, be it between teams of managers, other collaborating professionals or academic readers and writers. In effect incompleteness offers, along with the contribution of poetic form and reader, a consciously dialogical method of writing or engaging in academic or professional inquiry.

Space for Many Voices

Bernstein (1999) writes that “contemporary poetry remains an indispensable site for the exploration of the multiplicities, and multiplicitousness, of identities” (p305). Just as poetry provides space to circle an issue or theme, so it also provides a medium in which multiple voices can be heard. Again, other prose methods exist that seek to achieve this end, for example Woolgar and Ashmore (1988) or Smith and Gergen (1995) use a second voice device to allow a reflexive manner of writing, however I would argue that poetry has an especially creative potential in facilitating a dialogue to appear. In the poem “The Leaders” the three different voices are given different fonts and to an extent it is not certain which voice is privileged (although I admit that having read other of my poems most readers would be pretty certain which is ‘my’ voice). In other poems alternative moods are given different rhythms, doubts are allowed to interrupt a flow of argument and plays on words highlight absurdities. Each of these can be seen in another poem “Learning” (with chapter 10 in this volume).

In this poem we can see an attempt to explore the topic of learning using
each of the three dialogical shifts that I argue poetry offers someone wishing
to study organizations. The poetic choice of words highlights themes or ques-
tions. Is learning really a process of packing, stacking and tracking “things
of mind”? Is our understanding of learning from this poem different because
those words are used rather than, say, studying, memorizing or analyzing?
Different voices, or perhaps tones of voice, vie for the reader’s attention as
line lengths lead to an audible emphasizing of certain ideas. Isn’t the idea of
learning being like a convict that might escape absurd? Yet it makes some
kind of sense within this poem. Is it now possible, having engaged with the
poem, to suggest that learning when treated as the packing, stacking and
tracking of “things of mind” is equally absurd unless it is positioned within
a particular intellectual context, in the same way that “the unlearning run of
a convict escaped” makes sense within the context of this poem? Does this
poem ‘strike’ you in ways that provoke a search for new models of learning:
learning, perhaps, being a process of building or changing rather than the
stacking of ‘things’? So, with no clear single meaning privileged, the reader
is consciously enjoined in performing possibilities with the poet, perhaps “to
build anew/ learn as we do”? Rather than a monotone of persuasive argu-
mentation, poetry allows for shades and tones of doubt and uncertainty. As
Richardson writes “we find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, tem-
poral sequences, blurred experiences, and so on; we struggle to find a textual
place for ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties.” (1994, p.521). Poetry
provides such a space for reader and writer. It is in allowing for the uncertain-
ties, in permitting tentative writing or in promoting possibilities that poetry
provides spacious environments for dialogic, academic exploration of issues
within organizational studies.

Avoiding the irony of a conclusion?

Following the previous point it would be strange indeed to finish this chap-
ter with a conclusion! Instead, I will just end with a poem that I wrote after
visiting an exhibition of modern art. For me it sums up much of what I am
attempting to do in using poetry in my, and my students learning about orga-
ising. I’ve suggested above that poetry stimulates an active response. In the
classroom, or other learning context, I have found that poetry foregrounds
relationship, invitation, maybes and wondering. I don’t think that these are
unhelpful companions in learning and development!
SensAtion a(on)d East Side

There’s a sadness in the leaving
too early to ’see’ all.
A feeling left uncaptured,
no description, unexplored.
Reaction undeveloped,
unworded, no relating:
of the me who entered in then
and the me now sitting here. . .

. . . in a canteen – coffee, sandwich
and the grasping for a form:
word or frame considered
to take away and hold

but there is no holding moments
transient, cloudlike puffs.
So there’s a sadness in the leaving
as intention’s fingers slip.

BUT

There’s a “hello” in the moment,
an invitation glimpse
and a maybe looking forward
and wond’ring going on.

Here are some questions that can be used to explore each of the poems:

Managing a sestina managing me?
• Just who controls what in this poem?
• How much writing about frustration do we find in management textbooks?

The Agent out there
• This is a silly poem! So why is the idea of an agentic leader of organizations
  not silly?
• If a manager is diagnosing, leading, inspiring, motivating etc. etc. what are
  the others doing?
Who am I?
- How would treating ourselves as a process of relating rather than as an individual author of action change our ideas of managing others?

The Leaders
- What happens to your appreciation of this poem if we change the genders of the leaders in the first sections? (One student assured me that the woman in the second stanza was the first’s secretary. After all no senior manager would have flowers on his desk!)
- How are subject-object relations created within this poem
- Is there any ‘real’ difference in leadership styles?

Me-they-we?
- Are relationships the product of personal differences or of moments? If we assume the latter, what options does this offer us in our working relations?

Learning
- Is learning a memorising of things (facts, states of affairs, cause-effect relations)?
- What role might be given to these things if we ‘build’ learning?

The Band Played on
- Where are managers taught to listen?
- Can leaders follow?
- What actions might encourage genuine joint production of organizational activity?

The Experts
- What do we lose in becoming experts on organizations?

Synergy
- Perhaps this poem should just be enjoyed, but you can also ask
- What managerial actions become sensible when you see organizations as the result of moment-by-moment improvising?

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1 An extract from my poem “The Exhilarating Moment”
2 As a matter of interest, I do not think that it is a good poem; it irritates me immensely! Perhaps I can still resonate with the boredom I felt as I struggled with it in the local, village library one Saturday morning? Still there are rhythms and word use that I do not like, and although I have revisited it once in order to improve it, I just don’t like it and don’t want to give it the time. I write this lest it be thought that only poets could write and do research as poetry. The poetic quality of research poetry is of secondary importance.
Much has been written on relational realities and their implications. Many of us have devoted a good deal of time and effort to connecting theory and practice. This said, many questions remain concerning what we do differently when we operate from a constructionist sensibility. For us, social construction is not a theory that proposes particular techniques or methods for practice, but is more of a general orientation or thought style – a way of engaging with the world that centers on dialogue and multiplicity – an orientation that gives new meaning and value to ongoing and open dialogues. Our emphasis on ongoing co-construction makes it inappropriate to assert what social constructionist practice ‘is’ or ‘is not’ because this would exclude the voices of those who are relating to our words.

Social construction does not dictate specific techniques or methods. And yet constructionism informs our activities, both in producing theoretical talk and writings, and in our other professional and everyday practices. It does so not by offering explanations or causes (for example of human nature, human relations, or organizations), but by focusing on relational practices and the social realities they create, sustain, and change. Rather than prescribing certain specific organizational designs, organizing practices, or interventions, social construction encourages us to reflect upon the relational practices invited by our theories of person, organization, and change. Social construction is, then, both a theory about theories, and an orientation toward social practices and the kinds of people and worlds these practices create.

This poses some intriguing issues when it comes to telling others about social construction. For example, what kind of relations do we participate in creating when we ‘tell others’ what is or is not the case? Furthermore, is there a way passionately to embrace constructionism without it becoming another dogmatic truth claim, closed to further dialogue? And what kinds of social relations do we help to create if we position social construction as something...
in opposition to other, already well developed orientations in organization studies? Is there a way to talk about social construction without alienating other discursive forms? These questions hinge on a central distinction between talk as rhetoric/persuasion versus talk as overture, as an invitation to a dance.

Relating as persuasion

Persuasion, as a cultural resource, has a powerful history and a powerful effect on our everyday activities. The discussion of persuasion can be traced to Aristotle. In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric and Poetics*, he argues that rhetoric is the ability to find the available means of persuasion in some situation (1954: 24). He proceeds to articulate the most effective means of influencing (e.g. persuading others) that hinges on notions of rationality or logic. His perspective was guided by his belief that truth is gained by opposition and the means by which to oppose another is via formal logic.

Obviously Aristotle’s work has been influential. It is reflected in many local-cultural practices including perhaps, lecturing, writing essays, and radio interviews with politicians. Debate, a common form of public discourse in some cultures, is rooted in Aristotelian logic. Debate is centered on influencing others – on winning an argument through influence or persuasion, that is, through logic or rationality. But the question is which logic or rationality? And who gets to decide? We are hard pressed to find situations where our conversations do not take the form of persuading another to accept or ‘buy into’ our argument (see Intermezzo: Dialogue and Debate).

An illustration from Sheila

Last week I had an interesting conversation with a colleague who teaches courses in argumentation informed by classical rhetoric. I teach courses in dialogue processes informed by social construction. The meeting evolved into a discussion of some longstanding issues in our academic department, and the challenge we faced (in my view) was to proceed in a manner that promoted constructive, mutual dialogue on the topic (see e.g., Blantern & Anderson-Wallace, Cunliffe & Shotter, this volume). The expert in argumentation claimed that when we discuss things within the department, as colleagues, we need to start with the facts and from there our job is to persuade each other by bringing evidence to the fore. Whichever argument succeeds, dictates how we go on together. I questioned his claim by asking: “But, whose facts? Facts determined by what standards? And what would count as evidence?” His answer: “The facts. The evidence.” Well, I wondered out loud, isn’t it the case that what counts as a fact is what is constructed in activity (language)
with others. Thus, when any subgroup in the department gathers ‘evidence’ on an issue, they are in the process of creating a fact, creating evidence, and thus creating what will count as good, as bad, as right, and as wrong. Since different groupings within the department engage in similar processes but with very different values, incommensurate beliefs emerge within one small, academic department. If we consider that every sub-group is potentially creating a different rationality, could we use this recognition to begin our conversations from a stance of curiosity or interested inquiry? Might we not come to the table with genuine questions about what counts as a fact or as evidence to each other? And if we did that, how might our ‘deliberations’ be different?

Frustrated, my colleague informed me that the world operates within an argumentative model. We persuade. And it is the judgment made by the group concerning the quality of the argument (based on the facts and the evidence) that determines the course of action. To him, discussion of what will count as a fact would detract from efficiency and prevent us from moving forward as a group (as consultants to organizations, we hear this critique of dialogue quite often). I did not attempt to refute my colleague’s assessment since refutation would have been both a paradoxical act and a practical rejection of giving space to different realities. I did, however, invite him to consider the potential efficiency of every once in a while clarifying the various beliefs, meanings, values, and so forth of group members because the time taken to do this might help to establish relationships that recognize and value difference (appreciative relations) rather than relationships that deny differences or make them a matter of ‘right or wrong’.

From a social constructionist perspective, appreciative ways of relating are valued inasmuch as they give participants resources for connecting with each other. The mutual exploration of values, commitments, moralities – as well as the relational communities that give them sustenance – can allow participants to collaborate even when they differ over these values, commitments, and moralities. In effect, Sheila’s response was an invitation to dialogue, to a mode of relating founded on exploration and acceptance of diversity rather than competition, dominance, and imposition of ‘commonality’.

Relating as appreciation

By now it should be clear that persuading you (the reader) to ‘buy’ our argument for social construction and relational practices would not be in keeping with our constructionist premises and valuing of difference. A central premise of social construction is that social realities are social achievements produced by people co-ordinating their activities. This premise is thus very different from the more common narrative (often only implicit) that ‘reality’ is singular, ‘out there’, and knowable by the individual mind through a combination of sense
data and individual mind operations. Given this social constructionist premise, organizational participants (including Sheila and her colleague) might have more success in ‘going on together’ if they approached issues as ‘challenges in co-construction’ rather than as facts to be contested and countered. They might not, and need not, necessarily agree, for example, on a common narrative, but whatever realities they construct would be emergent byproducts of their co-ordinations. Although the matter of power or author-ity is ever-present, one person alone cannot control either how relating will go on (e.g. through dominance or dialogue) or control the ‘outcome(s)’ – the social realities produced. This brings us back to the intriguing challenge of this chapter. We may tell our story but to do this is only one of many pieces, where the ‘other pieces’, so to speak, come from what readers do with it. How you connect with our words is as critical to what this conversation produces as the words we commit to paper. We cannot prevent you from reading this chapter or this book as an author-itative statement about what social construction ‘really is’, or as propaganda or persuasive rhetoric designed to convert you to our view. But we can try to invite other co-ordinations by giving space to multiplicity, complexity, ambiguities, doubts and difficulties. We can try to create a conversational arena, so to speak. Some of the ways we are trying to do this include avoiding an editorial introduction to this book that fixes the one thing that social construction ‘is’; another way is by inviting multiple voices of relational construction without trying to homogenize them.

Sheila’s story might help you to reflect on how organizing and, indeed, many cultural contexts tend to assume that ‘good arguments’ begin with ‘good facts’ and ‘good evidence’. But whose definition of ‘good’ are we using and what power relations do their definitions and our ‘acceptances’ (re)construct? This question, when handled in an adversarial manner or when posed as a debate, can construct opposing ‘right-wrong’, ‘better- worse’ relations; hostility, fear, and suspicion across that divide so to speak; and, exclusion of Other (see Thisted & Stayeart, this volume) and so an end to open dialogue. This is not to suggest debate and argument are ‘wrong’; rather it is only to say that there are always limits to the utility of any way of acting. Not only is it difficult to be sensitive to the multiplicity of moralities and beliefs in any community, it is also difficult to forge new ways of relating that value such multiplicity. At this moment, we are confronted with the same seeming limitations: how can a text – seemingly fixed – once written and now ‘read only’ – invite many possible co-ordinations rather than invite narratives of ‘right-wrong’? We hope to invite you to view this offering, and others like it, as openings, invitations, challenges, or proposals into new ways of relating together. We will try to address the question of what we mean by the term social construction, why many refer to social construction as a generative or practical theory, and what difference this might make in our daily lives.
Relating as co-construction

When comparing notes on how we each feel when asked what we mean by ‘social construction’ we found that we both feel a rush of anxiety. Why? Because we wonder how to tell our narrative without having our conversational partners either glaze over in a sea of abstraction or nod enthusiastically saying: “Oh yes, that’s just common sense. You mean relationships are important.”

In our view it is precisely this issue of co-ordination – of co-construction – that is central to social construction. It can perhaps be better understood by being contrasted with the more usual focus on individual actions and individual sense making. So, for example, we are not talking about individual cognitions or mind operations, and we are not talking about the transmission of meanings or facts. And we mean precisely this – we are not talking about them – we are talking about something else: the co-ordination of activities among people. So, to return to our present, ongoing, local case, you readers and us writers are engaged in an active process of coordination. For example, you are bringing something to your reading of this text – your history of experience in reading works in this area, your work experiences, and so on. If we think of these experiences as texts, we can say that, as you read, you are actively making many co-ordinations or relations with our text: you are making multiple text-con-text relations. This co-construction process continues, for example, when you later converse with others who have read this text. In other words, constructions and therefore co-construction processes, can never be completely closed. There is, then, no way for us, once and for all, to tell you what we mean, or to close off relational processes of co-construction. Our colleague, John Shotter, captures this when asked by a conversational partner what he means. He responds, “I don’t know. We haven’t finished talking yet!”

Film director Arthur Penn recently gave another beautiful illustration of ongoing co-construction. He was talking about his film, Little Big Man starring Dustin Hoffman. In the story, Dustin Hoffman’s character – a white man – is accepted into a Native American tribe. In fact, he is allowed to marry into the tribe. After a bloody battle leaving the tribe depleted of its males, Hoffman’s pregnant wife – a member of the tribe – asks him to engage in sexual relations with her sisters in hope of ensuring the continuation of the tribe. So, an action that in other contexts would be considered immoral and unacceptable by this community becomes transformed into a positive and necessary action. As Penn describes it:

As conditions change through (in this case) tragedy, we see that values, language, and morality change as well. It is the elasticity of meaning that is important to recognize and this, to me, is what social construction is about. (Penne, personal communication)
Shifting from a focus on individual meanings to a relational orientation – relating texts, relating actions – is both a significant shift and one that is difficult to make. We will spend a little more time on it in the hope that it will allow some new conversations to take place between us.

**Making local realities**

It perhaps seems only natural to think of meanings as made by individuals. After all, when I look at you, I see a body that is separate from my own and from other people and things. I see eyes that are yours, hands that are yours, gestures that belong to you, and even peculiar phrasings, intonations, and quirky movements that are you. Surely it is only reasonable that you and I are separate, have private thoughts, motivations, intentions, aspirations, emotions. And surely it is only reasonable to assume that other kinds of objects – business organizations, Indian tribes, metals, dogs – also have personal characteristics that distinguish them from other objects. Is it not the wide variation among our private motivations, intentions, and ideas that makes living so difficult? Are not all the problems of the world, of social life, linked to problems of meaning? Poor performance in school or university surely is a sign of a student’s inability to grasp the correct meaning of the material; organizational failures are easily explained as the byproducts of those who do not ‘understand’ instructions, the organizational mission, the business environment. And business failure, economic instability, 3rd world poverty surely would cease to exist if we could control meaning.

But we cannot control meaning. And focusing on meanings, locating them in the minds of individuals, contributes to the complexity of the problem we have constructed. If only we could design the right organizational intervention we could make the merger work, create a successful strategic alliance, improve competitiveness. If only we could design pedagogical practices that work for particular topics or types of people, we could improve the educational standards achieved by all. These hopes are heavily layered with the sense of rationality and logic that also characterizes popular narratives (the Received View) of Science in the West: appropriate use of design and right methods will lead us closer to what is real and true – or at least closer to identifying what is generally useful.

The portrayal of meaning as residing within individuals represents a discourse that invites certain ways of thinking and acting. This discourse has a very long history, and is widespread in popular psychology. It is reflected in the belief that professionals have detailed knowledge and understanding of the properties of objects and what is right-wrong or better-worse, what it means to be psychologically (un)healthy, when an organization needs to change, what a good consultant should do. This discourse includes the idea
that professionals have ‘the expertise’ to make correct diagnoses and design appropriate and effective interventions.

When we shift to a relational orientation, these premises take on a very different light. If we talk about meaning as a byproduct of co-ordinations – of co-actions – then what is the job of the professional, of the writer, the organizational consultant? More generally, what does the field of Organization Studies or Organizational Behavior have to offer? Perhaps the first thing to note is that the notion of co-construction, of relational processes, means that any theory or model is a local construction. It is local in that it is produced in particular (and not universal) con-textual relations including relations between people physically present or only virtually connected. In the local con-junctions made by and between you readers and us writers (our relating), constructions are made and may be taken forward to other relations with other persons and things, at other times, and in other places. And those constructions are inevitably a function of the many cultural traditions, local conventions, historical canons and so forth that ‘speak through our tongues’ and ‘listen through our ears’. Given this relational view, we are faced with the question of how to live together in a complex world ‘inhabited’ by many differing constructions (beliefs, truths, values… call them what you will). Given this relational view, relations between constructions may be conducted through calling upon the rhetorics of rationality, truth, and what is better. However, now these ways of acting are seen as attempts to claim authority relative to other, different, claims. In other words, our relational orientation centers issues of power. Returning to our earlier proposal that a relational orientation invites new conversations, new ways of relating, we can see a number of possibilities already. One is to focus on multiple local constructions (rather than the one thing that is so); a second is to focus on power relations – on how some constructions and ways of relating become dominant relative to others. A third is to explore how relational processes may stay open to multiplicity and change.

Relating as performance

The Received View of Science (‘RVS’; Woolgar, 1986) as the privileged and trustworthy approach to discovering knowledge, truth, and (perhaps most important) solutions, is still widespread, as is the wider set of narratives commonly referred to as ‘modernism’. Many who espouse postmodern variants of a relational orientation feel frustrated by constantly having to justify their orientation to others who hold ‘modernist’ assumptions regarding rationality, knowledge, and truth (see Gergen and Thatchenkerry, this volume). Perhaps this frustration comes from the oppositional dualisms, confrontations and accusations that often are a part of such conversations. Of course, attempts to
champion the case for postmodernism by arguing against modernism simply substitutes one action or text with another and so maintains the relational opposition. From a relational perspective, three points are especially important. The first is that the above pattern or co-ordination would be a paradoxical way of relating. This is because the relational orientation ‘lets go’ of the assumption of (and consequent interest in) a single, universal, trans-historical truth. Second, any attempt to demonstrate the superiority of one position over the other is an attempt to close the dialogue and to achieve a superior power relation. To argue that both modernism and postmodernism are discursive options changes the argument entirely. Third, our relational perspective implies that modernism and postmodernism can be seen as inter-dependent constructions – they co-define each other.

Given the above, it should be clear that we are not arguing for the superiority of our relational orientation. Rather we are suggesting – on the basis of this orientation – a valuing of ways of relating that could variously be described as allowing all voices to be heard (multiplicity), staying open, keeping the conversation (relations) going. This draws our attention to the process of constructing realities as well as the relationships within which realities are constructed. We are less focused on the ‘proper’ or ‘best’ way to be professionals or provide information and more centered on the multiple ways in which social transformation can take place. Further, our focus is on the immediate moment – the ongoing relational processes – and the wide array of voices, relations, communities, and experiences that are mobilized in those processes.

Some implications for practice

Social construction, like any other theory, is a form of coordinated activity among persons in relation. In that sense, every theory is about practice. We need to spend more time asking what sorts of practices are invited by the different stories each theory tells. We have tried to sketch the ways in which social construction could offer a set of fluid resources for action that do not eliminate or demonize other traditions. We are not attempting to claim a preferred mode of life or to discover the best way for a person, organization, or community to develop. Social construction, instead, urges us to attend to the traditions, the communities, the situated practices of the participants at hand, to local realities in identifying what becomes real, true, and good. To attend to traditions, communities, and situated practices requires a constant flexibility on the part of those involved. Where the purpose of modernist theory and practice is to solve problems, cure illness, achieve social, environmental, and scientific advancement, the purpose of social construction, as a discursive option, is to explore what sorts of social life become possible when one way
of talking and acting is employed versus another. The alternative that social
construction offers is a relational discourse — one that views meaningful action
as always emerging within relationship (whether those relationships be ‘real’,
imagined, or virtual).

The metaphor of social construction as performance is useful because it
makes a ritualized practice familiar. It shifts attention from meanings as indi-
vidual cognitions, separate from action, to a process in which participants co-
create social realities. These are processes in which we not only create a sense
of self in relation to some particular Other(s) but also a sense of value. We
create — we perform together — a world, a lived reality (see Holzman’s chap-
ter in this volume). The metaphor of performance provides the opportunity
for us to engage in self-reflexive inquiry. If constructions are a byproduct of
relational engagement (conversation, performance), then we are free to pause
and ask ourselves how else we might engage, in what other ways might we
talk about this topic, issue, or problem? In so doing, we open ourselves to
listening, reading, talking, and writing in more ‘generous’ modes — remaining
open to the relational coherence of diverse ways of acting. We thereby avoid
speaking with a sense of certainty that the world is or should be one way.
And in so doing we open possibilities for the coordination of multiple ways
of being human and of, as Wittgenstein (1953) says, ‘going on together’.

References

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Penn, A. (2000). Personal communication to SM.


Woolgar, A.B. (1996). Psychology, qualitative methods, and the ideas of sci-
ence. In Richardson, J.T.E. (ed.), Handbook of Qualitative Research Meth-

Recommended further readings


McNamee, S., Gergen, K.J., and associates (1999). Relational responsibility:

Managing a sestina
managing me?

Caroline Ramsey

Can you manage, command and control
the actions of others who around you would work?
Are you able, within space, to provide them with shape
that surrounds them with boundaries on action
and promptings to thought?
And after your deciding, will others too manage?

If I pressure you hard will you manage
to keep going? Will you keep your emotions under control?
Will the way you proceed demonstrate thought?
or merely a frantic search for a work
-able next step that imitates action,
less concerned if that option has shape?

As I pause to consider contexts that shape
how I can act and which goals I manage
to achieve, can I claim choice in action
that puts others under control
if uncertain what will work
and connect action to a thought?

Now here’s a conundrum that merits some thought:
a linking of mind moves and will’d movements that shape
what occurs in any moment at home or at work.
Do I claim that my pondering will manage
my acts, and if so what controls
that wondering? So different from action?
Good grief I’m oh so bored, just give me some action. Allow me to escape from this twisting of thought. I’m playing word games with rules, losing control as I search for flight from regulations that shape what I can write and how I can manage to run for freedom and rhythms that work.

Thank goodness; at last the final stanza of this dull work and now I can lay down my pen and change my action on this Saturday morning. I’m done trying to manage these words that have constrained my every thought and instead of being my tools to shape have mastered me and shared with me control.

So, Sally your home work and I did manage to complete each other’s shape and thought Control contended and action words produced.
There is broad agreement that, within the western world, the greater part of the present century has been dominated by an interlocking array of conceptions, often termed modernist. These conceptions are related to various material conditions, underpin many forms of institutional life, and inform a broad array of cultural practices. Analysts focus on differing aspects of this modernist period, often using the term modernity to emphasize a composite of economic and institutional features (e.g., centralized government, organized economy, strong science), and modernism to speak of intellectual and cultural patterns (e.g., beliefs in accumulating knowledge, cultural progress, organized life-styles).

While there are many different views of modernism, there is also a general recognition that this interrelated set of institutions and beliefs is slowly losing its commanding sense of validity. This consciousness is variously indexed by writings that question, for example, the objectivity of knowledge, the concept of progress, the potentials of rationality, the investment in truth, the belief system of science, the possibility of controlled societies, and any foundations for beliefs or values. As many agree, we are slowly and unsteadily entering a period of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984; Turner, 1990; Gergen, 1991).

In the present offering we shall first consider prominent ways in which traditional organizational science is rooted in modernist assumptions, along with several major threats that post-modern thought poses for such assumptions. More importantly, given the waning of the modernist tradition, we must ask what postmodern thinking can offer as an alternative conception of organizational science. Are post-modern critiques simply nihilistic, as many believe? As we shall demonstrate, certain arguments within the postmodern dialogues, when properly extended, yield a promising future for organizational science.
Organizational Science: A Modernist Adventure

To appreciate the emerging possibilities of postmodern thought, let us first sketch out the modernist assumptions and practices that typify traditional organizational science. In our view the modernist orientation is evidenced in virtually every corner of the discipline – from the classroom, to the research site, forms of publication, theoretical content, and the orientations carried by specialists into organizations themselves. Here we discuss four key themes which we then contrast in our subsequent exploration of postmodernism.

The Rational Agent

As most scholars agree, modernist thought has important roots in the Enlightenment (the rise from the ‘dark’ or ‘medieval’ age), a period when the works of philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant were giving voice to emerging conceptions of the individual and the cosmos. Although history has furnished many significant detours (for example, 19th Century romanticism), Enlightenment assumptions have continued into the present century, fuelled to new heights by various scientific and technological advances (attributed to Enlightenment presumptions), the growth of industry and prevalence of warfare (both of which increased society’s dependency on science and technology), and various philosophic and cultural movements (e.g., logical positivism, modern architecture; modern music).

The Enlightenment was a historical watershed primarily owing to the dignity it granted to individual rationality. Enlightenment thinkers assailed all forms of totalitarianism – royal and religious. It was argued that within each individual lies a bounded and sacred principality, a domain governed by the individual’s own capacities for careful observation and rational deliberation. It is only my thought itself, proposed Descartes, which provides a certain foundation. It is this 18th Century valorization of the individual mind that came to serve as the major rationalizing device for the 20th Century beginnings of organizational science. The effects here are twofold: first, the individual mind of the worker/employee/manager becomes a pre-eminent object of study; and second, knowledge of the organization is considered a by-product of the individual rationality of the scientific investigator. On the one hand, if individual rationality is the major source of human conduct, then to unlock its secrets is to gain control over the future well-being of the organization. At the same time it is the individual investigator, trained in systematic rational thought, who is best equipped to carry out such study.

More explicitly, these assumptions have been realized in the conceptions of the individual and the organization emerging from organizational study since, virtually, its inception. For many scholars, Taylorism provided the modernist
model of organizational life par excellence. On the one hand it viewed the individual worker as a quasi-rational agent who responds to various inputs (e.g., orders, incentives) in systematic ways. Thus, if the organizational researcher makes a rational assessment of inputs and their effects on time and motion, worker behaviour can be reliably maximized. Although shorn of the dehumanising qualities of early Taylorism, the general orientation gave rise to the belief that management is a process of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling. Such beliefs continue to pervade organizational science theories and practices. For example, consistent with these beliefs are job re-design practices from the 1960s and 70s (e.g., job enrichment) along with more recent practices such as Total Quality Management (see Hosking and Morley, 1991).

Similarly, the belief in rational agency figures in the conception of the ideal manager. Prominent theories reveal steps that the individual manager can take in order to create the optimal balance between the organization and environmental conditions. The field of strategic management similarly rests on the assumption of individual rationality. Theories variously treat strategic styles of management, optimizing strategic choice, improving expectancies, goal setting, and path-goal orientations to leadership. Management education and training programs are developed to furnish managers with managerial competencies crucial to producing superior performance. In short, the prevailing assumption is that individuals are in charge of the organization, and that through the development of their rational capacities (to think, plan, discern, create, etc.) they can effectively direct or lead the organization.

Finally, the belief in rational agency underpins the self-conception of the organizational scientist and the view of his/her role as expert. The organizational scientist traditionally lays claim to a superior rationality – born of careful analytic thought and abstracted from the biases of immersion in everyday detail. This logic is amplified by a second modernist belief.

**Empirical Evaluation**

In addition to the celebration of rationality, a second legacy of Enlightenment discourse is a strong emphasis on the powers of individual observation. It is reason, in combination with observation, which enables the individual’s opinion to count on par with those of religious and royal lineage. This emphasis is played out most importantly in the present century by logical empiricist philosophy (Ayer, 1940). For empiricists, only those propositions linked unambiguously to observables are candidates for scientific consideration, and it was only the careful testing of scientific propositions that can lead to increments in knowledge. Within the behavioural sciences these views not only became central rationalizing devices – placing the behavioural sciences, as they did,
on equal footing with chemistry and physics – they also stimulated enormous interest in research methodology and statistics.

It is within this soil that organizational science took initial root. The presumption was that there is a concrete organizational reality, an objective world, available for empirical study. To illustrate, in the premier issue of the Journal of the Academy of Management, William Wolf (1958:14) proclaimed that: “We can describe an organization as a living thing; it has a concrete social environment, a formal structure, recognized goals, and a variety of needs.” This ‘concrete’ character was also evident in Talcott Parson’s contribution to the first issue of Administrative Science Quarterly (1956). Here Parsons defined an organization as a “social system oriented to the attainment of relatively specific types of goals, which contributes to a major function of a more comprehensive system, usually the society itself” (1956: 63). In the same issue of this journal James Thomson writing about the task of building an administrative science, placed the major emphasis on “deductive and inductive methods …operational definitions …and measurement and evaluation” (1956: 102).

This celebration of empirical assessment influences both theories of the effective organization, and the positioning of the organizational scientist in the broader cultural sphere. In the former case, many organizational theories place a strong emphasis on the necessity for the organization to systematically gather information, facts, or data for purposes of optimizing decision-making. The emphasis placed on rigorous observation within the profession, and again within its theories of effective organizations, also enhances the image of the organizational scientist within the culture. If observational techniques yield information essential to organizational well-being, and the organizational scientist is an expert in rigorous observation, then the scientist’s voice is again privileged. By nature of his/her training, the scientist can be an essential aide de camp for the aspiring organization.

Language as Picture

A third modernist text shapes the contours of organizational science. In comparison to the stories of individual rationality and systematic empiricism, it seems of minor significance. Yet, it is one that proves critical as we move to the postmodern context. The emphasis in this case is on the function of language in both science and the culture at large. John Locke (1825/1959) captures the Enlightenment view of language: Our words are, according to Locke, “signs of internal conceptions”. They stand as “marks for the ideas within (the individual’s) mind whereby they might be made known to others and the thoughts to man’s (sic) mind might be conveyed from one to another”(1825/1959: 106). And it is this view of language, as an outward ex-
pression of an inward mentality, which has been passed across the centuries, now to inform organizational science in the modernist mould. At the outset, as scientists we treat language as the chief means by which we inform our colleagues and our culture of the results of our observations and thought. In effect, we use language to report on the nature of the world insofar as we can ascertain its character through observation. Words, in effect, are carriers of ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ – whether in journals or books, or in everyday conversation.

This same belief in the capacity of language to represent the real, when coupled with the belief in reason and observation, also sets the stage for modernist understanding of organizational structure and communication. The effective organization should be one in which various speciality groups generate data relevant to their particular functions (e.g. marketing, operations, human resources), the results of these efforts are channelled to the other decision-making domains, and most importantly, higher ranking executives are informed so as to make rational decisions coordinating these various efforts. In effect, the emphasis on rationality, empiricism, and language as representation favour strong divisions of labour (specialization) and hierarchy (See, for example, the early work of Rushing, 1967; De Grazia, 1960; Thomson, 1961; and Rosengren, 1967).

The Narrative of Progress

Closely related to the preceding assumptions is a final modernist belief; that of systematic progress. If reason and observation work in harmony, if the nature of the objective world is made known through language, if propositions and findings are made available for others’ scrutiny… then the inevitable result will be a march toward objective truth. Scientists shall acquire increasingly sophisticated knowledge about the nature of the world, be capable of increasingly precise predictions, and ultimately be able to build utopian societies. This presumption of progress is also a constitutive belief within modernist organizational science. In the formative years of the science, Rollin Simonds (1959) gives voice to the progressive narrative in the Journal of the Academy of Management:

As (the science of business administration) develops …there will be more and more stress on stating rather precisely cause and effect relationships and on securing empirical data to substantiate or disprove these statements. Then the results of one investigation may be integrated with another until very substantial evidence is accumulated in support of a set of scientific principles (Simonds, 1959: 136).
Thirty years later, Cheal (1990) characterized modernity as a project in which the goal of progress is achieved through the ‘managed transformation’ of social institutions. The industrial organization is thus a major source of human unity and progress. In Bell’s (1974) terms, modern (post-industrial) society is “organized around knowledge for purposes of social control and the directing of innovation and change ...” (1974: 20). Much the same view of scientific progress is also projected into theories of organizational functioning. It is through continued research that the organization may adapt and prosper. With the consistent application of reason and empirical observation, there should be steady increments in the organization’s capacities for control and positive innovation.

The Postmodern Turn

The vast share of contemporary theory and practice in organizational science is still conducted within a modernist framework. However, across many branches of the sciences and humanities – indeed, some would say across the culture more generally – a new sensibility has slowly emerged. Within the academy this sensibility is predominantly critical, systematically dismantling the corpus of modernist assumptions and practices. Such critiques not only obliterate the modernist logics, but also throw into question the moral and political outcomes of modernist commitments. Yet, while the critique of modernism is pervasive, it has not yet been restorative. While faulting existing traditions, it has left the future in question. How do we now proceed? In our view there lies embedded within critique implicit logics of great potential. Criticism, too, proceeds from various assumptions, and as we explore these, a vision of alternatives unfolds. In what follows, we shall outline the nature of the critique and the grounds for a social constructionist vision of organizational science.

From Individual to Communal Rationality

While a faith in individual rationality is key to the modernist worldview, postmodern voices turn sceptical. The modernist view of language as an expression of individual rationality is criticised. As critics propose, language is a system guided by rules. Thus for one to speak as a rational agent is to participate in a system that is already constituted; it is to borrow from the traditional idioms. Or more broadly put, to ‘do rationality’ is not to exercise an interior function of ‘thought’, but to participate in a form of cultural life.

For many scholars, such arguments suggest the presence of broad and oppressive forces within the culture – appropriating both voice and power by
claiming transcendent or culture free rationality. Critiques of the modernist view of individual rationality are most sharply drawn by feminist and multicultural critics. As they surmise, there are hierarchies of rationality within the culture: By virtue of educational degrees, cultural background and other such markers, some individuals are deemed more rational (intelligent, insightful) than others, and thus more worthy of leadership, position, and wealth. Interestingly, those who occupy these positions are systematically drawn from a very small sector of the population. In effect, while Enlightenment arguments succeeded in unseating the totalitarian power of crown and cross, it is argued, they now give rise to new structures of power and domination.

Yet, postmodernist voices also enable us to move beyond critique. For when these various ideas are linked to emerging arguments in the history of science and the sociology of knowledge, an alternative view of human rationality emerges. Consider again the system of language. Language is inherently a by-product of human interchange. There can be no ‘private language’ (following Wittgenstein, 1963). Viable language depends on communal cooperation – the ‘joint-action’ (in Shotter’s terms, 1984) of two or more persons. Now if being rational is fundamentally an achievement in language (or actions consistent with a given language), as previously suggested, then rationality is inherently a form of communal participation. To speak rationally is to speak according to the conventions of a culture. Rational being is not thus individual being, but culturally coordinated action.

From Empirical Method to Social Construction

Under modernism, observational methods enjoyed an elevated status. The road to truth must be paved with rigorous empirical methods. From the postmodern standpoint, methodology does not itself place demands on descriptions or interpretations of data; findings do not inexorably rule between competing theories. This is so because phenomena are themselves theory laden, as are the methods used in their elucidation. It is only when commitments are made to a given theoretical perspective (or form of language) that research can be mounted and methods selected. The a priori selection of theories thus determines in large measure the outcomes of the research – what may be said at its conclusion.

To illustrate, if the organizational scientist is committed to a view of the individual as a rational decision maker, then it is intelligible to mount research on information processing heuristics, to distinguish among heuristic strategies, and to demonstrate experimentally the conditions under which differing strategies are favoured. If, in contrast, the theorist is committed to a psychoanalytic perspective, and views organizational life as guided by unconscious dynamics, then issues of symbolic authority and unconscious desires might
become research realities. Projective devices might serve as the favoured research methods. The former research would never reveal a ‘repressed wish’, and the latter would never discover a ‘cognitive heuristic’. Each would find the others’ methods similarly spurious.

The present arguments are most fully developed in social constructionist scholarship that attempts to vivify the socio-cultural processes that produce various ‘pictures’ of reality. Social constructionist offerings are now emerging across the full spectrum of the academy – including organizational studies. For many, such writings are liberating. They single out various aspects of the taken-for-granted world – the existence of a ‘cold war’ or a ‘space race’, the distinction between genders, the existence of mental illness or addiction, for example – and attempt to demonstrate their socially constructed character. They attempt to show, in Bateson’s terms, that “the map is not the territory”, and thereby free us from the grip of traditional intelligibilities; they invite alternative formulations, the creation of new and different realities.

Language as Social Action

Because language, for the postmodernist, is the child of cultural process, it follows that one’s descriptions of the world are not outward simulacra’s of an inner mirror – that is, reports on one’s private ‘observations’ or ‘perceptions’. On the scientific level, this is to say that what we report in our journals and books is not a mirror or map that in some way corresponds to our observations of what there is. Yet, if the modernist view of language as a representational device is eschewed, in what manner can it be replaced? It is in the later works of Wittgenstein – who, along with Nietzsche, is often viewed as a significant precursor of postmodernism – that the major answer is to be located. As Wittgenstein (1963) proposed, language gains its meaning not from its mental or subjective underpinnings, but from its use in action (‘language games’). Or, again emphasizing the significant place of human relatedness in postmodern writings, language gains meaning within organized forms of interaction. To ‘tell the truth’, on this account, is not to furnish an accurate picture of ‘what actually happened’, but to participate in a set of social conventions, a way of putting things sanctioned within a given ‘form of life’. To ‘be objective’ is to play by the rules of a given tradition.

More broadly, this is to say that language for the postmodernist is not a reflection of a world, but is world-constituting. Language does not describe action, but is itself a form of action. To do science, then, is to participate actively within a set of sub-cultural relationships. To treat the organization as an information system and managers as ideally guided by a rational calculus, is to favour certain forms of cultural life and to undermine or prevent others. We shall return to the implications of this view shortly.
The Multi-Culturation of Meaning

With this relational view of language in place, modernism’s grand narrative of progress is thrown into question. Because scientific theory is not a map of existing conditions, then research does not function to improve the accuracy of the scientific account. Scientific research may lead to technical accomplishments, but it does not improve our descriptions and explanations of reality; descriptions and explanations are, rather, like lenses through which we index our accomplishments. As research operates to displace one scientific theory with another, we are not moving ineluctably ‘forward’ on the road to truth; we are – as many would say – simply replacing one way of putting things with another.

It is the function of scientific language that primarily concerns the postmodern critic. As a modernist by-product, scientific endeavours work toward a single language – a monologue. Scientific research operates to narrow the range of descriptions and explanations – to winnow out the false, the imprecise, and the inconsistent forms of language, and to emerge with the single best account – that which best approximates the ‘objectively true’. For the postmodernist the results of this effort toward univocality are potentially disastrous. In its search for the ‘single best account’, science operates as a powerful discrediting device – revealing the ‘ignorance’ of the layman in one sector after another. Love is shown to be a myth, families are formed out of the requirements of ‘selfish genes’, values are merely the result of social influence, and so on. For the culture at large, then, scientific activity does not represent progress but often its reverse. From the postmodern perspective, it is imperative to strive toward pluralism of understanding.

Toward Postmodern Organizational Science

Postmodern critique signifies a general process of de-legitimation. In the scientific sphere we find a loss of confidence in rational theory, in the safeguards of rigorous research methods, in the capacity for objective knowledge, and in the promise of steady progress in the growth of knowledge. When considered in relation to organizational life we find threats to longstanding assumptions about effective leadership, the scientifically managed transformation of organizations, the promise of steady growth in organizational efficacy, and the capacity of organizational science to produce increments in knowledge of organizational functioning. Many may see these threats as nihilistic. However, we have introduced the possibility of a reconstructive theme. For example, we have proposed the replacement of individual rationality by communal negotiation, noted the importance of social processes in the observational enterprise, highlighted the socio-practical function of language, and stressed the
significance of pluralistic cultural investments in the conception of the true and the good. In short, we have derived a rough outline for a social constructionist view of scientific effort, a view that is congenial to many of the postmodern critiques but enables us to press beyond the critical moment.

In this final section we turn attention to the possible contours of a positive organizational science within a postmodern context. This task is informed by a range of writings that have already introduced postmodern thought into organizational studies (e.g., Boje, Gephart and Thatchenkery, 1996; Calas and Smirchich, 1991; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 1992; Hassard, 1991; Morgan, 1990; Martin, 1990; Parker, 1992). In an attempt to integrate various strands of this work, and simultaneously elaborate on the potentials of organizational science in a constructionist mode, we centre on three areas of special significance.

The Place of Research Technologies

Within the modernist frame, the technologies of empirical research (e.g., experimentation, simulation, attitude and opinion assessment, participant observation, trait testing, statistical evaluation) were largely used in the service of evaluating or supporting various theories or hypotheses about behaviour in organizations. Under postmodernism, methodology loses its status as the chief arbiter of truth.

At the same time, there is nothing about postmodernism that argues against the possibilities of using empirical technologies for certain practical purposes. To be sure, there is widespread scepticism in the grand narrative of progressive science; however, there is no denying that the means by which we now do things called ‘transmitting information’, ‘automating production’, and ‘quality control’, were not available in previous centuries. It is not technological capability (or ‘knowing how’) that is called into question by postmodern critique, but the truth claims placed upon the accompanying descriptions and explanations (the ‘knowing that’). In this sense, organizational scientists need not be dissuaded by postmodernist arguments from forging ahead with methodological and technological developments. So long as one does not objectify terms such as ‘team’, ‘values’, ‘competencies’, and the like but, instead, remains sensitive to the parochial forms of reality which these terms sustain, and to the valuational implications of such work, then such technologies are not inconsistent with most postmodern arguments.

While postmodern critique undermines the function of research in warranting truth, and shifts the empirical emphasis to more local and practical concerns, it also invites a broad expansion in the conceptualization of research. As we have seen, postmodern critique favours a constructionist view in which
research technologies serve a variety of social functions. Many organizational researchers have already begun to mine the potential of this alternative. For many years now, organizational scholars have been exploring the intersection of research and social action (see, for example, Argyris et al., 1983; Brown and Tandon, 1983). Action research (Reason & Rowan, 1981) and ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) have developed forms of research in which the researcher and the researched collapse their traditional roles to collaborate in what may be viewed as the realization of local knowledges (e.g., Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Yet, the articulation of local knowledges is not the only function of research within a constructionist frame. Various research strategies may also be used to give voice to otherwise marginalized, misunderstood, or de-privileged groups. Thus far, the scholars have occupied themselves primarily with exploring the ways in which various voices are silenced. For example, Martin (1990) has shown how organizational efforts to ‘help women’ have often suppressed gender conflict and reified false dichotomies between public and private realms of endeavour, Mumby and Putnam (1992) demonstrated androcentric assumptions underlying Simon’s concept of ‘bounded rationality’, and Nkomo (1992) analysed how the organizational concept of race is embedded in a Eurocentric view of the world.

Finally, in the broadened concept of research, methods may be sought to generate new realities, to engender perspectives or practices as yet unrealized. Thus far, the most favourable technologies for achieving these ends take the form of dialogic methods (for a range of illustrations see Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; McNamee and Gergen, 1999; Senge, 1990). Dialogic methods often enable participants to escape the limitations of the realities with which they enter and, working collaboratively, to formulate modes of understanding or action that incorporate multiple inputs.

**Toward Critical Reflection**

Cultural life largely revolves around the meanings assigned to various actions, events or objects; discourse is perhaps the critical medium through which meanings are fashioned. And, because discourse exists in an open market, marked by broadly diffuse transformations (Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 1978), patterns of human action will also remain forever in motion – shifting at times imperceptibly and at others disjunctively. In this context we view organizational science as a generative source of meaning in cultural life. In its descriptions, explanations, technologies, and its services to organizations, the science is a source of cultural meanings. And, in generating and disseminating meanings it furnishes people with implements for action. Its concepts are used to justify various policies, to separate or join various groups, to judge
or evaluate individuals, to define oneself or one’s organization, and so on. In effect, organizational science furnishes pragmatic devices through which organizational/cultural life is carried out. From this standpoint, two vistas of professional activity become particularly salient. Here we consider ideological and social critique; we then turn to the challenge of creating new realities.

Within organizational science in the modernist context, there was little justification for moral or political evaluation of the science itself. The attempt of the discipline was to furnish neutral knowledge and assessments; if this knowledge was used for unethical or untoward purposes, this was not normally the concern of the science qua science. Yet, with the postmodern emphasis placed on the pragmatics of language, organizational science can no longer extricate itself from moral and political debate. As a generator and purveyor of meanings, the field inherently operates to the benefit of certain stakeholders, activities, and forms of cultural life – and to the detriment of others. Three forms of critical analysis are especially important:

At the outset, organizational science can appropriately develop a literature of self-critique. Required are debates on the cultural implications of its own constructions. With the benefit of the various intellectual movements described above, this form of self-reflection is already under way. To illustrate, Boyacigiller & Adler (1991) show how American values regarding free will and individualism affect how researchers conceptualize organizational behaviour. Quoting Stewart (1972), they argue that a strong American cultural assumption is that individuals are (or should be) in control of their actions, they can affect their immediate circumstances, and can influence future outcomes. By contrast, they explain:

Many other cultures traditionally see causality as determined by factors beyond their control, factors such as God, fate, luck, government, one’s social class, or history ...the Chinese invoke ‘Joss’, a combination of luck and fate, to explain events (Stewart, 1972: 273).

The works of feminist scholars, along with those representing various ethnic and political standpoints, also contributevaluably to critical self-reflection. Critical-emancipatory (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) and radical humanist (Atkouf, 1992) works further extend the horizons. The postmodern transformation not only furnishes a strong warrant for such work, but invites a vigorous expansion of these efforts.

At the same time, organizational science may also direct its concerns to the dominant and conventional forms of organizational structure and practice. This is not simply to extend the modernist quest for the most efficient, productive and profitable organizational structure and practices. Rather, it is to inquire into the entity called ‘organization’ as a form of cultural life. To what extent are the relevant modes of human activity desirable in their pre-
sent condition, for whom, and in what ways? For example, in the American system there is a strong belief in the power of the individual to make a difference, which is consistent with the fact that the average American CEO earns 160 times more than the average American worker, whereas in a more collectively oriented culture such as Japan, the corresponding differential is under 20 (Crystal, 1991). While such explorations sensitize the reader to possible biases in the taken-for-granted world of organizational life, in fact they serve as subtle criticisms of Western modes of life. As we find, however, the door is opened to far more pointed and uninhibited forms of critique – directed both to the discipline and to organizational life more generally.

This is to say that organizational sciences should be active participants in the more general debates about values and goals within the culture, and most specifically, as these are related to organizational practices. Again, this is a venture effectively launched within organizational science. Pettigrew and Martin (1987) have explored the shape of the organization in terms of its inclusion of black Americans; Srivastva and his colleagues (1990) have prompted inquiry into more ‘appreciative’ management practices; Strati (1992) has inquired into the aesthetics of organizational life, and so on. Again, a postmodern organizational science would extend such discussions in manifold ways. At the present juncture, mainstream positivist scientific training provides very few resources for such explorations. Organizational science has specialized in a language of ‘is’ rather than ‘ought’, a language of rational judgment as opposed to an ethics of care (Jacques, 1992). In this sense, postmodern arguments also favour a revitalization of organizational science curricula.

The Construction of New Worlds

Within the modernist era, the organizational scientist was largely a polisher of mirrors. It was essentially his/her task to hold this mirror to nature. For the postmodernist such a role is pale and passive. Rather than ‘telling it like it is’, the challenge for the postmodern scientist is to ‘tell it as it might become’. Needed are scholars willing to be audacious, to break the barriers of common sense by offering new forms of theory, of interpretation, or intelligibility. The concept of generative theory (Gergen, 1994) is apposite here. Such theory is designed to unseat conventional assumptions, and to open new alternatives for action. Through such theorizing, scholars contribute to the forms of cultural intelligibility, to the symbolic resources available to people as they carry out their lives together.

Generative theorizing is already evidenced in the steadily increasing number of contributions drawing from post-structuralist and postmodern analytics to forge new ways of conceptualizing (and challenging) organizations themselves. In these instances, theorists typically view bureaucratic, hierarchical,