

# AI Practitioner

*The international journal of AI best practice*

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## Expanding Organizational Practices: Lessons from Therapeutic Conversations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sheila McNamee and Harlene Anderson  
*Guest editors, August 2006*

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## Connections among social construction, language and collaborative understanding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### Connections among social construction, language and collaborative understanding

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### Dialogue: Appreciating the Possibilities Inherent in It

Harlene Anderson (see above)



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# Dialogue: Appreciating the Possibilities Inherent in It

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*This article focuses on dialogue as an important aspect of Appreciative Inquiry: learning to understand. The author sets out the importance of listening, hearing and speaking in dialogue with others as well as having the silent or inner dialogue with ourselves or an imagined other. Interacting through dialogue invites participation, a sense of belonging and ownership.*

Over the years I have taken my experiences and conceptual resources as a psychotherapist into the context of consulting and training in businesses and organizations. In this brief article I focus on the central role of dialogue in my practices and the importance of listening, hearing and speaking in such a way that the generation of understanding, meaning and possibilities emerge. Dialogue is an important aspect of Appreciative Inquiry. It involves “learning to understand.” As the initial inquirer seeks to understand, the searching, the curiosity, in itself, invites the other into a generative process of mutual or shared inquiry. Possibility is inherent in mutual inquiry.

Dialogue is a relational, generative and inherently transforming activity. It is influenced, of course, by the multiple larger contexts, discourses and histories in which it takes place. Of prime importance is the relationship between the dialogical participants or the “conversational partners.” Wittgenstein talked of relationship and conversation as going hand-in-hand: the kinds of conversations that we have with each other inform and form the kinds of relationships we have with each other and vice versa.

Participants become conversational partners who reciprocally engage with each other. The notion of with cannot be overemphasized as it describes people jointly encountering and responding. Social psychologist John Shotter talks of “witness (dialogic)-thinking.” He describes this as “a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with an other’s living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their ‘works’” (2004, p. 150). According to Shotter, witness is dynamic, “people’s meanings and understandings are in their responsive expressions” (p. 157). People are responsive with each other; they touch and are touched. The participatory nature of the conversational partnership is of prime significance. To invite the client<sup>i</sup> to join into a partnership and to foster it requires that the consultant enter the relationship as a learner who listens and responds by trying to understand the client from his or her perspective and logic and in his or her language. The client must take center stage: what does she or he want you to know about him or herself? What does s/he want to talk about.

We all know the importance of relationship building but we often short-cut it and fail to give it the attention it deserves. In emphasizing this importance and its association with dialogue for my students, I find it helpful to use a host-guest metaphor. It is as if the consultant is the host who meets and greets the client as a guest while simultaneously the consultant is the client’s guest. I ask my students to think about how they like to be received as a guest. What does the host do that makes them feel welcomed or not, at ease or not, and

special or not? What did the quality of the meeting and greeting feel like? These are not rhetorical questions. I do not expect particular answers. Instead, I want the students to think about the sense of their experience in the relationship and conversation what it communicated to them, how it invited them or not.

### **Listening, Hearing and Speaking: Their Importance in Dialogue**

Dialogue involves the equally significant and intertwined reciprocal yet discrete activities of listening, hearing and speaking. Each is part of the natural spontaneous way of conversations and each is critical to the other. Members of a conversation constantly move back and forth between these actions. Listening is part of the process of trying to hear and grasp what the other person is saying from his or her perspective. It is a participatory activity that includes attending, responding and interacting with the other person.

Attending requires giving the speaker uninterrupted space to talk. The words of Smilla, the main character in Peter Høeg's mystery *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, illustrates the kind of listening that I am talking about:

Very few people know how to listen. Their haste pulls them out of the conversation, or they try internally to improve the situation, or they're preparing what their entrance will be when you shut up and it's their turn to step on stage. ... It's different with the man standing in front of me. When I talk, he listens without distraction to what I say, and only to what I say (1993; pp. 44-45).

Responding requires genuine interest and curiosity. Responding is the listener's way of interacting with the speaker and his or her words. It involves asking questions to learn more about what is said and not what you think should be said. It requires checking with the other to determine if what you think you heard is what the other person hoped you would hear. Checking necessitates using comparable terms or different words from those that the other is using, providing opportunity for the listener to compare and contrast meanings and providing opportunity for the speaker to clarify, correct or confirm the listener's missed or different understanding.

It is important to keep in mind what kinds of responses facilitate and what kinds hinder dialogue. What signals you, for instance, that what the other said is respected and valued versus dismissed or discounted? What signals that the listener thinks the speaker has said enough or that it is okay to continue talking? A listener can respond with or without words. Spoken words are accompanied by body expressions. It is also important to keep in mind that a lack of response is a response – it is a communication that the other interprets just as she or he would any other kind of response. A seeming non-response may, for instance, make the speaker feel unimportant, discredited, misunderstood, judged and so forth. I am reminded of overhearing a business colleague talk about a discussion where she did not agree with or value what the other person had said. Earnestly and a bit proudly, she said, "I was a 'good' listener, I didn't say anything. I just listened and waited patiently until he finished." We have all experienced this kind of response. The "difficulty of difference" is part of the dialogic process. Instead of rejecting what is disagreed with, whether through silently

ignoring or outwardly rebuking, advantage can be taken of the opportunity inherent in difference, for instance, to try to make sense of and be curious about the different view.

### **Inner Dialogue**

Dialogue refers to both outer and inner dialogue. Inner or silent dialogue – the conversation that we have with ourselves or an imagined other – is the first step toward spoken dialogue and is critical to fostering it. The expression of silent thought is itself generative; that is, the expression of thought, whether through spoken or written words or through signs or gestures, is an interpretive and meaning-generating process. The process of expression forms and gives shape to the yet-unspoken thought.

Professionals often learn to operate from invisible, private, inner thoughts-theoretical or methodological maps. These thoughts influence how the professional listens and hears and partly informs his or her interpretations and responses, among other things. Putting private inner talk or thoughts into spoken words produces something other than the thought or understanding itself. The expression of the thought organizes and forms it. The presence of the client and the context, along with other factors, affects the words chosen and the manner in which they are presented. As well, the client then has the opportunity to respond to the consultant's inner thoughts. The response – in the many forms that it may take – will affect the client's reception of the response and his or her reply to it.

Dialogue operates along a continuum. Sometimes we are less in a dialogical process and sometimes we are more so. Sometimes dialogues are harmonious or easy and at other times participants do not resonate with each other or dissonance occurs. In the latter case, I find it helpful to think about the dialogical-monological distinction. This is when I also find it helpful for consultants to pause and reflect on their inner dialogue: is their inner talk monological rather than dialogical and if so, how might it be contributing to the difficulty.

Making private thoughts public invites what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as responsive understanding. He suggests that, "A passive understanding of linguistic meaning is not understanding at all" (p. 281). Shotter, influenced by Wittgenstein, suggests a relational-responsive kind of understanding. In other words, understanding cannot take place unless both the speaker-listener and the listener-speaker are responsive to each other. An unresponsive inner conversation is in danger of leading to missed-understanding or understanding that does not fit with that of the speaker or his/her intent (e.g., the client's). When private thoughts remain invisible there is the risk that this will interfere with being responsive in the manner mentioned above and also suggests the risk of inner dialogue collapsing into monologue. Monologue contributes to the pervasive potential for misunderstanding (a misunderstanding is simply an understanding that differs from the speaker's intentions)

It is possible that in not putting inner thoughts into spoken words, that the inner talk, as well as the spoken talk, will become monological and risk contributing to the potential, creation or maintenance of consultant-client monologue, as well as client-client monologue. Keeping consultants' inner talk public minimizes the risk of their being ensnared in monological inner and outer talk. By monologic, I refer to the same thought continuing, like having a tune in one's head that plays over and over again. Sometimes this result can be

experienced as dueling monologues or realities: when one or both parties put energy into further defending or persuading the other of their view (Anderson, 1997; Anderson and Goolishian, 1988). The monologic voices become like skyscrapers that are side-by-side without windows, doors or bridges – each closed to the other or “deaf to the other” as Bakhtin suggests. In such instances, the conversation reaches a standstill; there is no longer the criss-crossing or cross-fertilization of either the consultant’s or the client’s perspective that is present when people are in the process of trying to understand one another. Put differently, dialogue or “witness thinking” can easily collapse into monologue or “aboutness thinking.” Shotter contrasts witness and “aboutness (monologic)-thinking.” Quoting Bakhtin, Shotter iterates: “[in its extreme pure form] another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness and not another consciousness .... Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293).

I do not suggest that all private thoughts must be spoken. The important thing is to beware of the risk of monologue, how what is heard and spoken is filtered through inner talk and how to shift back from inner monologue to inner dialogue. Each of us will have our unique ways of reversing monologic talk. A note of clarification: I use monologue to make a distinction. I think that everything is dialogical to some extent, but at times it may not seem so.

Interacting with the other through dialogue as I have briefly described above is a generative and transformative process. It invites participation, participation invites a sense of belonging and a sense of belonging, in turn, invites a sense of ownership. Ownership invites shared responsibility for the process and the product. The product will be more individually tailored and have relevance for the client and in such, sustainability is enhanced.

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#### Footnote:

<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the terms client and consultant to respectively refer to the customer and the professional.

# What Does It Mean To Be Appreciative?

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*This article focuses on the nature of respect and appreciation by referring to ideas proposed by a number of European philosophers and authors, including Baudrillard, Bataille, De Certeau, Kafka and Heidegger. It also discusses the implications of these views for client work, using the experiences of a Finnish expert cooperative, the CoopHope, as a starting point. The key argument is that, to enhance appreciation and respectfulness, it is useful to focus more on style than on content of interaction, and to base client work and consultation activities on different metaphors, primarily those relating to various forms of art and writing.*

We would like to discuss the concept of *appreciation* from the viewpoint of some authors and philosophers who have influenced our work as psychologists working with people to develop a sense of *wellbeing*. Appreciation is perhaps not as simple and straight forward a phenomenon as is often thought; it is not as much related to the *content* of verbal interaction as to the *style* of interaction. There are some basic questions that should be asked of Appreciative Inquiry. The obvious are: *what is appreciative? What is not?*

This question could perhaps be answered in a more satisfactory fashion if we use wider and more nuanced points of departure. The points we would like to emphasize are those that appear to be more typical for European authors. Using Baudrillard's focus on style (rather than content), we will explore several aspects of language and social interaction that we believe offer more complex – and thus more humanly useful – understandings of appreciation.

## **Appreciation and the Obsession with Content (Instead Of Style)**

There can be many objections to the writings of Jean Baudrillard, a French philosopher generally known for his cryptic language and often vague arguments. However, some of his themes seem to be relevant to Appreciative Inquiry.

We refer here especially to Baudrillard's comments about "style." In his essay, *Radical Thought* (<http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/radical.html>), he contrasts what he calls radical thought/critique with non-radical thought. To him, analysis is often moralizing and depressive, focused on content at the expense of everything else. Baudrillard encourages enigma and the pleasures of language, a more poetic and less goal-oriented way of writing:

**Such a passion** for the artificial, a passion for illusion, is the same as the seductive joy (jouissance) of undoing a too perfect constellation of meaning. It is also a joy to render transparent the imposture of the world, that is to say the enigmatic function of the world, and its mystification which supposedly is its secret.(...). This passion "wins" in the free and spiritual usage of language, in the spiritual game of writing. And it only

disappears when language is used for a limited finality, its most common usage perhaps, that of communication.

All this sounds very, very French. But what if Baudrillard is writing here not only of thought and thinking, but also of key processes linked with phenomena like appreciation, respect and treating people well? We think his ideas could very well be seen that way. If we follow Baudrillard's focus on style over content, several other issues emerge. Each of these considerations challenges the popular managerial, product-oriented uses of language.

### **Appreciation vs. Instrumentalism**

Appreciation self-evidently has something to do with treating people well; of communicating or interacting with them in such a fashion that they feel good about themselves and the situation; about wellbeing produced in and through interaction. If this is so, isn't appreciation directly contrary to instrumentalism? In other words, if our main concern is with treating people well and with their own wellbeing, we are not likely to focus on our own needs and how we can manage a situation such that we "get" what we want or need.

We constantly experience the tension in these orientations to life. The first orientation could be called technological, including ideas such as realism and instrumentalism. The second is very different: it highlights the singular, the fragmentary, the non-systemic and the here-and-now. It can be linked with appreciative *style*.

Yet, the ethos of western welfare societies is productivistic<sup>1</sup>. Michel Maffesoli has claimed that the predominance of productivism is a result of the Christian-Rational heritage of western cultures (Maffesoli 2002). For him the State is basically a profane version of Christian religion which sets out to eradicate the bad/chaotic and sees the virtue of order/cleanness as a primary target. Maffesoli remarks that, in the long run, these societies come to resemble hospitals, with metaphorical viral or bacterial names which multiply, and include causes of social, economical and cultural ills. It is therefore natural to approach the world (or the organization) as an entity to be handled mechanistically by the appropriate social and health industries. Is not something very essential lost, as Maffesoli himself believes, if we all too eagerly accept this western, extremely rational approach to human life and interaction? This orientation is also seen in rationalist and instrumentalist approaches to work and interaction with clients.

We borrow Maffesoli's term "productivism" to describe these instrumental and rational orientations to organizational life. Productivism is based on a "technological view" of the world, a mentality discussed by Heidegger as a way of viewing the world around us in terms of potential resources, i.e. in terms of their usefulness to us. Everything else fades into insignificance. At the level of everyday life this means that an avalanche of instrumentality is launched and that the singularities (i.e., the very particular, the unexpected) contained in popular discourses, experiences and activities tend to be devalued, because they are not rational or pragmatic.

Instrumentalism closes down any openness to multiple views of what takes place in human interaction and human lives. Penman (1992) would also claim that the possibility of

continuous openness and relative fragmentation of meaning is also a prerequisite for things like appreciation and respect – and even for love. She has been interested in how various types of interaction and communication allow for genuine participation, and how they influence the wellbeing of participants. In a key article Penman discusses “good communication” in a post-modern perspective (1992). For her, “goodness” should be defined using moral criteria: communication is good when it is good for people, *not when it is clear and concise*.

Penman uses four criteria to describe good communication. First, it should be based on the premise that the conversation in which we are participating at a certain moment acknowledges the social realities and roles of the same moment. It does not come from above or outside but respects what is taking place. Second, the conversation should be open to continuous re-definition; it should not just follow an externally prescribed order. Third, good communication allows for various interpretations; it does not consist only of immutable facts. Fourth, communication like this, and the meanings it produces should never be final but be open to reinterpretation.

### **Appreciation as openness to multiplicity**

On the first pages of his book, *Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes explains his motives for choosing a fragmentary approach for writing about love and being in love. For him, being in love is a fragmentary condition. Being in love is a dis-cursus, a state of mentally sprinting in all directions, starting new schemes and lines of action which contrive against the lover.

Barthes concludes that this condition should be respected. Being in love should be described primarily as a set of discontinuities. There are other types of experience and discourse to which this barthesian logic could be applied. One is appreciation and respect.

### **Appreciation as Respect of the Singular**

In Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he develops the idea that people choose from a wide range of ways to escape objectifying situations and practices, including street-level wisdom and cleverness and ingenious uses of passivity and evasion: ways of being physically present and mentally absent. These methods are obviously in extensive use both in normal working life, and also during free time.

Grasping the possibilities of a singular moment and choosing singular lines of thought and action is not easy. However, there must be definite points in time when seeing and utilizing them is possible. In *Re-Imagining Therapy* (Riikonen and Smith 1997), we analysed the dialogical and discursive conditions of this freedom. There were two central ideas in our discussion. First, we were interested in *interactional gaps*, moments when alternative views and options become visible. Second, we explore what we call *providential dialogues* or ways of interacting that keep sight of interactional gaps. One of our conclusions was that a key means for creating providentiality of this type is the use of metaphors and metaphorical language. This suggests that appreciation accompanies acceptance and nurturance of interactional gaps and dialogical providentiality<sup>2</sup>.

In a recent debate in postcolonial studies, Peter Hallward argues that postcolonial writing

is governed by two different logics and styles that he calls specific and singular (2002). Specific texts and discourses see things primarily in terms of social position, hierarchy and politics; singular ones focus on the non-measurability, non-comparability and detachment from formal relationships. Thus, singularity relates to phenomena that cannot be explained from a distanced, dis-interested, uninvolved stance. Singularity requires presence and attention to the nuance of the situation.

Successful resistance to all-encompassing and fixed meaning, instrumentality and excessive functionality comes close to what classical philosophy meant by the “good life;” life that exceeds mere survival. According to this view, social organisations should be built so that they are good for humans, not just for mere life or survival. Should we not take things like “promotion of a good life” into account when we try to think what appreciation and respect actually could refer to?<sup>3</sup>

### Appreciation as Non-calculation

A key way of resisting systems of objectification is deconstructing their language. Later in his life, Heidegger, proposed that the alternative to the “calculative thought” of a technological era is “meditative thought.” Heidegger referred to Greek philosophy in order to show that technique is just one form of expression or manifestation of realities (Heidegger, 1962). Technology by itself is, for him, nothing “technical” in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, technology is a frame inside of which people act and talk. This frame guides and orients us. Through it we choose our metaphors and understand the objects of our thought.

The world revealed through the frame becomes the one and only Reality. Thought of this type, whatever its specific form, operates according to Heidegger in a ready-made framework. It is geared towards answering *already* existing questions. Heidegger claimed that this structure of thinking dominates our relationship to the research of nature and the human mind.

In the text *Letting Be*, Heidegger claimed that meditative thought only takes place when the search for functional resources ends and it is replaced by a different relationship to surroundings (Heidegger 2002). He referred to this state of mind as rootedness, as belonging to a place. It is not even a relationship to the surroundings, to the nature and locality that counts; it is, rather, a relationship to the basic openness of things. Meditative thinking – which is related to our concept of providential interaction – allows for inherent non-finality and multiplicity (see also Heidegger 1962; Steiner 1997). Activities like research are obviously problematic, given Heidegger’s stance. However there are alternative views.

Deleuze, discussing philosophical-historical research, divided research in two broad classes: Nomadic and Royal (Buchanan 2000; Deleuze 1986). It is only Royal research that is dominated by a strategic, control-related interest. It observes its object from a fixed outside point of view and intends to reveal its true nature or essence. Nomadic research is very different: it travels along with its subject matter; it reveals multiplicities, openings and metaphors. It opens the horizons of possibility (Buchanan 2000, 118-119; Rajchman 2001). Deleuze has also used a roughly corresponding categorisation regarding literature. His book (1986) on Kafka talked about major and minor literature. Minor literature – like that of Kafka – succeeds in using official languages (like bureaucratic German) in a radical fashion. Minor

literature works inside major literature and uses it not to deliver a specific (radical) content, but to create intensity with a specific style. It is not a bad idea to try to achieve something like this in research on phenomena like the experience of well-being and marginality. But how is it possible to promote this type of study or research of fragmentary everyday phenomena? The values of our western science are clear in this respect. There is strong preference for whole over fragments. The “unhealthy” is always the aberrant, nomad, porous, non-classifiable, hybrid.

But this preference does not cover everything that takes place in life. It describes only what takes place on the level of “serious” occasions and debates, like those taking place in official spheres of administration, research and business. On the level of everyday, and even in the interstices and “backyards” of the official world, the same people think and behave differently (Riikonen et al. 1997; Riikonen et al. 1998). They prefer the messy and non-useful to the clean and useful. They organise their lives around strange obsessions and even perversions instead of clean and healthy habits. They smile and laugh and wrestle words out of their contexts. In short, they are illogical, inconsequent and irrational, not logical and serene. Should this irrationality be appreciated? Is this linked with what appreciation is? It is hard to think of any genuine respect for other humans that does not allow for the non-classifiable, a-logical and singular. It could even be claimed that true respect is directly linked with the acceptance of singular thought, behaviour and experience.

### **Appreciation as Opposition to Productivistic Colonialism**

Perhaps it would be better to think that we are all “colonised”? And maybe we should follow Deleuze and take the positive side of minority identity? Minority in this sense is about maintaining or re-introducing liveliness and singularity into everyday life, about creating discontinuities. Maybe we should take minor expression and thought (and minor research) more seriously.

According to this logic we are not colonised by a specific State or Organisation, but by certain modes of thought and speaking, by sets of technological (in Heidegger’s sense) and productivistic (in Maffesoli’s and De Certeau’s sense) discourses and practices. But Deleuze presents an alternate view. Perhaps we do not have to see these discourses and practices as all-encompassing systems. Even if they are dominant, they are still only a collection of loosely connected bits and pieces of ideas, values, vocabularies and concepts – a loose and changing web of constructions that do not have final meanings. The real target is the illusion of their stability and coherence.

As we have seen, a productivistic world view has difficulties with creativity and singularity. These two worlds just do not speak the same language. A productivistic world does not have room for unpredictability, multiplicity and interactive gaps in speech, thought and interaction.

It seems that human thought is inherently dualistic and tensional. It has to lean both to calculation and meditation, both to a systems-orientation and singularity. It would therefore be an error to try to make the other end of the dynamic tension disappear. However, at present, the singular is in more danger of disappearing than is the specific. To create a better balance we would need more practices, discussions, writing and research that could be qualified as “minor” in Bataille’s/Kafka’s sense. One of the keys is that this writing and

research should be able to contain its objects holistically and focus on opening perspectives, not on closing them. This is definitely as much a matter of style as it is of content. It is also more a matter of art than an accumulation of facts.

### **Implications for Consultation Work: Cooperative Hope (CoopHope)**

It seems necessary in this context to start with a short description of our own organization and its activities. CoopHope, founded in 1997, is a highly specialized work cooperative with about 50 employees, mostly part-time, working in four different Finnish cities. The organization has been exposed to the ideas described above for many years, because of everyday interaction of the personnel and also because of several books and articles (mostly in Finnish) written by ourselves and some of our colleagues. The basic orientation to our work has constantly been *solution and resource-focused*<sup>5</sup>. This general approach has been coloured with a wider interest in theoretical and cultural themes. One indicator of the breadth of interests within the organization is the active interest in writing, both fiction and non-fiction (5 books of fiction published during last 5-6 years). The organization also uses the specialised skills of many people working in the field of art (graphical art, painting, photography, digital photo processing, sculpture, glass work).

The work of the CoopHope focuses on psychiatric/mental rehabilitation, counselling/coaching, brief psychotherapy, enhancing wellbeing at work, training and academic research. The key activities/projects include:

- A multi-professional consultation centre for children, youth and their families (Powerhouse for Children and Youth)
- A Consultation Clinic for Work/Life Problems
- Rehabilitation Courses for Youth
- Psychotherapy training (solution and resource-oriented client work/therapy/supervision)
- A number of supervision activities
- Projects relating to wellbeing at work
- Work/life related research

Although several of our employees have medical training, one of the basic intentions is to (partly) de-medicalize “therapy” and “psychosocial/psychiatric rehabilitation services” targeted at the client groups in our existing projects. Our employees are, almost without exception, highly trained and experienced; a great majority have academic degrees. Common backgrounds are psychology, social work, medicine and research. Most employees have additional training and work as trainers themselves.

There are actually only 8 members in the cooperative, 3-4 of whom are active. The rest of the personnel are either regular employees or freelancers working on contract for CoopHope. The main funder of our activities is the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela), a huge state controlled agency covering social security, pensions and rehabilitation. The cooperative is also involved in joint projects with the State Treasury. This sector of our activities is targeted on developing new approaches for solving problems that relate to wellbeing at work. Most of this expanding sector of our activities consists of work with managers, unit heads and boards of different state organizations.

## New Metaphors for Therapy and Consultation Work

It is clear from the above, we hope, that the ideas described do not lead to straight-forward methods or applications. The issues here are much more holistic. The main implication of our ideas, one that is also supported by research on consulting activities, is that people/clients prefer respectful, relevant and interesting interaction. Another way to say this is that they prefer to be treated as intelligent and responsible human beings.

In this sense, many things described in the literature focusing on practices such as appreciative interviewing, prerequisites for dialogue and good communication and anti-stigmatizing approaches is relevant for our clients and for us as professionals. What is also relevant, and this is of great interest to us, is that a respectful and appreciative orientation to client work benefits from different metaphors for life and interaction. Our favourite metaphors relate to art. It seems useful to view clients as fellow artists or authors. This identification leads to subtle but cumulative changes in values and orientation.

The key here is that many dominating metaphors of therapy and interviewing tempt “experts of client work” to see themselves and their clients in a traditional and mechanistic fashion, as experts of various types of tricks and manipulative treatments. They put themselves in the technological framework, to use Heidegger’s term. If people are seen as Life Artists and Life Authors, even if this is just a playful idea or a background hint, we will naturally have a more nuanced, less socially engineered or managerial approach to our dialogues and discussions.

To change a metaphor does not mean that the new metaphor need be discussed, or that it is forced on clients. In most cases there is no mention of it. This does not prevent ideas and metaphors we believe in from having a significant influence on what takes place in the sessions and meetings.

Another thing apparent to us is the need for an element of surprise in dialogue, which also ties in with what was said above in the context of Baudrillard and others. The level of newness is apparently an indicator of the quality of interaction for most people; it is a sign of honesty, intelligence and responsibility. Experts who can create and inspire fresh topics, expressions, styles and ideas jointly with clients are not only doing the routine thing, they are listening more carefully, they are taking the needs of others more seriously, they are more human and treating others in a more human way, too.

### Footnotes

1 The word productivism refers to discourses and practices that rely on the logic, vocabulary and values of economy, administration and production (see Maffesoli 1996, 2002; Dejours 2000).

2 It seems that power of all kinds must have the capacity to close interactive gaps to be able to work. It is for this reason that the rhetoric used by those interested in control has to lean significantly on factuality and realism, on the (illusion of) disappearance of the metaphor.

3 Another correlate of these ideas seems to be that attempts to achieve (or counteract) power must generally focus on creating or deconstructing discursive totalisations.

4 This concept stems from earlier projects in different Finnish organisations and refers to the somewhat eclectic and hybrid nature of our approach which combines solution-focused and narrative methods, ideas stemming

from the literature of Appreciative Inquiry as well as methods developed by ourselves. Our main interest is in positive possibilities and development in what individual clients and client organisations can actually do (with others) to make things better.

5 In Finnish: Riikonen, E, Smith, G. (1998) *Inspiraatio ja asiakastyö*. Vastapaino: Tampere

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## Promoting social networks in the healthcare system in Ribeirão Preto/Brazil

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*The Brazilian Healthcare System faced many challenges in implementing the new principles of universality of access, comprehensive care, decentralization and social participation. In this article, we present three examples of how group practices influenced by constructionist ideas promote local changes essential to the transformation of the Healthcare System. The first example focuses on interdisciplinary health work. The second is an example of social participation in health politics and the final case illustrates community engagement in the process of producing/ delivering healthcare.*

In the late eighties, Brazil initiated a Health Reform Process which has subsequently led to a National Healthcare System called Unified Health System (SUS). The SUS is based on constitutional principles of universality, comprehensive care, decentralization, social participation and equal right of access by all citizens to services at all levels of complexity. Since this reform, the concepts of health and illness have been amplified and efforts have been taken to transform the healthcare system into a unified organization at the federal level while simultaneously giving autonomy to different, local levels of care. Special effort has been given to the first level – primary healthcare – which became the central focus of the system since it serves as the entrance to the healthcare system and the first contact with families. This level of care has a community-oriented mode where the goal is to take care of communities. “Taking care” in this context means approaching and connecting all members of the community to the entire healthcare system. In doing so, the aim is to create an environment conducive to collaboration, thereby fostering an atmosphere of cultural and local sensitivity, improving the quality of life and creating a sense of attachment, co-responsibility and participation. In order to develop practices that are relational, integrative and helpful within this new healthcare structure, the need for new interventions designed to challenge the traditional and technique-oriented approaches to healthcare are a priority. Focus is on creating more innovative models and making positive changes.

With the healthcare system as a new governmental priority, more value is given to interdisciplinary work and the social/political/relational aspects of the health/illness process. With this shift in emphasis, the work of psychologists has been gaining a more prominent place within the healthcare process, thereby broadening the meaning of psychological intervention in public health and expanding psychological practices beyond the traditional focus on clinical issues. Emphasizing the local level of healthcare and, consequently, demanding a productive collaboration among the actors involved, challenges healthcare professionals to incorporate multiple voices. This is a context in which social constructionist discourse offers some useful resources. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the relational

and discursive processes through which people construct themselves and the world in which they live. Within a social constructionist perspective, language is understood in its performative character and is considered a social practice that constructs realities.

Associated is the denaturalization of some assumptions usually considered to be essential truths. For constructionist authors, the meanings that inform our understanding of the world are social constructions, an outcome of the conversational exchanges, situated in specific social, historical and cultural contexts. Constructionism focuses, therefore, on the way people co-create, in their discursive practices, certain personal and social realities. This constructionist emphasis on the relational process of world making is especially useful in the production of collective answers to the challenges present in Brazil's healthcare system, because it invites the use of group practices to promote a sense of relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) and a climate of dialogue (Becker et al., 1999).

### **Group practice in healthcare: a social constructionist approach**

Based on social constructionist assumptions, we would like to propose an understanding of "group" as a conversational resource – that is, a group is seen as a specific interactive context in which people engage in the negotiation and construction of meanings. Developing group practices therefore can be described as an attempt to construct a dialogical context based on collaborative discourse, in which the negotiation of meanings can favor the emergence of alternative possibilities and new vocabularies for action. Our focus is on various ways in which these sorts of group practices can be developed.

As Anderson (1997) proposes, in relation to individual and family therapy, the group therapist abandons the position of specialist on the content of the client's narratives and, instead, occupies the position of specialist on the conversational process. In a constructionist view of group practice, the coordinator pays attention to the conversational flow, focusing on the quality of the participants' interactions. Also, the coordinator focuses on how narratives constructed in the group create openings or constraints for alternative ways of describing the world and relating to it.

Thus, the group coordinator can be seen as co-responsible for the narratives constructed in this context. Also, s/he can be seen as a facilitator of the conversational process, aiming for the creation of a dialogical context in which the plurality of voices can be heard and managed in a respectful and reflexive way. Her/his goal is to construct a conversational context that is responsive and non-judgmental. Ideally, the group becomes a context wherein special ways of talk can emerge. Within this perspective, the coordinator is part of the relationship that is constructed in the group and tries to remain attentive to the ways of talking that are developed, to the social discourses which sustain some narratives and to how conversations can favor the generation of new meanings and forms of life.

In this understanding of the group, we have found David Cooperrider's assumptions about Appreciative Inquiry very useful. We prefer to put the conversational focus on the investigation of resources that are already present in social organizations (communities, groups, teams) and not on the amplification of problem narratives, thereby directing a search for causes and problem solutions. Based on this approach, we attempt to create a group context for the exploration of the stories of success and the creation of new scenarios,

through the envisioning of possible futures based on the acquisitions already made by the group (Hammond, 1996).

In drawing on constructionist authors to think about group practice, it is important to remember that social constructionism is not a method with particular procedures and techniques of intervention. Instead, it is a relational practice, a way of making meaning of the world and engaging in generative forms of dialogue. As McNamee (2004) points out, social constructionism can be considered a discursive option that gives us a new vocabulary for action, which favors the investigation of what kind of social life is made possible when one way of talking is used instead of another.

To illustrate our argument, we will discuss three cases in the remainder of this article. We believe these cases illustrate the ways in which a group can be used as a conversational resource. Informed by an appreciative and dialogical perspective, we believe that imagining the concept (or “entity”) of a “group” as a social construction favors the creation of social networks necessary for the improvement of the Brazilian healthcare system. In each of the cases described below, we point to the changes produced through group practice and make explicit how such changes can contribute to the transformation of health institutions in Brazil.

### **Promoting interdisciplinary work in a Family Healthcare Program**

In order to amplify the practices developed in a Family Healthcare Program at Jardinópolis (São Paulo / Brazil), we have started a “Group of Mothers”. Our intention was to construct a different model for working in the context of primary healthcare. We were interested in creating a mode of working where different professionals (communitarian agents, medical students and psychologists) could take part in the same context of care. This method varies from traditional work with mothers where “problems” would be assessed and treatment would be designated to only one of the following: a medical student, a psychologist or a communitarian agent.

The objective of the “Group of Mothers” was to promote open conversations about the everyday life and difficulties of mothers. Our aim was to be open to the self-narratives of mothers in order to work with their own resources and potentials.

This group was coordinated by a psychologist (also Professor of Public Health within the Medical Faculty) and co-coordinated by medical students and communitarian agents. All were instructed to participate in the group as they pleased. However, they were given some orienting group “rules” to facilitate the construction of a welcoming and safe conversational space. These rules focused on process issues and were presented to the participants at the beginning of each group. Included were: i) when one talks, the others must listen; ii) people must respect each other’s opinions and avoid giving advice; and iii) people can try to help each other by telling personal stories (first person narratives) in which they share a similar experience/difficulty as well as offer descriptions of what they found useful in solving these issues. These rules were proposed by Barreto (2005) for “community therapy.”

To evaluate the utility of this practice, we considered the different perspectives of all participants. This included those present as well as those who “populated” the mothers’ stories and who were, therefore, significant participants in the storied lives of these women.

For example, it was necessary to consider the communitarian agents' (community volunteers) views. The "group of mothers" offered a new opportunity to connect the mothers' narratives with real or imagined narratives of communitarian agents with whom they might have frequent contact. By exploring the complexity of their frequent interactions, the potential for increased comprehension about the health/illness process was facilitated. Also, the group dialogue favored the mothers' connections with their own stories about "being a mother," constructing the group as a context to deconstruct prejudices and beliefs. Finally, their participation in the construction of the group as a place for sharing experiences, based on a respectful and non-judgmental atmosphere, gave them another model of conversation, less centered on problems and more focused on resources and potentialities.

Considering the medical students' perspectives, the group work was an important space for theoretical and practical learning. The students worked as co-constructors of this dialogical space, learning from within the group about conversational processes which create or constrain possibilities for the emergence of new vocabularies for action. Thus, they practiced some constructionist assumptions about useful ways of being in dialogue, abandoning deficit language and helping people construct alternative self narratives, based on Appreciative Inquiry principles.

We think this kind of interdisciplinary practice improved the quality of medical student training, as well as the professional practices of the health team, inviting all participants to reflect on how their everyday practices promote (or fail to promote) SUS principles. In our experience, the health team was able to create, jointly, a space to perform integrative, collaborative health assistance. Different professionals could work together to create a dialogic context that was relationally responsible (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) and focused on caring for people's health.

### **Promoting social participation in the healthcare system**

Another intervention that aimed to improve the healthcare system was carried out in a non-governmental organization (NGO) whose objective is to advocate for the rights of people living with HIV. One of the principles of the SUS is the democratic participation of citizens in determining how the government defines healthcare practice – in terms of specific lines of action – at all levels of healthcare. However, there are several challenges that impede this goal. For example, after years of political repression, Brazil understandably suffers a wholesale depreciation of citizenship, thereby making democratic and participatory practices alien to many community members. An additional challenge is the healthcare professionals' beliefs that the general population has little (if anything) of use to contribute to the development of policies and practices designed to promote their own health. Finally, the extreme value placed on the technical knowledge of healthcare professionals creates conditions that severely limit the likelihood of active and lively professional–community collaboration. Therefore, the project aimed to promote organized and effective participation of the population in the local healthcare system. To do so, project organizers developed an intervention at an AIDS/NGO, the "Grupo Humanitário de Incentivo à Vida".

This organization had as one of its goals "to give voice" to the HIV carrier. For this reason, it attempted to influence the political stance directed at this population by starting

with a consideration of HIV carriers' interests. However, as you might imagine, these political actions constituted a challenge for proponents of the project, generating many tensions among the organizational members. In the face of these difficulties, an intervention that aimed at facilitating communication among the organization's members was proposed with the hope of creating a collaborative decision making process and, consequently, an integration among organizational members.

The intervention consisted of ten monthly meetings, with the four members of the team responsible for political networking actions and community involvement. These meetings focused on generating new meanings about the actions carried out by the team through a process of "shared inquiry" (Anderson, 1997). The meetings were not structured with a determined set of questions or group exercises to be followed. Rather, the psychologist facilitating the meetings acted from a not-knowing position, searching for the "not yet said," using therapeutic questions (Anderson and Goolishian, 1998), bringing appreciative voices and remaining relationally sensitive to the interests and concerns of the team (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). The psychologist, focusing on the interactive moment, invited the participants to listen carefully to each other and to consider the values of the other members. They were encouraged to talk in a way that was not aimed at persuading the other, but was instead aimed at sharing personal concerns (Becker et al., 1999). These meetings created a culture of dialogue within the team, promoting respect for their differences and strengthening the cohesion and organization of their collective actions.

The outcome of this intervention can be evaluated by the actions accomplished by the team and the organization. In addition to better internal communication, it was possible to carry out a series of political networking actions with different institutions. One year after the intervention, the team counted more than 40 meetings with different organizations for the defense of HIV carriers in the state. The organization also created a permanent forum of AIDS/NGO in the city and a regional meeting of people living with AIDS. All these actions empowered the team and allowed them to have direct interaction with the governmental representatives charged with promoting health assistance for this population, thereby influencing the politics and accomplishing the goal of the organization.

### **Promoting dialogues of health/illness within communities**

The third intervention to be described occurred within a community which is assisted by a primary healthcare center. The goal of the center was to engage people in the whole process of producing and delivering healthcare. According to the Brazilian Primary Healthcare plan, all healthcare practices must include the community, focusing on their needs and emphasizing their participation in the process.

Based on constructionist ideas, the healthcare process is viewed as a social practice in which the meaning of health/illness is dynamically constructed and deconstructed in the interaction between community and health professionals. Taking this perspective into account, community groups were created with the goal of inviting the neighborhood to talk about issues involving health, illness and care. The overriding aim was to create a space where the very idiosyncratic and important local values and culture could be respected – particularly where these values connect with issues of healthcare. The group coordinator

adopted an open stance, being the “architect of dialogue,” helping the group explore their health-related subject through dialogue. Respect and appreciation of all opinions, no matter how diverse, was the organizing rule. Thus, within the context of respect and appreciation for various viewpoints and experiences, the conversation that emerged was dialogic in form, considering the group participants experts on their own lives (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Having an open and an appreciative conversation with the community made it possible to consider a multiplicity of meanings about the health/illness process. By integrating both traditional techniques of healthcare with local, community-centered “knowledge” of health and illness, fixed discourses can be denaturalized and the same subject can emerge with different meaning, thereby creating new possibilities for interaction. Additionally, this dialogic process shows us that universal aspects of healthcare, when discussed from within a personal story, transform into unique understandings where each situation generates the possibility for a singular form of care.

This experience allowed us to be sensitive to reflexive practices (i.e., the ways in which we, as professionals, invite others into conversation) and to the importance of context, favoring that both the community members and the health professionals collaborate in the healthcare process. It also indicates that healthcare delivery could be more dialogical, collaborative and inclusive, not just involving the staff and community, but all the social actors involved such as the political administrators designing healthcare policy, the users and the executors/professionals. Furthermore, it assists people in being more active participants within their communities in general and within the healthcare system in particular. This, in turn, creates a social network and enhances a sense of relational responsibility for professionals and users alike.

### Concluding remarks

This article points to the significance of social constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry in the construction of dialogical group contexts. These group practices can be used in different settings and have an important impact in the promotion of institutional change. This way of working emphasizes the micro-social context of change, opening the way to broader organizational/institutional transformations. Considering the principles of the healthcare system in Brazil, this micro-context of social participation appears compatible with the national healthcare reform in Brazil and locates communities at the center of change.

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# Image and Success: Collaboration and AI with a law firm in Mexico City

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*This article provides an example of applying principles and ideas that come from social constructionism, positive psychology and flow as a way to develop appreciative organizations in the professional world. The use of professional tools such as the Via Signature Strength Questionnaire prepares the participants and orients them towards their strengths. It also opens the door to a working atmosphere centered on possibilities and Appreciative Inquiry. Last but not least, it allows highlighting the organizational strengths and creates a sense of bonding and hope for the future.*

## First encounter

I was approached by Cervantes, Aguilar, Alvarez y Saenz (CAAYS) a prestigious law firm in Mexico City, looking for business coaching for their Annual Convention, a weekend event organized by the firm, which includes partners (7), associates (7) and student interns (26), a total of 40 people.

When I met with two of the partners for our initial interview, they were not very sure about their goals for the Convention. They wanted it to be different from the experience they had the prior year and wanted to focus on creating a sense of belonging and cohesion within the law firm. They had already selected the date, time and place for the event and I was only able to join them for part of the weekend (Friday and Saturday afternoon).

## A Proposal

After this first encounter I had the sense that following the ideas of *The Appreciative Organization* (Anderson et al. 2001) might be a good way to approach the firm and create the sense of community and coherence they were seeking. I also thought about Martin Seligman's *Via Signature Strength Questionnaire* (VSSQ)<sup>1</sup> ([www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com)) as a way to start the process of looking at personal strengths, even before starting the workshop. I sent them a proposal focusing on image and success as the topic for the seminar. The reaction to the proposal was very positive. They felt that the ideas and methodology I was proposing fit their organization and the goals they had envisioned for the Convention. Based on my collaborative approach to therapy (Anderson, 1997) and my experience of collaboration and co-design as a key ingredient for success, I insisted that we meet one more time, so I could get a better sense of the organization, including ideas about how to form conversational clusters. They suggested forming mixed groups, each one with partners, associates, and young female interns.

## The workshop

The Seminar took place at "La Mansión Galindo," a beautiful 16th century "hacienda"

converted into a five star resort, two hours drive north of Mexico City. I arrived in time to have lunch with the group before we started the workshop. I found them lively and eager to work. We started the seminar with Name Introductions (Appendix 1: workshop outline) to create a sense of surprise; then we moved to form conversational clusters where, in a more personal and intimate way, participants could talk about the meaning of their names and give their working group a meaningful name. They reintroduced themselves within their newly formed groups. I then did a short presentation with cartoons about the way society sees lawyers, as an introduction to an exercise based on the social construction of the profession, how they see themselves and how others see them. This exercise ended in short presentations where the different groups used original and fun ways to talk about themselves.

We ended the evening creating a treasure chest, where each participant was asked to write her/his 5 signature strengths (SS) from the (VSSQ) survey on a sticky note and paste it on a large piece of paper. They ended the day with a dinner together while I worked on the information they had given me to have it ready for the next meeting.

The following morning the group had business meetings and some free time. I had to return to Mexico City for a prior commitment, but returned to La Mansión in time to join them for lunch and preparations for the workshop.

The group was eager to continue and very enthusiastic about the work we had been doing. We started the afternoon with a theoretical presentation on Positive Psychology, Flow and Signature Strengths (SS) (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996 and Seligman, 2002). Once they had the information from the presentation they went back to work in their small groups on a long assignment regarding their personal definition of success, their preferred identity and their SS. The groups were given the task of returning to the whole group with their combined personal and group strengths based on the survey. The groups were focused and animated and had a hard time coming back together. They were already commenting on the usefulness of the ideas and the types of conversations they were having within their small groups. They described these conversations as different from the business conversations they typically had. The conversations were lively and intense. The groups came back and presented their "Group's SS" and their reactions to them. I followed these presentations showing a slide with my own list of their individual strengths, compiled, to represent the firm's SS (Appendix 2).

Once the Firm's SS was presented, I asked them to work in pairs and talk about their reaction to the information. The reaction the participants had to the Collective Survey Results was very exciting, they became very animated saying how much the results represented them and how much they liked being part of an organization personified by these strengths, talents and values.

However, there were five young female student interns in the group. Throughout the workshop I sensed that they had felt silenced in their groups and they agreed. In this particular exercise I asked them to gather together and have a conversation as a group and add the challenges of being a woman in this organization. The slide stayed on for a long time, while the whole group had a conversation about the organization, its past, present and future. The partners were very proud of having created an organization that looked the way

this one did. They thought the strengths were well balanced and had a conversation about the future of the organization and ways to further develop these strengths and minimize their weaknesses.

There were also conversations comparing individual results with the overall results, in terms of fit and match with the organization. At this point the women were able to talk about being young women in this organization and the challenges they met in society. The meeting ended on a very emotional and spiritual note with a big appreciation from the firm partners and an invitation to keep on building their future together.

### **After the seminar**

After the seminar, the group had a dinner party with Mexican food and music. I joined the party and was able to have more informal conversation with different members of the group where they expressed their gratitude and appreciation for the kind of work we had done together and the personal and professional enlightenment that came from it.

There were two particular issues they wanted to discuss further and invited me to join them in future:

One had to do with the fact that the firm is male dominated. They have not had a woman partner yet, and they wanted to talk about the kind of firm they could become which would invite women partners in a way that everyone in the organization would feel comfortable with.

Secondly they wanted to analyze the data from the SS questionnaire in different ways according to teams, partners, associates, and student interns.

The next morning before returning to Mexico City, we all had breakfast together. The excitement was still in the air and I could hear how they were beginning to incorporate positive psychology, flow and SS language in their conversations.

We ended the seminar with a scheduled meeting with the partners to follow up on the new agenda developed during the workshop.

I received the following e-mail a few days later from the firm's founder:

*"Dear Sylvia:<sup>2</sup>*

*In the name of all the members of CAAYS we would like to express our gratitude and acknowledge the value of your guidance in our seminar. We believe that we can make better use of our strengths; we would like to count your strengths at the top of our list.*

*Please let us know others ways in which you can help us*

*Regards,*

*Luis"*

### **What is next?**

I met with two of the partners the following week to plan future meetings. We agreed on a monthly breakfast for the partners to continue the topics that were initiated at the seminar. They also wanted to organize a workshop on gender issues and the organization of their firm, which we are in the process of doing.

## Personal Reflections

I think that I would have liked to spend more time with the group; to be present for all the exercises I had planned for them. The time was short, but I believe we made very good use of it. What I think worked particularly well in this group was that there was no sense of being rushed and we took time to create a sense of community and belonging before diving into the issues. We moved from the general to the personal and then back to the general with a better sense of the individual. Having the group take the SS Questionnaire before we started the seminar was an asset in terms of sensitizing, developing language and focusing the group on strength and appreciation. The fact that they shared the results of the questionnaire anonymously created a sense of community where stiff hierarchy was dissolved.

Closing the seminar with the firm's strengths was a way to motivate and keep building community for the future. The atmosphere that was created was playful and fun, even though we were working on serious issues.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Via Signature Strength Questionnaire Measures 24 Character Strengths

Questionnaire and classification of strengths are the work of the Values in Action Institute (VIA), under the direction of Drs Martin E. P. Seligman and Chris Peterson, and funding for this work has been provided by the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation. © 2002 Values in Action Institute. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author from the Spanish original

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## Appendix 1

### Workshop Outline

#### Image and Success

#### Friday

#### I. Introductions:

#### Exercise 1<sup>3</sup> (15-20 minutes)

In one breath please introduce yourselves saying your name and something that will be new and surprising for your workmates

Form 6 work groups assigned by color (pre-selected according to organization's request)

#### Exercise 2 : Naming (30 minutes)

What is your name?

Why are you named the way you are named?

What are the implications this name has or has had on your life?

What name will you choose to name your group in order to represent all the group members?

Write a name and logo that will identify your group

Why did you choose that name?

What does it say about you?

## **II. Power Point Presentation about Social Construction of Lawyers through cartoons (five minutes)**

### **Exercise 3 :Image/Prejudices (30 minutes of preparation, 20 minutes of presentation)**

Individually take a minute to think about this:

- What are the social constructions about lawyers?
- How are they seen in society?
- When people talk about lawyers what kind of adjectives do they use?
- What are the most common jokes?

#### **Share your thoughts with the group**

- How would you represent the group's ideas in a 2 minute play

### **Exercise 4 :Desired Image (40 min) in large group**

- How do you react to this information?
- What do you like?
- What do you dislike?
- What would you like to keep?
- What would you like to change?
- What would you do to make the change happen?
- How would you like to be seen?
- What do you do to confirm the created social image?
- What would you have to do to change or enlarge the social definition and perception?

#### **Treasure Chest**

On a sticky note please write your first 5 signature strengths from the questionnaire and paste them on the large piece of paper (you do not have to identify yourself)

#### **Saturday**

### **Positive Psychology, Flow and Signature Strengths (PP Presentation)**

#### **Exercise 1 : Personal Definition of Success and Preferred Identity (60min)<sup>4</sup>**

The first step to reach success is to find out what success means to you.

Take 2 minutes to write in positive language your personal definition of success.

- Personal
- Professional
- In conversational clusters, each person take 5 minutes to share your definition with other group members. Other group members can offer questions and comments to clarify

or amplify the meaning.

- Once all the group members have shared their own definitions, take 2 minutes to refine the meaning. Move on to the next question.

### Preferred Identity

The second step to achieve success is to define your “preferred identity”.

Identity is the way you see yourself and influences the ways in which others see you.

- Take two minutes to write a definition of your preferred identity, including words that represent it.
- What are your strengths and talents (share the information from the signature strength questionnaire).
- What words or phrases represent what you would like others to see in you?
- Write on a large sheet of paper the characteristics and signature strengths which represent the group and come back to the larger group.

### CAAYS Signature Strengths

**Each group presented their own Signature Strengths followed by the PP presentation of all the computed values of the Via Signature Strengths Questionnaire for the entire firm In pairs have a conversation about the information**

In a large group and popcorn format address the following issues:

#### CAAYS

- How would you define CAAYS success?
- What is CAAYS preferred image?
- How can you achieve it and maintain it?
- What are the personal, group and relational strengths in this organization?

#### Balance between personal and professional life

- Dilemmas and challenges
- Gender issues
- Value clarification
- Energy drainers
- Energy boosters

#### Possibilities

- What kind of possibilities has this seminar created for you?
- How do you enrich your personal and professional life?
- What are you bringing to your work environment?

## Appendix 2

### Signature Strengths (SS) CAAYS

1. Hope/optimism/future- mindedness T (15)
2. Curiosity/interest-in-the-world W (13)
3. Citizenship, teamwork and loyalty J (10)
4. Industry, diligence and perseverance) C (9)
5. Loving and allowing oneself to be loved H (9)

6. Integrity, authenticity and genuineness C (8)
7. Judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness W (8)
8. Gratitude T (8)
9. Fairness/equity J (7)
10. Valor/bravery C (7)
11. Ingenuity/originality/practical-intelligence/street-smart W (6)
12. Perspective W (5)
13. Social Intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence W (5)
14. Leadership J (5)
15. Humor/playfulness T (4)
16. Forgiveness/mercy T (4)
17. Spirituality/sense-of-purpose/faith T (4)
18. Prudence Te (2)

### **Distribution of SS**

- Transcendence (5) 1,8,15,16,17
  - o Hope, gratitude, humor, forgiveness, spirituality
- Wisdom and Knowledge (5) 2,7,11,12,13
  - o Curiosity, critical thinking, ingenuity, perspective, social intelligence
- Justice (3) 3,9,14 Citizenship, justice, leadership
- Courage (3) 4,6,10 Industry, integrity, valor
- Humanity (1) 5 Loving,
- Temperance (1) 18 Prudence

### **SS clues**

- T Transcendence
- W Wisdom and knowledge
- J Justice
- C Courage
- H Humanity and love
- Te Temperance

### Appendix Footnotes

<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the work of Sallyann Roth

<sup>4</sup> Exercise inspired by Access Success International through Coaching Workshop: For business and professional women who want to be more successful

# Therapeutic stances in the construction of an AIDS/NGO: the psychologist as a partner

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*This article describes the use of therapeutic stances in developing a process of collaboration among professionals and people living with AIDS. The process was developed within a Brazilian non-governmental organization (NGO), the Grupo Humanitário de Incentivo à Vida. As a psychologist, I participated in the founding of the organization, assisting in the process of defining its organizational structure. Furthermore, as the NGO was originally a self-help group which I facilitated, I describe in this article the trajectory of my transformation from the role of therapist to that of project manager.*

## **Brazilian community response to AIDS**

The AIDS epidemic has demanded diverse efforts within Brazilian society. The successful response of the country to this epidemic has been influenced by the social forces of an organized civil society, consisting mainly of different community-based and non-governmental organizations all embracing local character and aiming at defending the rights of people living with AIDS (Câmara & Lima, 2000).

These non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are successful in regard to the epidemic because of the collective character of the social response that surpasses the traditional, technologically-centered answers offered within the conventional health context. In Brazil, these NGOs appeared in the mid-eighties and expanded to approximately 500 by 2000. Represented by institutions such as unions and churches, as well as those specifically created for the fight against AIDS, these NGOs carry out activities of support and assistance for HIV carriers; prevention and education in STD/AIDS; political networking; and advocacy.

As part of this community response to AIDS, in the city of Riberão Preto/SP/Brasil, in 2002, the Grupo Humanitário de Incentivo à Vida was created (GHIV). This is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, whose mission is to promote quality of life for people living with AIDS. Besides offering psychological and legal assistance to HIV carriers, it promotes political networking with governmental and non-governmental institutions.

## **Introducing the case: from a self-help group to a non-governmental organization**

The history of this organization began when it was a self-help group for HIV carriers. For six years I coordinated this group with another colleague in a room offered by a labor union. We had no relationship with the labor union except for the use of their space. As the group progressed, the participants (HIV carriers) began to think critically about the role of the local healthcare system. Discussions were active about the system's participation in national meetings of people living with HIV/AIDS, about carrying forward various support actions for other HIV carriers, and having an interest in forming an NGO.

After a while, I began to stimulate the group to search for information on the legal

requirements for the constitution of an organization and to define its objectives. Our group was designed to focus on participants' needs. However, the group very quickly focused on processes of collectively generating political and organizational answers to this epidemic. Thus, while the self-help meetings were not oriented toward the creation of an NGO, the result of our group moved in this direction very quickly. My hope was to promote an environment of dialogue wherein participants could review their decisions and deal with the tensions between themselves in these negotiations for creating an NGO.

### **The meetings with the future members of the NGO**

Some of the participants requested my aid in the process of the NGO creation – specifically in the definition of its objectives and its organizational structure. I proposed meetings with those interested in such a task. We conducted four meetings of approximately three hours with eight participants.

Based on constructionist contributions in the field of psychological practice, and considering their implications for the different phases of group development (Bushe, 1998), I coordinated these meetings according to the following principles:

- Sharing the motivations of each participant through the inquiry of their life histories
- Identifying successful experiences lived jointly by this group
- Imagining the difference that they would like to make in their assistance to the carriers in the city through the new organization
- Exploring the actions that they would like to keep doing
- Defining the orienting concepts and values of the NGO
- Selecting the positions of each member in the organization.

As result of such meetings, we defined a proposal for the organizational structure of the new NGO which included the following features:

- An Executive Management team
- A Council of Directors
- Six subcommittees:
  - Psychosocial Care
  - Active Citizenship
  - AIDS and Prejudice Prevention
  - Legal Orientation
  - Administrative functions
  - Physical Education

Using a dialogue process to construct the NGO's organizational structure also strengthened the cohesion within the group, helping to construct a positive frame where an appreciative stance was valued. During this process, and with the foundation of the NGO, some patients turned into volunteers within the institution and I gave up my role as group therapist. Once I did this, I was able to deal with issues of management and also assume the position of project manager within the organization.

### **From group therapist to project manager: my work tools**

My experience as group therapist was valuable in the development of the activities with the members of the NGO. Based on constructionist contributions to psychological practices (Andersen, 1987; Anderson, 1997; Hammond, 1996; McNamee, 2003; McNamee & Gergen, 1998; White & Epston, 1990), my actions were oriented by the following ideas, among others:

- The importance of relational meanings. The world is socially constructed through the conversation. The meanings constructed within these conversations are related to the people interacting and vary according to their specific social and historical conditions. To change meanings, participants must change relationships. An invitation to others' different voices, institutions and perspectives is immensely valued.
- An appreciative stance. There are many different ways of world making: one, emphasizes critique, opposition, differentiation and separation; and another, focuses on co-construction, acceptance of others' contributions, shared histories and connection. We favor the last one in our conversations.
- Focus on the future and potentiality. Associated with the previous idea, this highlights a preference for promoting conversations about the future, enriching them with significant details, energizing them with the best of our beings, enlivening the chosen possibilities and helping to make them real.
- An expertise in conversational process. In order to invite people's authorship of their own lives, professionals act as specialists in the conversational process, offering opportunities for new descriptions and possibilities of action by encouraging different ways of talking and letting people tell and decide the truths of their past and future lives.

As we can see, I am not describing an intervention procedure or a set of pre-defined group exercises. Instead, I offer a way of thinking and acting in each moment of the interaction. It is a stance that focuses on the interactive moment and the promotion of relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) in a way that empowers the people involved (professionals and participants) and invites them to create new identities and possibilities for action.

### **Therapeutic stances in the organizational context**

Despite the fact that this brief case history is a story of a particular experience – an outcome of an uncommon professional trajectory – it can help us reflect on the utility of certain therapeutic stances for the field of organizational practice. The therapeutic stance described above contributes to the creation of spaces in which people have their potential promoted within the organization.

Additionally, this case allows us to think about four issues that arise when using therapeutic stances in the organizational context:

- First is the issue of the value of such stances at different moments in the development of an organization. Although there are many descriptions of how postmodern approaches have helped to create a new way to promote the development and evaluation of an existing organization, this case points out the utility of those

approaches in the process of creating an organization, in the definition of its organization chart, flowchart, and position descriptions.

- Second is the move from technique to ethical commitment. This way of working was more than a technique. It was an ethical commitment to the uniqueness of the different forms of participation of the team members. I was curious about the participants' topics of conversation, about what they thought about other members' comments, and attempted to be sensitive to the way they interacted. The focus of this practice is the people and their process. Through collaborative practices we change people who, in turn, change organizations.
- Third, we must consider the relationship between the fields of the Clinic and the Organization. Traditionally, and especially within the psychological profession, the fields of the clinic and the organization are opposed in terms of either a focus on actions or on methods used. However, such opposition can mean a waste of the knowledge generated. A therapeutic stance can be useful at different moments for the psychologist in the organization. Moreover, the approach presented here also produces an interaction between these fields which is different from the one traditionally present in the practices of mental health and work. The focus in the present case is not focused on taking care of or offering health treatment to the workers. Rather, the focus is on giving attention to the ways in which people relate to the diverse elements of the situation. It is a way of jointly constructing a propitious context for the work of all the people involved and for the development of the organization.
- Finally, we must attend to aspects of critical practice in the Clinic and the Organization. Considering the critical perspectives in health psychology (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), the psychologist may include organizational and political dimensions in its psychological interventions with the population of HIV carriers, expanding the possibilities for action. In this way (in the present case), it was possible to construct new meanings of life that incorporated the concrete living conditions of this population and allowed for transformative action beyond their own lives, having an impact within the community where they lived.

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# Provoking New Management Learning

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*In this article Caroline Ramsey uses ideas from Frank Farrelly's "Provocative Therapy" to develop new ways of supporting management learning. In particular, she argues for a treatment of managing that emphasises the creativity of managers' moment-by-moment relations and down plays the importance of management theory.*

I came across the "Provocative Therapy" of Frank Farrelly a few years ago. I confess that I did not know whether to laugh at his way of working with clients or to be appalled. The things he said to clients seemed outrageous and possibly dangerous. However, they also showed a profound confidence in fragile people, a confidence that they could work their way out of personal crises or long-term psychological traps. Could his ideas contribute to my own work with managers? (I work as a university lecturer and management consultant.)

Frank Farrelly trained as a psychotherapist within a Freudian community of practice; he was then influenced by Humanistic psychology and worked with Carl Rogers in the person-centred tradition. Later he rejected both these approaches as unhelpful to clients and developed "Provocative Therapy." Two assumptions permeated Farrelly's work and have informed my own work with managers, both in the university classroom and in consultancy practice. First, Farrelly assumed that clients have the potential to change their actions. That rather than being passive 'readers' of their past, their relations and other deterministic forces, their actions are responsive; changed challenges can see changed actions. They are, at least in part, authors of their circumstances.

Secondly, Farrelly saw changed actions as a part of social processes. Farrelly focused, in particular, on the social relationship between therapist and client. He saw two ways that the therapist could relate with a client to promote certain kinds of self-enhancing actions: the therapist could challenge the client; and the therapist could use the one-to-one relationship with a client to model other interpersonal relations. If we appreciate Farrelly's therapeutic work in terms of learning practices, we note that Farrelly focuses our attention on the creative consequences of moment-by-moment relations. In reading Farrelly's work through the eyes of John Shotter's idea of "Social Poetics," I notice the way that many of Farrelly's ploys create "arresting moments" (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003) that may encourage managers to explore their practices from a different vantage point which makes new practice or new learning possible.

One story, from amongst many told by Farrelly (Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974) will illustrate the nature and intent of Farrelly's Provocative Therapy. One of his clients was a young mother struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide. On one occasion, she mentioned to Farrelly that perhaps everyone would be better off if she committed suicide. Farrelly responded by saying that maybe she had a point and that she should go ahead with it, asking her if she could think of three good reasons for staying alive. Shocked, the woman worked her way to three good reasons to continue living. What I find powerful in this story is that these were the woman's reasons, not an expert's – she was providing answers for herself.

I am not claiming that this counts as good therapy; my own interest is in helping managers do the difficult job of managing organisations and there are three points of interest that help me in that process. First, Farrelly shifted the onus onto his client to create and own her actions. Secondly, I notice that there is no seeking to explain everything by reference to “real world” theories. Finally, the personal development happens within a social process. Let me take these three points and convert them into practical management situations.

Management textbooks seek to explain why the world is the way it is. According to these texts, we all have five levels of needs that motivate us, groups go through four or five stages in their development and organisations have particular cultures. Within this context, the manager’s job is to know about all this and then take appropriate action as prescribed by the particular management guru in fashion at that moment in order to make the organisation work well. Incidentally, I really do not know what, according to these textbooks, the subordinates are doing at this stage since it appears that only managers can take effective action. Even when subordinates do contribute to an organisation, it would seem to be only because the manager empowers them or encourages them to work democratically.

For Farrelly, people are not just passive pawns in a world of forces or “real world theories.” People’s futures are there to be created, not determined by external forces, dynamics, motivators or other factors. We could say that Farrelly suggests we are authors of our future. We can create new actions that will change our worlds. In “Provocative Therapy” little time is spent examining what might explain people’s actions; instead time is spent designing improved ways of relating with and changing the world.

Similarly, in working with managers, I avoid using theory to explain the world. Instead, I work with them to explore what actions might help in their particular context. Sometimes, of course, we find that ideas from management textbooks help us come up with new practices, not because they reflect “a real world” but because they’re novel ideas that inspire us!

Too often, reliance on “real world theories” allows managers to say things like, “Oh I can’t make that change; it won’t fit with our company’s culture.” Or, “We’ve got to create a real sense of urgency and crisis before we can introduce change.” Nonsense! Do you see how we can escape responsibility for contributing to improvements in our working context? The problem is always “out there” rather than within our reach. We see clearly what we cannot do and fail to see what we might do! We tentatively dance around our actions with theories and “best practices” and so reduce our scope to improvise and innovate. I watch so many managers being oppressed by short courses on the latest new management gimmick. “Just do it this way. Follow these five simple steps.” Of course, things don’t improve. Or, if there is any improvement, it is short lived and the managers are left wondering what they did wrong. I find many managers weighed down by these textbook “best practices.”

Does that mean that anything goes? Does it mean that we can get away with any action however ill considered? By no means and for a very important reason: all our actions have social repercussions. For any of our actions to be effective within an organisation they will have to gain the buy-in of colleagues, customers or funders. If we’re trying to work out what we need to do, a crucial factor is how others will respond. I may write a wonderful lecture but if the students are more interested in a football match or if they haven’t read the necessary preparation material then the wise words will fall on deaf ears.

We can see Farrelly's skill in supporting his clients' development: he modelled, often in extreme ways, possible responses to his clients' actions. He might role-play their friends and family or their worst fears or an expert. As he did so, he was not seeking to help them understand what was going on. Instead, he was creating an improvised social arena in which they could try out their emerging practices or check how people would respond to new ways of acting.

So how can we – as trainers, consultants, managers or teachers – use Farrelly's practices to help organisational participants create healthy, purposeful and prosperous organisations? Here are three methods that I have found helpful over the last few years.

First, I seek to model relations for students. Sometimes I role-play their colleagues or subordinates. On these occasions, I might react to an initiative with surly indifference or excessive enthusiasm so that the manager can explore some of the more surprising consequences of their actions. Too often, we can idealise management solutions by seeing only the responses we ought to get from others. There can be helpful learning in exaggerating possible responses to give managers a micro-play within which to refine and redevelop their initial ideas. Alternatively, I can play an unknowing fool, requiring simple explanations of managers' actions. Whatever the role I adopt, my goal is to help managers work out, within a social relationship, sophisticated managerial practices.

Secondly, like Farrelly, I will exaggerate (and sometimes make up on the spot) management theories. "People resist change!" say the experts. Any readers going to resist a large salary increase for doing their same job? I thought not! On another occasion, I took some ideas about motivation and kept pushing them until I suggested offering workers amphetamines to keep them going longer. "That's outrageous," shouted one of the managers. "Oh," I replied, hurt and innocent, "tell me at what stage in the process from offering them more money, through offering them better tools or improved team facilities did my comments become outrageous?" We started to re-examine the morality and effectiveness of current motivational tools!

Finally, I do use management and other academic theory. I offer managers alternative ways forward, alternative management practices and surprising ways of thinking. However, I do so within a context of managers using theories as provocations for action, not as prescriptive tools for use. I've coined the term "Provocative Theory" to capture the idea of theory being a conversational gambit for managers to throw into their relations at work. I am not peddling some sort of "best practice;" just offering them different words or phrases that might strike, move or nudge them towards new managerial practice created by themselves and not determined by experts in smart suits and airport bookshops.

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# Turning the 360° feedback method into a dialogical process

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*This article asks readers to rethink “regular main stream tools” of organizational development. Using two case examples it introduces a dialogic approach as an alternative and supplement to such tools using the 360° feedback method as an example of how to turn such “tools” into a more dialogic “process.”*

I have worked for several years as an organization consultant and have trained consultants and coaches in long-term programs at the University of Helsinki. As a social psychologist and family therapist, relationships, interaction and conversations are central to the way that I see life in organisations.

In my work within organizations I find that using a dialogic approach is very helpful in addressing a question that puzzles many leaders: “How to make a business or organization human?” From a dialogic perspective, creating a connection between people and their words is very important and listening is essential to making this link happen. Listening carefully to the other person, listening to your own inner dialogue and reflecting on the connection or disconnection of these entities are, to me, essential aspects of dialogue. With your own words you connect with others’ words. I am mostly grateful to the writings, lectures and discussions I have had on this topic with Harlene Anderson, John Shotter, Jaakko Seikkula and Pekka Holm. They have shaped and developed my own understanding of dialogue.

Social construction suggests that people continually construct realities together with each other. This means that people are not just describing reality but *making it* (Berger & Luckman, 1968). For example, when a person is talking about a problem in consultation, he understands and lives through that narrative; it has become “real” for him. These narratives and descriptions of life can be seen as mutual: we are influencing them and they are influencing us. *Understanding together* drives dialogue.

Dialogue can also be seen as a skill. The consultant must learn to pose a self-reflexive question such as, “How should I act, think or perform, in order to initiate a dialogic process in consultation and in organisations” (Holm, 2006).

## **Example: How a Leadership Development Tool made Communication Worse**

When practicing as a consultant, one occasionally faces a dilemma that encourages reflection and an attempt to make sense of one’s role and work as a consultant. This happened when an insurance company called me. The company wanted to develop the leadership performance of their managers/team leaders and had contracted a consultation firm who used the 360° feedback scope to evaluate leadership performance and provide feedback.

On this occasion the company’s managers had just completed the 360° process. Each manager’s/team leader’s team members, colleagues and boss had completed a questionnaire regarding the manager and his or her leadership capacity. The leadership skills of each were

the main focus of the evaluation. Managers and team leaders also completed a self-evaluation, using the same questionnaire which took about 10-15 minutes to complete. The consultation firm collected the data, performed the appropriate statistical analysis, prepared their report/results (answers, verbal comments and feedback) and gave it to each manager and team leader. The results were also provided to the HR department and to the managers' and team leaders' respective bosses.

Problems arose for some of the managers and team leaders who received very critical feedback, or in the company's language, "bad scores." They were told that they "should do something about the feedback." Most of the managers, even though it was very challenging to do so, convened their team members to share and discuss the evaluation feedback with them. This plan, however, for the most part did not go well. For instance, one 36 year-old manager, who two years earlier had been promoted to manager of a unit of insurance specialists, shared the feedback with his team and asked how they would like to see him perform differently. He was astonished by the team members' reactions. The team members started looking at each other, some kept asking others about the feedback trying to find out who said what. No one owned any of the feedback. Awkwardly, the group fell silent. The manager felt inept. The next day the HR manager contacted me and asked me to help. I was asked to meet one-on-one with some of the managers who had difficulties with their feedback to help them improve their leadership skills and especially, to face their teams after this feedback exercise.

We can conclude that this leadership "developmental tool," put the managers in an unfair situation. Despite the idea that when feedback is anonymous team members feel more freedom to be honest, in the end it seemed irresponsible since no one owned the feedback. This led to worse communication between the managers and their team members and led to an awkward and non-trusting atmosphere. Through the feedback process, communication – rather than being enhanced – was stifled. Leaders were invited into a one-way process and the mutual and situational nature of the relationships was not acknowledged.

### **Example: Leadership and Dialogue Development in a Management Team**

I went with sense of curiosity to a company in the food industry. I felt especially challenged because in the first phone contact with the HR manager I was told that "we want to develop our performance within the management team; specifically, we want to focus on collaborative work, communication and dialogue." They described the "360° exercise could be a good basis for this kind of consultation." I decided beforehand that I would listen carefully to the client.

I first met with the CEO and HR manager who told me about the outcomes they wanted from the consultation. The CEO was unhappy with his management team's communication style in meetings. He wanted to see more "dialogue" in which each person participated and took responsibility for sharing their visions and resolving conflicts. He wanted to see managers mutually helping and supporting each other in their daily leadership challenges. We agreed that we were aiming to evaluate performance and enhance dialogue. The CEO and the HR manager still wanted to utilize the 360° feedback process. I suggested that we use it, but "refresh it" and give it "a little bit of a dialogic direction." We agreed that the CEO

would discuss this method of working with the management team and ask them “why they wanted this kind of development right now.” These discussions resulted in a green light for the plan from the management group. They named it, “leadership and dialogue development in the management group.”

### **Description of 360° process**

- 1) The work started by talking together to create a common context by asking the following questions: What is this consultation for? What does leadership and dialogue mean in this company and within this management team? What could leadership and dialogue be like in future?
- 2) Managers discussed what they suspected their employees would like to talk with them about regarding leadership and dialogue.
- 3) Each manager created personal dialogue notes by collecting feedback gained through the discussions generated in steps one and two. Participants called these notes “dialogue tools.”
- 4) The group discussed and agreed how to implement the dialogic 360° process. They determined who would be included in the process, whether or not the discussions would be organized as whole-group or one-to-one discussions and what the timetable would be? They agreed that each manager would create the feedback method that he or she thought would be the most appropriate and relevant given his or her own situation.
- 5) Each manager went to his or her own unit to ask for feedback and engage in dialogue about the feedback.
  - ✿ The process continued as a series of dialogues:
    - ✿ Employee – manager feedback and dialogue
    - ✿ Reflection about that feedback within management team
    - ✿ Collegial one-to-one feedback and dialogue
    - ✿ Reflection about that feedback within management team
    - ✿ CEO – Manager feedback and dialogue
    - ✿ Reflection about that feedback within management team
- 6) In final meeting, all of the managers were in dialogue with each other, inquiring about the process and the outcome. They were dialoguing and inquiring about the outcome of the process from their own point of view as well as from the point of view of the management team.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The dialogic 360° feedback process contributes simultaneously to several developmental purposes within the management team. First, it supports managers in personal development through the feedback given by the different stakeholders. Second, the dialogic feedback process enables the development of an interactive and objective-oriented organizational culture and practice. The feedback received by each manager, the mutual discussions about it and the personal considerations that were reflected in the management group collectively combined to contribute to the development of each manager. That is, feedback to one

manager not only benefitted that manager but led to discussions that benefitted all of them.

In this dialogic 360° feedback application, the external measurement process was avoided. The managers themselves constructed the process and collected the data. The principles of dialogue and collaboration were applied from the beginning of the process and in turn served as a strong development intervention. The participants reported that learning was fostered and deepened because they addressed personally and collectively significant and relevant questions. Reflections and discussions in the management group helped the participants stay on task and keep the process focused on the mutually agreed upon issues. Furthermore, it strengthened focus and open ways of working which were considered pivotal for the success.

The main focus of the process was on the everyday practice of each participant. The discussions with different stakeholders took place within the work context. Participants invited and emphasized the responsibility of each other for their own learning. Emphasis on personal responsibility in this context also means that the development process was unique for each individual and therefore there was no single correct or better method for learning and leading. Leadership takes its unique form in different relationships between people in different contexts. The focus of reflection is thus in each individual's personal experiences and ways of being and acting: "How should I act, be and think as a leader in my different relationships in order to improve and increase dialogue within the organization?" I believe that this case illustrates that when these considerations are engaged within a public and collective context and when the words and narratives have an audience, they will be strengthened. Becoming attached to other stories and other people changes one's own concerns, one's own leadership and thereby enhances diverse and generative relationships.

In this organization, the respondents found it useful that leadership and consultation practices were approached from a dialogic perspective in which the evaluation and its outcome were collective and mutual. In the spirit of dialogue, the presented case does not suggest a model that can be copied and transferred to other contexts. Dialogic processes are always unique and can never be identically repeated. Each situation and its process will take its own form. However, through dialogic experiences people can be more prepared to act and express themselves openly in the future. The dialogic 360° feedback process can make a significant contribution to the organization when pursuing more dialogic and open organizational culture and practices.

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## About the November 2006 Issue:

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The November 2006 issue is titled “Lifelong Learning and Education: On the Road to Find Out”. This timely issue will highlight the many possibilities for individual and educational community transformative positive change through lifelong learning and lifelong education. Students enrolled in K-12, those attending colleges and universities and students of life all can benefit from being lifelong learners. Positive methods of how to build learning, access to knowledge, social connections and resources in schools, universities and other places for learning will be identified. Further, the relevance of social capital and access to learning will be explored by using Appreciative Inquiry to build connections for linking the lives of people with the world in which we live. Content from the November 2006 issue will add valuable information and field experiences to a body of emerging knowledge.

Ten years ago, the Delors Report identified four 'pillars' of education for the future: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be.

(<http://www.unesco.org/delors/fourpil.htm>) Traditional routes of gaining knowledge and skills are evolving to allow all types of students opportunities for new understanding and foundations for growth in their personal and civic lives. In this new millennium, educators and administrators need effective and innovative tools to teach and facilitate learning. Exemplary practices and strategies for learning and building community in education change can be freely shared with those that teach and everyone that wishes to learn.

You need not be an educator or have an advanced college degree to practice lifelong learning or engage in lifelong education. Lifelong learning is an approach to education that encourages continuous learning and an attitude of openness to acquiring knowledge and new ideas and skills. By extension, lifelong education “umbrellas” childhood and youth to old age and can be obtained through formal or informal means -- for children the experience begins in the classroom. Adult learners have access lifelong education through traditional college venues and workplace/ corporate training or continuing education opportunities.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is well suited for support lifelong learning and lifelong education. It is a collaborative strength based approach to change that engages the “whole system” – extending and elevating that which is good and true in our lives. Through AI, it is possible to co-construct a positive future by bringing out the best in people, organizations and learning institutions.

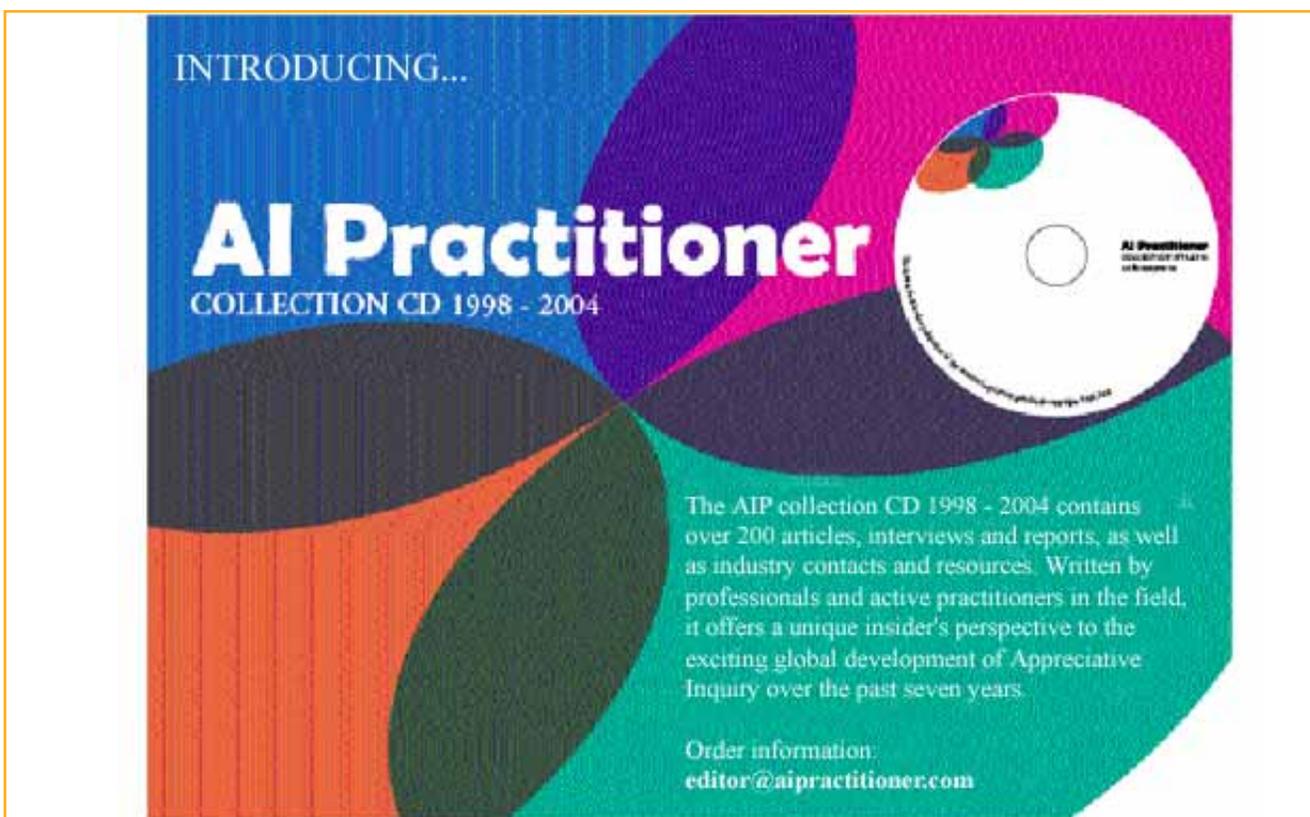
Roger Von Holzen wrote in *The Futurist*, Volume 39, January-February 2005 that, “In today's knowledge marketplace, education is required for survival in the fast-changing workplace. So a market is being created for both corporate training and lifelong learning. While more than 25% of Americans currently seek to continue their education after college, it is expected that this percentage will increase to well over 50% in the next 20 years.”

AI practitioners are uniquely focused and positioned to respond to the needs of school systems, communities and this expanding marketplace with methods for implementing and supporting lifelong learning and lifelong education programs. Don't miss the November 2006

issue of AI Practitioner to learn ways to expand your AI practice by understanding the roles AI and other positive change methodologies play to create educational transformation.

Guest Editors: Steven N. Pyser, JD ([steve@thedialogue.net](mailto:steve@thedialogue.net)) and Marjorie Schiller, PhD ([margeschiller@yahoo.com](mailto:margeschiller@yahoo.com))

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2. Edits completed by September 1, 2006.
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Anne Radford was one of the first people to work with Appreciative Inquiry in this country. She uses this, and other strength-based approaches to change, with businesses, in healthcare settings and communities. She coaches managers and consultants in their use of these approaches and is the editor of AI Practitioner, the international online publication of AI best practice.



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