Moving relationality:

Meditations on a relational approach to leadership

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Constructing relations: Introducing entitative and relational-processual discourses

'It was my first murder' - was how my colleague Maurice Punch began his ethnography of police work. Since I had no dramatic introduction I borrowed his. My first leadership handbook (much more prosaic than a murder) was Stogdill's (Stogdill, 1974). I remember using it when I was a Phd student researching Fiedler's model of leadership effectiveness (Fiedler, 1967). More than 30 years later I was invited to write about relational leadership for what is, I believe, the third handbook. Now that I come to think of it, my reply was perhaps rather bold. I said I would love to write such a chapter but only if I could write about what I meant by the term 'relational' and only if I could use the space to play with some moving possibilities; we had a deal.

But now what? Time to fill space? I recall Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought Fox' - a poem about the process of writing the poem - beginning with the blank page - outside in the night-time garden a fox emerges from the shadows... and fills the page with its passing. So perhaps I could begin with some foxy reminiscences... with a tale...of an approach... of wanderings and wonder... a moving tale of relational processes.

Looking back it seems I wandered into leadership. I followed a growing curiosity which was less about leadership and more about person - world relations. I was curious about the ways social theories differentiated person and world and, having done so, 'put them back together' in relation. I had recently come across the contingency approach, a variant of systems thinking, which combined information about e.g., about organizations, organizational environments and organizational effectiveness. Fiedler's was one of the earliest contingency models which - in his case - combined variables he thought to be implicated in leadership effectiveness. He aimed to predict the latter by combining talk about the leader, talk about the context or 'leadership situation', and performance data - each separately defined and measured.

Fiedler defined the leader as one who 'directs and controls' the task-relevant activities of a work group. He obtained information about the leader by asking leaders to describe their Least Preferred Co-worker (the LPC questionnaire). He then correlated leaders' LPC scores with group performance data (which he viewed as a measure of the leader's effectiveness). These correlations were plotted on a graph in which the vertical axis ranged from minus one through zero to plus one (the size of the co-relation); the horizontal axis combined high and low levels of three 'situational' measures: group atmosphere, the leader's position power and the level of structure in the group's task to produce eight distinguishable

'leadership situations'. Fiedler claimed that a data plot involving over 800 work groups showed that high LPC scorers were more effective than low in some defined situations whereas the opposite was the case in other situations. Many accepted his claims and so directed their attention to the LPC measure - which seemed to predict - but no-one knew why. LPC scores were variously investigated as potential signifiers of a leader's 'leadership behavior', of some leadership trait, and of 'cognitive complexity' - how complexly leaders' could know 'self' and 'other' or world, so to speak.

At first I was intrigued by the idea that the way leaders perceived 'the world' might be connected with their leadership effectiveness. However, to cut a long story short, I came to have serious doubts about Fiedler's model and about the entire contingency approach. My doubts included the following:

- selecting and centering one particular person (in this case, 'the leader') and focussing on individual characteristics and behaviors gives too much significance to that individual;

- treating 'the leadership context', 'world' or 'other' as 'out there', independent of the leader, draws too sharp a boundary between self and not-self;

- differentiating self and other in these ways over-emphasizes stable things with stable characteristics and means that processes can only happen within and between things.

- differentiating self and other in these ways turns relating into an instrumental process potentially value-able for self through (a) producing knowledge about and (b) achieving power over Other.

My fellow social psychologist Ian Morley and I used the term '*entitative*' to summarize all theoretical/empirical approaches that embrace the above constructions of self, other and relations (Hosking and Morley, 1991). Later I came across the work of another social psychologist, Edward Sampson, who linked these constructions to what he called 'the western project' in which 'dominant groups construct (...) servicable others' (Sampson, 1993). He spoke of this 'monological and self celebratory' construction as being oriented around the notion of (i) a singular and rational self (ii) who is able to know other as other really (or probably) is, (iii) who can speak for and about other (followers, women, other ethnic groups...), and (iv) can use other in the rational pursuit of (supposedly) rational goals and interests.

Samson emphasized the moral/ethical aspects of this construction. He mobilized for example, feminist and post-colonial critiques (e.g., Flax, 1987; Harding, 1986, 1998) to make connections with dominance relations in areas such as race and gender, centering the issue of whose claims to know receive warrant, whose claims go unheard and whose are 'heard' but e-valuated and reconstructed in

dominance relations. In broad summary, various critiques of the 'entitative approach' and western individualism point to (i) the ways in which relations are connected to persons who are assumed to possess a stable and bounded self together with individual knowledge, who performs individual acts and who relates to other in terms of what other can do for self... (ii) the relative neglect of power and politics e.g., through an emphasis on one universal rationality and abstract, objective knowledge 'from nowhere' (iii) the ethical/moral issues involved in constructing a 'serviceable other' and (iv) the implications that these practices might have for the future of humanity and the planet (see Sampson, 1993; Gergen, 1994).

By the time I finished my Phd on Fiedler's contingency model I was actively investigating other possible constructions of persons, processes and relations and how these might these be manifest in leadership theories and (research) practices. Over the years, and together with many co-authors, I have explored various possibilities. So, for example, in our book 'A Social Psychology of Organizing' Ian Morley and I developed a view of organizing and leadership as a *relational process* that is simultaneously social, cognitive and political. We defined social processes as those in which 'participants (in organizing) construct a sense of who they are (identity) in relation to a context which consists importantly of other people and their constructions' (Hosking and Morley, 1991 p. xi). We proposed that these same processes should also be seen as 'cognitive' in that they involve sense-making. By this we meant that social processes construct local-cultural realities that reflect particular orderings of fact and value. We further proposed that these same processes are 'political' inasmuch as they support particular local-cultural constructions or valuations - and not others - constructions that are more or less open to otherness.

In this context we theorized leadership as a special kind of organizing process. We used the term 'leadership' to refer contributions that achieve acceptable influence; we defined leaders as those whom participants see to make consistent contributions of this sort and come to expect to do so. In other words, *we defined leadership relationally* according to how contributions are supplemented and *centered extended leadership processes* rather than bounded, 'self contained' individuals (e.g., Hosking, 1988; Hosking and Morley, 1988, 1991). In theorizing relational processes we spoke of the '*mutual creation*' and '*emergence' of self and other*. In other words, we viewed self as fundamentally relational and ongoing rather than characteristic of some pre-existing entity engaging in 'backwards and forwards transactions to produce rational outcomes. We spoke of processes as more or less helpful and, in this

sense, more or less skillful, of the importance of actively open-minded thinking, conversations and dialogues - including those which 'build relationships in which followers turn into leaders' (Hosking and Morley, 1991, p.256) . To my mind, we said a great deal that was useful about a possible relational approach to leadership and I shall return to these themes in a while.

Meanwhile, I was also in conversation with Helen Brown during the time she was a participant observer in women's groups. In a subsequent publication Helen and I argued that 'entitative' constructions of individuals, leadership and organization were gendered, masculine-cultural constructions (e.g., Brown and Hosking, 1986; see also Brown, 1992). Again we attempted to articulate a relational-processual view. In this case we explored *relational processes as themselves 'the product'*. We argued that 'the process is the product' when it allows participants to enjoy a certain (positively valued) way of being in relation rather than being reduced to a (instrumental) means to link inputs and outcomes. In this case, the local social ordering of value included ways of relating characterized by distributed leadership and heterarchy. It was important to us that this work added 'another voice' (Gilligan, 1993) to contrast with the more usual emphasis on focussed leadership, appointed leaders and (gendered) hierarchy.

The same year that Ian and I had our book published Peter Dachler and Ken Gergen invited me to a small workshop in St Gallen, Switzerland. A few years later the three of us brought out an edited book based on the workshop calling it 'Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism' . As I remember, we puzzled a great deal over what title to give the book and we had lengthy discussions over the many things we wanted to signify by the term 'relational'. In general, we wanted to signify a shift from entitative assumptions to what we called 'active processes of relations' - viewing the latter as 'the matrix from which the conception of both individual selves and social structures spring' (Hosking, Dachler and Gergen, 1995, p. xii). Once again, the issue of how further to develop a relational approach was very much in the foreground.

Peter Dachler and I wrote a chapter which we called 'The primacy of relations in constructing organizational realities'. We proposed that:

> the key issue in any relational approach lies not in matters of content,
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> e.g., competitive vs collaborative relationships, and not in justifying
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> the truth value of propositional statements; the central issue is
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> epistemological (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p.1).

Although we used the term 'epistemological' we emphasized that a relational approach blurs the (entitative) distinction between ontology (what exists) and epistemology (what we can know). We asserted: 'What is experienced as real or true depends on (usually implicitly) held assumptions about processes of knowing' (p. 1) and it is these 'knowing' processes that give existence (ontology) e.g., to individuals, leadership and organization.

Illustrating the above, entitative constructions treat e.g., persons, leaders and contexts as 'out there' and available to be observed and known by an independent observer. In contrast, a relational epistemology (we could say ontology) views e.g., entities, knowledge, power... as constructions made in ongoing relational processes - and these are processes in which the 'observer' participates. We argued that these processes construct and reconstruct relational realities in all kinds of actions and focussed on *language as action* rather than as as a way to represent entities. We proposed that processes be viewed as ongoing in the sense that actions (or 'texts') supplement preceding actions whilst, at the same time, making themselves available for possible supplementation. In sum, we (a) blurred the (post)positivist distinction between ontology and epistemology (b) shifted emphasis to relational construction processes and (c) directed attention to relational realities as ontology in the sense of (d) being made in local-cultural, local-historical processes.

Our account of relational processes was illustrated through reference to existing and possible narratives of leadership. We began by emphasizing that, in comparison with the entitative approach, everything changes. First, relational theorizing centers 'empty' relational processes, so to speak. Since relational realities are theorized as local (rather than universal) rationalities *their 'content' must be allowed to emerge* rather than be pre-specified by the theorist/researcher (see Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). It also became clear that a relational perspective invites different questions - about how rather than what. For example, a relational approach might ask how distributed leadership could be constructed and maintained (i.e., constantly re-constructed). Similarly, we might become curious about the ways ongoing act-supplement processes (re)construct western individualism and 'hard' self-other differentiation (e.g., Berman, 1981; 1990). One particular question continues to intrigue me. It concerns the possibility of 'soft' self-other differentiation - how such relations might be constructed and how might leadership be part of and contribute this? In the context of this relational approach it no longer makes sense to ask which narrative of leadership is correct or to complain that different narratives of leadership 'do not add up'. Instead we are invited to direct our attention to the ways in which relational processes open up or

close down possibilities and what this means for identities and relations, including the space for others and to be other.

Reflecting on the many live conversations, research and writing projects in which I have participated, Sandra Harding's reconstruction of the 'voyage of discovery' metaphor comes to mind. But the 'post-colonial voyage' is not (in order) to conquer and possess - but rather a process of (re)learning possible worlds and ways of being in relation (Harding, 1988). I would like to use the rest of this chapter to further develop what I have already said about a possible 'relational approach' to leadership. So I will center relational processes and view leaders and leadership, science and scientist - all relational realities - as always emergent in relational processes.

When considered as a 'social science perspective' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) this approach could be said to embrace a set of voices that variously emphasize historicism, phenomenology and hermeneutics. A historical voice is reflected in the view that understandings and practices, *including 'scientific' ones*, are 'inside' rather than 'outside history'.   The phenomenological voice centers everyday life worlds as local-cultural 'relational' realities rather centering the assumption of a single 'real reality' that science can know more or less objectively. Science then is viewed as one local-cultural relational reality or 'form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953) which 'goes on' in relation to other forms of life. A hermeneutic voice directs attention to language and the ways it reflects and (re)constructs, shall we say, local-historical, local-cultural practices and conventions (Hosking and Morley, 2004, p.319).

I shall bring these 'voices' together in a way that *gives ontology to ongoing relational processes*. I shall speak of leaders and leadership, science and scientists - indeed all identities and related forms of life - as '*constituted*' in relational processes. This is a 'constitutive' rather than a 'mediative' view of science (Woolgar, 1986). It is vitally important to note that it offers a very distinctive relational view. It contrasts with other 'relational' perspectives of leadership (e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2004) by being constitutive, by including scientists and their community-based traditions in the general line of theorizing of relational processes, and by its dialogical view of personhood (Hosking, 2006, 2007).

Participation and the dialogical view of person

It's been a while since we heard from Sampson. It's time for him to come out of the undergrowth; he has been yapping at the shadows of western individualism for long enough. As we already know, he is not

alone. Like many other social theorists he has articulated a view of person and self-other relations that differs from the egocentric, monological, western view of personhood. As we have seen, this (we could call it 'eco-logical') view treats self as a relational construction made in relational processes. What has not yet been made explicit is that this implies, not one, but *many selves 'situated' in particular relations with particular others.* In this view*, other is intimately connected (related) to (or should I say with) self. When theorizing these relational processes language-based inter-actions are usually centered and variously conceptualized using concepts such as conversation, dialogue, discursive activity, and narrative or storytelling (e.g., Edwards and Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1994; Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992; Hosking and Morley, 1991; Sampson, 1993). I need to say a little bit about these language-based processes so that I can then explore their possible connections with leadership.

Hermans and his colleagues can help us with this (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992). Their approach was to contrast what they saw as the cultural specificity of Western individualism with the notion that all persons, in all cultures and at all times, listen to and tell stories and, in these ways, socially construct particular ways of relating self and world. They drew from writers such as Vico to argue that mind and body are inseparable and 'in history' whilst also actively making history - knowing and doing are the same (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992, p.24). History making was theorized as narrating and narrating was theorized as a *dialogical* process. This is where the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin comes in. Bakhtin had noted that, rather than having one narrator dominate and speak for others, Dostoevsky allowed each character their own voice. Dostoevsky's *narratives were produced by a 'polyphony' of voices in dialogical relation* rather than 'a multitude of characters within a unified objective world' (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992, p.27).   What is important here is that the metaphor of the polyphonic novel shows that one person can live in many *I* positions in many co-existing worlds, that several may enter into dialogue with one another and, indeed, may agree or disagree.

Polyphonic narrating is possible because persons can engage in imaginal dialogues (where they can imagine a future and reconstruct a past) in addition to 'actual' dialogues in inter-actions with 'real' presences. So *the dialogical self is social* '...in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multi-voiced self' (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992, p.29). Unlike the monological view of person, there is no centralized and singular self attempting to control other. Indeed, as they remark, the western-cultural 'tendency to centralization' may encourage practices that centre one self in dominance relation with others 'thereby reducing the possibility of dialogue that, for its full development, requires a high

degree of openness for the exchange and modification of perspectives' (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992, p.30). Looking ahead, we can begin to imagine the significance of this for a relational view of leadership processes - a view that links the dialogical self and dialogue to openness, listening, and history making.

Sampson (1993) also centered a dialogic view of person. He wrote at length about what he called 'the dialogic turn' which he saw as a turn to 'celebrating the other' (rather than The Self). He wrote:

> ...what stands out when we look at what people do together is language as communication in action. Because we have become so intent on searching deeply within the individual's psyche for the answers to all our questions about human nature, we usually fail to see what sits right before us, a dominating feature of our lives with others: conversations. It is time now to take conversations seriously. (p.97)

He singled out four key features of conversations. First, they go on between people; even when people are alone 'their thinking occurs in the form of inner conversation or dialogue' (p.97). Second, conversations are public (we could also say, social) because they involve signs that are generally shared by a particular community. Third, conversations implicate addressivity - they are addressed by someone to (an)other(s); they are what we humans do i.e., *conversation is action* (rather than about action). And last, conversations involve verbal and non-verbal, symbolic and written material. For Sampson 'These four features link person and other in such an intimate way that disentangling the bonds that join them becomes an exercise in futility' (Sampson, 1993, p.98). Borrowing from Bakhtin, he continued: 'The argument, in short, is that we gain a self in and through a process of social interaction, dialogue, and conversation with others' (Sampson, 1993, p.106). And so, *by being constituted in conversations, each person is a multiplicity, 'multiplicity is the norm'.*

Again, to be very clear, these dialogic, narrative, conversational processes are processes in which all aspects of relational realities are in ongoing, emergent (re)construction. These processes (re)create particular 'language games' together with their related 'forms of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953) which we then take to have their own independent existence or, in other words, to be how things 'really are' (e.g., Bohm, 2004). So, for example, as Sampson remarked: 'our conversations both express and presuppose a reality which, in expressing what is presupposed, we help to create' (Sampson, 1993, p.108). I should also add that the grounds for these lines of argument are found in many literatures including those that

focus on language (e.g., Wittgenstein, 1953), on social development and social relations generally (e.g., Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978), on 'mind', cognition, and 'discursive' processes (see e.g., Billig, 1987, Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wertsch, 1991), on feminism and feminist critiques e.g., of science and social relations (e.g., Flax, 1987, Harding, 1986; 1998), on the social construction of relational realities (e.g., Gergen, 1994), and on the nature of consciousness and historical-cultural variations in the same (e.g., Berman, 1981, 1990; Bohm, 2004; Ong, 1967).

This relational perspective re-constructs the entitative narrative of knowledge and power. *Knowledge* is now seen as social-relational, constructed in action, situated and moving, and intimately interconnected with power. *Power* now is linked to how self and other can be - in relation. The apparent presence or relative absence of multiplicity must now be seen in terms of power. So, for example, when dialogues are constrained such that one party acts as if they know and can speak for other - when the voice of other is not heard or distorted - when other is judged in relation to some supposed universal rationality - then we can say these are *ego*-logical processes constructing dominance or 'power over' (Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995; Sampson, 1993). *Eco*-logical processes embrace the 'power to' be in different but equal relations - as in the case of the women's groups mentioned earlier (Hosking, 2000). They also include the 'power to' voice different selves (e.g., as parent, green activist, health service user, buddhist...) and not just one (e.g., self as a manager). Returning to leadership, we shall need to explore ways in which conversations, narratives or dialogues can open-up (or close down) multiplicity in all these aspects.

This dialogical view is closely related to work that talks of a 'participative' world view. In this context, 'participation' refers to much, much more than e.g., a leadership style, a way of handling management-labour relations, a preferred approach to national governance or a liberal ideology. Rather *participation is viewed as a relational way of being and knowing (*Reason, 1994). So, for example, the anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson argued something like this in his 'Steps to an Ecology of Mind' (Bateson, 1972). For Bateson, a proper understanding of mind would be to see it as extended or 'immanent' - not only in the human body - but throughout the entire living world. Bateson is one of a number of social theorists who argue that humankind's 'fall from grace' involved the construction of many dis-engagements or separations - separating self from other, separating thought from emotion, separating sacred from secular and so on. A 'return to grace' (Bateson, 1972) or to an 'enchanted world' (Berman, 1981) requires that 'individual mind' be re-viewed as part of 'larger mind' which is

'comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by 'God'' (Bateson, 1972, p.461). For Bateson and many others, re-engagement is essential for recovering wisdom, ecological balance and long-term survival of the planet. This requires re-connecting with participative ways of knowing, with ways that re-join the many levels of mind, including 'computations of the heart' (Bateson, 1972, p.464; see also Reason, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Hosking, 2000).

Many have suggested that 'participating consciousness' underwent an 'epochal' shift to non-participation. This shift has been linked with many changing cultural practices especially with changes in communications - from oral/aural cultural practices dominated by sound, speaking, hearing and listening - to literate cultures in which visual forms (especially written texts) and visual observation dominate (Berman, 1981; Berendt, 1992; Levin, 1989; Ong, 1967). However it is also possible to see participatory thought, not in some dualistic 'either-or' relation, but as the ever-present background of literal thought. For example, the physicist David Bohm, one of the Dalai Lama's 'scientific guru's', wrote 'I suggest that we are constantly doing participatory thought...it has never gone away' but 'literal thought claims we are not doing it at all.' (Bohm, 2004, p.98). For this reason, claims Bohm, literal thought is incoherent. If, as Bohm further suggests, literal, subject-object ways of relating continue to dominate then *the fundamental interrelatedness of thoughts, bodies, cultures, nature and the cosmos cannot be understood*. We will be unable to understand what it is to be human, un-able to be relationally responsive to other - other selves, other people, nature and the cosmos. It seems to me that we have now come to the heart of what this sort of relational perspective can offer.

A relational approach to leadership

I have suggested that relational processes can be more or less open - open to multiple self-other relations, to the voices of others, to the 'many levels of mind' and to ongoingness. I have further argued that, instead of assuming that hard self-other differentiation is how things really are or should be, hard differentiation should be seen as an ongoing construction made in language-based processes. This invites us to explore how ongoing relational processes could construct *soft self-other differentiation* and to reflect on how leadership might emerge and contribute to such processes.

It seems timely to do just this. We seem to be facing issues of interconnectedness such as climate change, global communications, increasing inequalities in financial wealth and economic infrastructure,

loss of biodiversity, destruction of forests, landscapes and communities, pollution... issues which may not be tractable to yet more 'knowing that', more 'power over, more instrumental ways of relating. In other writings I have suggested that all this gives us enough good reasons to (re-)learn and (re)construct practices of soft self-other differentiation, to (re)learn more participative ways of relating. This clearly is how some e.g., feminists, ecologists, buddhists... want to be (to 'go on') - in relation (Hosking, 2000; Hosking and Keisterlee, 2009). This relational constructionist perspective, together with its special interest in eco-logical ways of relating, perhaps should be viewed less in terms of knowledge and truth (as is the case with other[social] science perspectives) and more in terms of *ethics* (e.g., Levinas, 1989) *and local (interconnected and extended) pragmatics*. For me, this is where a relational approach to leadership has greatest promise.

I have theorized relating as a language-based process using concepts such as narrative, conversation and dialogue. In this view of process, the present both re-produces some previous local-cultural, local-historical constructions and acts in relation to possible and probable futures. In other words, both the past and possible futures are implicated in the ever-ongoing present, 'in the now' so to speak. This invites us to explore 'nowness' and how it might be more or less open to other possible selves, to other persons and other possible worlds. One possibility is to reconsider relating in terms, for example, of *extending hospitality* without attempting to know or to achieve 'power over' other. 'Hospitality' for Derrida meant 'I open up my home... I give place to them... I let them come...' (Derrida, 2000, p.25). He adds that hospitality might include careful attention to language (following Emmanuel Levinas who suggested that language is hospitality) but might also 'consist in suspending language...and even the address to the other... Keeping silent is already a modality of possible speaking' (Derrida, 2000, p.135). What follows are meditations on some qualities of relating that seem required for there to be room for other, for other to be invited and hosted in different but equal relations.

Dialogue and relationally-engaged leadership   Conversation has become increasingly popular in connection with transformative change work. Approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Shrivastva, 1987) assume a relational, dialogical view of person and processes whilst others such as Participative Action Research are attached to a participative world view (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). They are all ways of working that can open up 'power to' rather than close down through 'power over'. Approaches of this sort: (a) work through multiple dialogues rather than through top-down leadership

edicts and the avoidance of dialogue (b) work with many different self-other relations rather than a single hierarchy of knowledge and expertise (c) work with what is already (potentially) available and with what participants believe to be relevant, rather than imposing mono-logical constructions of leaders or outside experts, and (d) invite and support many lines of action, rather than requiring or imposing consensus. Dialogical processes can facilitate multiple community-based voices and can help multiple communities (as 'forms of life') to participate such that other realities can be 'allowed to lie' rather than being questioned, grasped, judged and re-constructed by a particular, knowing and structuring agent.

There are some social science approaches that explicitly centre 'dialogue'. They include the Public Conversations Project (Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin and Becker, 1996), work using the language of 'transformative dialogues' (Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett, 2001),'dialogue conferences' (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996) and the MIT Dialogue project (e.g., Isaacs, 1993, 1996). The former draw most heavily from research and theory in communication studies, social psychology, family therapy and cybernetic systems theory, and action science e.g., using the work of Bakhtin (e.g., Wertsch, 1991), Gregory and Catherine Bateson (Bateson and Bateson, 1987), Watzlawick (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974; Watzlawick, 1978); the MIT dialogue project draws more heavily on David Bohm's writings. Whatever their particular lineage, these approaches use the term 'dialogue' to refer to *a special kind of conversation.*

In its 'purest' form, dialogue is free from selfish attempts to know and control other (Bateson, 1972; Bateson and Bateson, 1987) and goes on in conversations that have no agenda (Bohm, 2004). Dialogue, as a special kind of conversation goes on in slow, open and curious ways of relating characterized: (a) by a very special sort of listening, questioning, and being present; (b) by willingness to suspend one's assumptions and certainties; (c) by reflexive attention to the ongoing process and one's own part in it. Rather than constructing separate, fixed or closed realities e.g., of self (other) and one's own (others) position, dialogical practices open up to relationality and to possibilities, and open-up space for self and other to co-emerge... this is what Bohm called flow.

At least in the circles I move in (!) dialogical practices seem to be increasingly emphasized. They seem to offer an alternative to dis-engaged, dis-heartening, dis-enchanted ways of being in relation. Dialoging can provide a way out of stuckness, a way out of some seemingly solid, stable and singular entity who builds individual knowledge about and seeks control over other. Dialoging can help to bring forth and support appreciation (rather than judgement and critique), discussion of what can be done

(rather than what cannot) and a sense of relational responsibility (rather than blaming others). Dialoging makes space for ongoing emergence, for improvisation. Practicing dialogue as a 'discipline of collective inquiry' (Isaacs, 1996) participants can learn how to learn, can learn to open-up to possibilities – to other constructions of what is real and good. Relationally engaged leadership can be thought of as ongoing in practices that invite and support this 'discipline' and the practice of hospitality.

Leadership and light structuring Specifying the design of some research or organizational change program, producing written rule books and job specifications, and single voiced leadership all can be viewed as examples of one local 'form of life' (Wittgenstein, 1953) or 'elite' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) attempting to control other 'forms' - to control what, when and how in relation to (the elite's) specified standards. Much the same could be said of the therapist who relates to their patient on the basis of some content-rich story they have of health and illness or of the leader who applies some theory of leadership when relating e.g., to their followers or team. These are forms and practices that are 'already knowing'. In contrast, what I am calling light structuring gives more space for emergence and improvisation, for dance and play, for 'being in the now'. Part of what this means is that it becomes possible to be 'relationally responsive' (McNamee, Gergen and associates, 1999) to whatever comes up in any particular moment and possible to make space for multiple 'local forms of life' to be voiced, heard and related with.

Light structuring is an important aspect of dialoguing - a practice which, as I have said, has to be practiced. Usually participants are invited to agree to certain rules of engagement that help them to learn - whilst practicing - the 'collective discipline' of dialogue. These usually include rules such as e.g., don't interrupt, do not attempt to persuade others, use respectful language, ask questions only for clarification, listen to your listening and so on (e.g., Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker and Stains, 1996). Minimal structures such as these can help to block or interrupt already solidified patterns and, in this way, help to open up new possibilities and softer (non S-O) ways of relating. The idea is to provide enough but not too much structure - to provide a container, so to speak, that invites and supports the gradual emergence of slow, open, coherent, in-the-present-moment performances.

Improvisation has been much discussed in this context e.g., using improvisational jazz or theatre to illustrate and/or develop skillful practice. Whilst improvising, participants could be said to discover the future that their actions invite - as it unfolds - by being relationally responsive and by being ready to

connect with what cannot be seen or heard ahead of time . This is possible, for example, through making space for multiple equal voices - minimizing or doing away with hierarchy - and making space for 'distributed leadership' (Brown and Hosking, 1986). Improvising in the context of light structuring means being open to whatever is presented - relating to whatever it is as 'workable' - open to emerging possibilities. You could also call this an appreciative orientation - there is no good or bad, no mistake, no bum note - everything is related to as workable. Relating in these ways involves being ready to dare, to leap into the unknown, perhaps - like Picasso - 'refusing to appeal to the familiar' by repeating some already established pattern or form. I love the way my colleague Frank Barrett, himself a very talented jazz pianist, speaks of improvisation - as 'cultivating surrender' (Barrett, 2006). It seems to me this relational practice could make a valuable contribution leadership processes.

Light structuring seems to be a matter of as-light-a-structure-as-possible. But this doesn't mean always light - which would become heavy - by becoming another design principle, by becoming unresponsive to the particular moment. Structuring can be thought of as 'light' to the extent that goes on in multiple, temporary and variable forms rather than some singular and stable form. For example temporary groups might emerge in relation to particular projects and, like a sand or flower mandala be allowed to dissolve as the project is completed. And last, structuring can be thought of as 'light' when 'empty' of some pre-specified content or 'what' - just like the present construction of leadership. Perhaps this is why Bohm proposed that dialogue meetings should be held in which there is no pre-set agenda (Bohm, 2004). Practices such as 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987) are also relatively 'empty' methodologies, intended to facilitate and support a certain kind of process. In light structuring, leadership is not provided by one individual and does not fix and separate. Rather it is a relational practice ongoing in and supportive of dialogues, emergent processes, relational responsiveness, multiplicity and appreciation (Hosking and Kleisterlee, 2009). We could call this 'relationally engaged' leadership - ongoing in practices of soft self-other differentiation.

Sound leadership and heart-felt listening   Cultural-historical variations in communication forms have been linked with differing constructions of person and world and their relations (e.g., Berman 1981; 1990; Bergquist, 1996; Berendt, 1992; Corradi Fiumara, 1990; Levin, 1989; Toulmin, 1992; Ong, 1967). According to Ong, 'one of the most striking and informative' differences between oral/aural cultures and cultures dominated by the alphabet and print concerns their relationship with time. In oral/aural cultures,

and in the absence of 'look up' facilities, the past is present in what people say and do, in the

performances of epic singers, storytellers and poets, in the arts of oratory and rhetoric… performances

that join play, celebration, and community with learning. In oral/aural cultures, the word is clearly a

vocalisation, a happening, an event… experienced as 'contact with actuality and with truth' (Ong, 1967.

p33).

Implicit in our discussion of dialogue and light structuring were two important themes that now

need repetition and slower development. One is the theme of being in the present (rather than already

known and already knowing); we could call this '*being in the now* rather than the know'; the other, inter-

related theme, is *listening*. There are important connections to be made between nowness, listening, and

what some call 'compassionate action'. Pema Chodrun's way of talking about compassion seems

particularly relevant since it is clearly situated in what I am are here calling 'soft self-other

differentiation'. She speaks of compassionate action: as not shutting down on self or others; as being

open and non-judgmental (appreciative); as letting go of fixed views; as being fully present 'on the spot',

and as 'deep listening' (e.g., Chodrun, 1995).

Talk of listening, feeling and compassion can seem 'flaky' and irrational when understood in

relation to hard self-other differentiation. The latter usually manifests in an emphasis on talk (*logos*)

rather than listening (*legein*) and talk and listening are understood as individual action. Further, in the

context of hard self-other differentiation, listening is storied in a self-centered way: as something that the

knowing and influencing subject does - for their own instrumental purposes - in order to 'grasp'

something (Heidegger, 1975; Corradi Fiumara, 1990). In the context of hard self-other differentiation,

listening is *dis-heartened* by being tied to interests in 'aboutness knowledge'. In western individualism,

the knowing and influencing subject is assumed to be largely closed to other: to other as other possible

selves, to 'other' as body and not mind, to 'other' as other people and 'other' sentient and non sentient

'things'. But listening shifts into a very different context without these familiar 'hard differentiations'.

When part of soft self-other differentiation, listening or *legein* - what Corradi Fiumara called 'the

other side of language' - gains prominence relative to talk as *logos*. In this context, listening becomes

understood as embodied, heart-felt participation in relational processes characterized by dialoguing and

light structures. Perhaps there's a connection here with Bohm's suggestion that 'if we consider that it's

also necessary to reach or contact the unlimited, then there must be silence - a lack of

occupation' (Bohm, 2004, p.107); so listening need not be 'for' some-thing. Indeed, rather than for

producing 'aboutness knowledge' listening can now be understood in relation to participatory knowing. Listening the becomes sensing and feeling or 'being with' the phenomenal world; listening is heart-felt, engaged relating. Returning again to Corradi Fiumara, listening - in the sense of *legein* - 'allow(s) sounds, overtones, multiple voices… to be heard' - allowing rather than grasping. Heidegger linked *legein* to 'hearkening and heeding'; he connected listening with being - understood as a particular local manifestation of a singular, unifying whole. This brings us back to dialogue and opening up to the logos. Listening - in the sense of *legein* - allows space for what is; rather than moulding or structuring other, listening allows <u>both</u> multiplicity <u>and</u> wholeness or, as others have said 'not two, not one' (Chogyam Trungpa, 2002).

Relational constructionism as practice

The relational constructionist perspective I have outlined deals with 'the how' of constructing and says little about the 'what' or 'content'. This makes sense given that it is intended to speak about multiple, local realities and relations - rather than the one way things probably are (assuming some universal rationality), and about 'developing' or ongoing realities - rather than stable realities as 'content'. Perhaps it can be thought of as a post-modern (and indeed Buddhist) recognition of, and turning towards, emptiness. Indeed, I have sometimes found myself referring to this orientation as 'empty theory'. This relative emptiness is one of the ways relational constructionism differs from other social science perspectives. I should also add that this perspective should <u>not</u> be related to as a theory. For example, it is not about causal relationships between variables and it is not stated in a way that invites or is amenable to 'testing'. Relational constructionism makes no predictions, has no interest in control, does not offer explanations and is not oriented towards producing objective knowledge of independently existing entities.

In contrast to work done out of other social science perspectives, 'theory' is not the point, nor is theory testing, nor is knowing what is or was the case. Rather, I suggest that relational constructionism be thought of as *a way of orienting to practice* - to ongoing relational processes and the ways they (re)construct particular relational realities - such as self as a knowing and power-full agent (scientist, leader, consultant) in relation to some 'serviceable other' (Sampson 1993). The orientation is intended to have practical effects and to develop practical wisdom (Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996). So, for example,

there is no need (although of course one could) to treat social practices as either theory construction or empirical work. Similarly, there is no need for inquirers to view their inquiry as the instrumental means to say something 'about' some-thing from a detached observer position. When viewed from a relational constructionist standpoint, inquiry does not discover 'what is' in order to provide the basis for some subsequent ('evidence based') intervention but rather offers a view of *inquiry as a process of (re)constructing realities and relations* (Pearce, 1992). The objects of inquiry are the very processes themselves, the relational processes: as they co-ordinate or organise activities; as they make identities and relations; as they constitute and live a certain 'form of life' (Wittgenstein 1953); and as they construct different but equal, or different and unequal orderings of power and value (Hosking 2007).

Of course the 'inquirer' may participate in the inquiry process in many different ways. Other social science perspectives could be said to require researchers to do research 'on' and 'about' other. But relational constructionism also makes meaningful the possibility of doing research 'with' others (Pearce 1992). This means working in ways that minimise *a priori* assumptions about local rationalities and their (hierarchical or otherwise) relations and in ways that avoid centring scientific rationality above others. This could mean, for example, joining with organisational or community participants to perform some sort of participative or collaborative inquiry (Friere, 1982; Reason and Bradbury, 2008) that might help (perhaps in quite different ways) the various participating forms of life. To quote Darin Weinberg on 'the philosophical foundations of constructionist research': 'The practical point of doing constructionist studies has very often been to promote a better way of thinking and, more important, living…' (Weinberg 2008: 15). But, I should add, in the relational constructionist orientation this 'promoting' is viewed as ongoing.

Consistent with my meditations on dialogue in the context of leadership, performing research <u>with</u> others seems to call for dialogue. This is definaitely not the case in other social science perspectives - which view dialogue (a) in the context of methodology - where it should be minimised since it reduces experimenter control, and (b) as an individual act by other (the research object) which provides potential data. These practices privilege the local rationality of science and so relations of what some have called 'power over'. Conducting inquiries 'with' others means working in and through dialogues and so opening up the possibility of becoming more multi-logical - of multiple local rationalities. Work of this sort that is presented as inquiry includes 'generative metaphor intervention' (Barrett and Cooperrider 1990; Barrett, Thomas and Hocevar 1995); appreciative evaluation (McNamee 2006), 'responsive

evaluation' (Greene and Abma 2001) and participative action research or 'action science' (Reason and Bradbury 2008). These all 'go on' in ways that aim to open-up spaces for new kinds of conversation and for new ways of being in relation, and open up possibilities for multiple local realities (as forms of life, not individual subjectivities) to co-exist and be appreciated as different but equal.

Our talk about relational processes implies that we have to learn how to work in these soft, slow, heart-felt ways as we 'go along' - in practice - in dialogues and reflection. Joe Jaworski wrote about this in his book 'Synchronicity' (1996). The book could be read as yet another (masculine-cultural) heroic tale. But what he talks about resonates with relational constructionism and our talk about learning another way of being in the world. You could say it was a story of how things 'fell apart' and how he learned self reflection, 'self discovery, and 'surrender' - to a new kind of commitment and to a larger purpose in life. Jaworski wrote about his transition from separateness to relatedness. Part of what this involved was a growing desire and commitment to serve something beyond himself. For him this was to create a leadership institute that was oriented towards 'servant leadership' - serving with compassion and heart. After a number of years and all kinds of experiences he described himself as making the leap of confidence - he gave up his job and his business and dedicated himself to creating the Institute.

But after 'the leap' came the void - ' a domain without maps' . He wrote about falling into 'traps' which were his 'old ways of being', his old 'habits' . The first was 'the trap of responsibility' which was to see himself as indispensable, responsible for everyone and everything and so making the focus on him rather than what he called the larger calling. Second was 'the trap of dependency' which meant that he became too dependent on his original plan, stopped being flexible, stopped listening, and became more fearful. Third was the 'trap of overactivity'. This came from having people in the organization who were not 'aligned with the dream' - 'resulting in deep incoherence in the organization' (Jaworski 1996, p.127). He wrote that getting out of this trap required individual and collective reflection: 'unless we have the individual and collective discipline to stay anchored, we will eventually lose the flow' (p.129); he went on to emphasize 'the discipline of dialogue' - taking the time for regular 'get togethers', continual reflection and re-nurturing.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I borrowed from Ted Hughes's poem The Thought Fox indicating that, through some 'foxy reminisences', I would present a very particular and moving tale of relational processes and leadership. Of course this has meant that other 'relational' approaches to leadership (e.g., Koivunen, 2007; Kupers, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006) have been left in the shadows. It seems to me good news indeed that interest in relational approaches to leadership is blossoming. Jerry Hunt, who made an enormous contribution to leadership studies, considered 'the relational perspective and [the approaches within it]…to be at the forefront of emerging leadership thrusts… (Hunt and Dodge, 2000, p.448). Of course the term 'relational' is given many different meanings in the context of very different social science perspectives. However, what seems to me important is that such differences are recognized and respected rather than glossed or subjected to a universalizing 'better/worse' critique (see Uhl-Bien, 2006).

My own hope is that we shall see continuing exploration of *eco*-logical constructions and relational processes as they make and re-make self-other and relations. Given the work that has already been done it seems that this must give more space to the body, to feelings and the senses, to what some would call wisdom, and to ways of opening up to otherness. Increasingly world leaders, managers and consultants are (re)connecting 'sacred' and secular (e.g., Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004). Maybe 'relationally engaged leadership' can provide the difference that really makes a difference; maybe this is the fox emerging from the shadows.

references

see handbook