

10 Relational knowledge in organizational theory: An exploration into some of its implications

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Cooperrider et al., in their chapter in this volume, aim to take the 'modern management insight' that organizations are 'made and imagined' 'to its logical conclusion'.¹ They say that if societies and organizations are made and imagined, i.e. are products of human interaction and social construction, they can be remade and reimagined. To take this argument 'to the hilt', the authors apply it to the organizational theorist and try to take systematically into account the constructed/constructing nature of the theorist's work: 'the postmodern implication that organizations are made and imagined can serve as an invitation to revitalize the practice of social science'. In other words, they want to explore 'what it means for organizational behaviour to take on its own constructive project - that is, to fashion for itself a practice of social theory that simultaneously includes an explanatory approach to organizations and a program for organizational reconstruction and development'. Their 'bedrock idea' is that 'the constructive co-enlightenment effect of all organizational theory is a brute fact'. In their conclusion, they recommend an 'appreciative approach' for organizational theory, one that appreciates the human cosmogony and focuses on social innovation. Thus 'new vistas of study and construction will continue to appear' and 'the theorist him - or her - self will soon come to experience what it is like to have their lives count, count affirmatively, as it relates to the creative and crucial questions of our time'.

While sympathetic with the thrust of this proposal, I sense a lack of elaboration in some epistemological and methodological aspects and in some fundamental concepts. In this chapter I intend to focus on the concept of relational knowledge and explore some of its implications. My basic thesis is that much can be gained if we draw on the insights of phenomenologically founded social constructionism. While basing my arguments primarily on the chapter of Cooperrider et al., I will develop them into a more fundamental critique of postmodern constructionism, where Cooperrider et al. locate their own approach,

which in my view provides a problematic framework for clarifying the concept of relational knowledge. I shall proceed as follows. First, I examine what social construction means and, through this analysis, identify and eliminate some common misunderstandings associated with the phenomenologically founded social constructionism. Second, I discuss the problematic relation between postmodern constructionism and agency. Third, I examine the concept of sociality. Fourth, I go on to discuss some aspects of empirical reference. This allows me, fifth, to reconsider methodological individualism and, finally, to close with a brief statement on the 'appreciative approach' noted above.

Social construction

If, as Cooperrider et al. claim, organizations are 'products of human interaction and social construction' and the theorist's work has a constructed/constructing nature, then what do they mean by social construction? Is it a production or just an interpretation of a social phenomenon? If, as they say, organizations are 'made and imagined', then is there a difference between making and imagining or are they synonymous? The authors insist, following Hazelrigg (1989), that 'making/thinking/doing' and 'theory/practice/development' form a unity. I do not quite agree.

The talk about social construction originates from Berger and Luckmann (1967). Thus, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the basic constituents of their conception. Their sociological approach was deceptively simple: society must be grasped in its duality as both an 'objective' and a 'subjective' reality. The former, although produced by social action, appears to the individual as separate and independent from him or her, therefore the reference to objective. Subjective reality is the actor's consciousness of (social) phenomena, shaped in pervasive processes of socialization, and sustained and modified in daily interactions. In this dialectical duality the seeming dichotomy between Durkheim and Weber was reconciled, and the basic question for sociological theory could be put as follows: 'How is it possible that subjective meanings become objective facticities' (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 30)? To avoid intricate philosophical reflections, they defined the key terms from the point of view of the natural attitude:

It will be enough, for our purposes, to define 'reality' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our volition (we cannot 'wish them away'), and to define 'knowledge' as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 13).

The revolutionary idea was to declare common sense knowledge to be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. Traditionally, the sociology of knowledge has been preoccupied with the history of ideas only; now we are told, it must concern itself 'with everything that passes for "knowledge" in society' (ibid., p. 26).

Berger and Luckmann's sociological theory was based upon a protosociological foundation, namely the phenomenological analysis of the life-world by Alfred Schutz. In a fine-grained descriptive analysis of the formal structures of the life-world (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; 1989) Schutz tried to develop a philosophical foundation for Max Weber's interpretive (*verstehende*) sociology. After the idea of a 'phenomenological sociology' had spread among social scientists in the late sixties and early seventies, the phenomenological method soon fell prey to thorough misunderstandings. For example, it was denounced to be subjectivist or individualistic. However, the goal of phenomenology always has been the constitutive analysis of meaning structures, be it on a transcendental (Husserl) or on a mundane (Schutz) level. The phenomenological method chooses subjective consciousness as the locus of perception and cognition, but it does so to explicate the structures of phenomena not just in their noetic but also in their noematic aspects.¹ The phenomenologically explicated formal structures of the life-world are claimed to be the same for everybody, and thus neither subjective nor individualistic in any sense. In other words, phenomenological analysis attempts to describe those basic structures that all cultural life-worlds on this planet have in common. Consistent with this endeavour, Berger and Luckmann integrate Schutz' analyses with key aspects of modern anthropology (e.g. Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner).

In view of these widespread misunderstandings, it cannot be overemphasized that the phenomenological method is a philosophical, not a sociological method. This is the reason Berger and Luckmann draw a clear-cut distinction between 'constitution' and 'construction': constitution of meaning is a subjective process that takes place in consciousness and must thus be analyzed by phenomenology; construction is a social process and therefore should be analyzed by sociology.² However, what social construction means exactly also remains somewhat ambiguous. For instance, the term 'construction' has a static and a dynamic aspect. In its static aspect it denotes a reality-as-it-is (appears), while in its dynamic aspect it means the process of a reality-construction. Then again, it obviously makes a difference if we see a natural landscape with its mountains, rivers, meadows, cows, farmhouses and so on - a natural reality shaped by our cultural knowledge - or if we gaze at society produced, entirely, by human actions. To understand what is going on in society (e.g. in a social setting), the sociologist has - in Schutz' and in Berger and Luckmann's eyes - to grasp the

meanings the actors themselves employ and in which they are embedded: the second-order constructs of social scientists have to relate to the first-order constructs people hold in their everyday life (Schutz, 1971a, 1971b; Berger & Kellner, 1981).

Although Husserl hoped to reach a kind of archimedic point of cognition, modern phenomenologists acknowledge that the phenomenological method, too, cannot escape the epistemic circle of reflexivity (e.g. Luckmann, 1980). Phenomenologists hope the same as Cooperrider et al. and Hazelrigg (1989, p. 8): that the 'threat' of an incessant reflexivity can be domesticated. Indeed, 'The Structures of the Life-World' (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, 1989) offers such rich and detailed analyses of knowledge, its types, the relationship between subjective and social knowledge, its social derivation and the process of its construction, the transcendence's, and much more. These form, on an epistemological level, a frame within which the hermeneutical task of any sociological inquiry, quantitative or qualitative, inevitably has to be pursued.

In Berger and Luckmann's conception epistemological, methodological and theoretical aspects are intimately linked but analytically differentiated. In Cooperrider et al.'s paper their relations are less clear. On the one hand they proclaim 'the special charity of relativism', that societies as well as the relationship between social science and social practice are 'socially constructed'. At the same time, they talk of the 'truth' of human freedom, the 'fact' of collective existence or the 'truth' of human relatedness, and they call a 'brute fact' 'the contextual quality of all thought', 'the enlightenment effect of all inquiry', and the 'constructive co-enlightenment effect of all organizational theory'. While they treat different constructions at the level of organizational theory as an 'invitation to a relational understanding of knowledge', they do not seem inclined to do the same on an epistemological level. At this level there are 'truths' and 'facts', not meant as another equally relative world among many, but as a world that is superior to others including, for example, the epistemology of positivism. 'Changing virtually every assumption of a modernist science - including foundationalist verities', they obviously cannot do without 'foundationalist verities' themselves.

With respect to this new foundation, Cooperrider et al. imply an evolutionist view: That organizations are 'made and imagined' is called an 'essential modern management insight' which abandons the search for iron clad laws and the assumption that patterns of social-organizational action be 'fixed by nature in any direct environmental, technological, psychological or deep-structure sociological way'. However, to call this an 'essential modern management insight' is certainly misleading. First, it fails to say if this was an insight of managers or of management theorists; as experience shows they often do not cohabit the same world. Second, and in conspicuous contrast to phenomenologists like Husserl,

Schutz, and Berger & Luckmann, they do not explain what they mean by 'essential'. Third, the formulation conceals the fact that this 'insight', in its essence, goes back at least to Neo-Kantianism and Historicism: Heinrich Rickert and Max Weber developed the concept of ideal-type to come to grips with the ever-changing social phenomena whose constitutive difference to natural phenomena is that they do not follow any laws in a physicist's sense (cf. Burger, 1976; Eberle, 1984). Do Cooperrider et al. mean, that managers or management theorists are only now becoming aware of this?

Perhaps, instead, it is the radical implications drawn from that 'insight' that are new. Indeed, Cooperrider et al. claim that: 'no discipline has ever taken the idea of society as made and imagined to the hilt.' It is their goal to do this, and they are convinced that 'once done, ... there will be no return to the old'. Points of no return are always interesting places in a trajectory and worth a deeper study. In a somewhat secular statement the authors declare 'with confidence that the scoffers are uninformed'; uninformed of what? Are the ideas and arguments of the cited authors, such as Feyerabend, Rorty, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Habermas, Gadamer, Foucault and others, so compelling that all other epistemologies must be rejected? What about the 'special charity of relativism' in this context?

Let me emphasize that, since the turn of the century, Husserl's phenomenology has also rejected all those 'foundationalist verities' that Cooperrider et al. question - the Cartesian, dualistic epistemology and the picture theory of words. But phenomenology, as well as the philosophy of language, admit to a search for 'foundationalist verities', and both are capable of indicating a method of cognition that is able, in turn, to reflect its own premises. In comparison, the evidential grounds for Cooperrider et al.'s 'postmodern insights' remain somewhat obscure. They manage, as do some other postmodern thinkers, to bring together a broad spectrum of different approaches, including Heidegger and Gadamer, Wittgenstein, Habermas, Foucault, Feyerabend, and Rorty, all the way to Derrida. However, each of these thinkers has advanced their analyses to such depths that, in many ways, they are mutually incompatible. In my view, it is more fruitful to follow an epistemological reflection to its depths and draw the conclusions from there.

Postmodern constructionism and agency

I suggest that phenomenologically based social constructionism, in the tradition of Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann, can contribute a great deal toward clarifying several implications of the concept of relational knowledge. When Cooperrider et al. speak of a 'relational vocabulary of knowledge', or of a 'truly

relational understanding of knowledge', they refer to Gergen (1988) who questions the concept of knowledge as a state of individual minds and places it within communities of discourse users. To confine knowledge to discourse is, in a phenomenological perspective, too narrow: Not all subjective knowledge is social or discursive knowledge.³ Discourse certainly is an important and powerful sociological concept. It emphasizes the social aspect of knowledge, its collective character, its social origin and its interactional construction. However, the concept of discourse can be misleading, not only because of its linguistic implications, but especially when its relationship to agency is not specified. Are the 'users' of a discourse some kind of marginal attachment to the discourse or are they in any sense vital to it? Are we talking of a kind of auto-poietic, emergent discourse that takes on a life of its own, or is a discourse the result of the intricate coordination of two (or more) persons' practical actions? Do we dismiss concepts like consciousness, mind, experience, intentions and the like as subjectivist terms, as an inadequate discourse using traditionalist, obsolete or individualistic language, or do we integrate them with the concept of discourse?

Cooperrider et al., anyway, use such terms: they talk of experience, of minds, of actors - we,⁴ students, physicians, researcher etc. - without saying what they mean and what epistemological status these concepts actually have. They even tie them together with the concept of an 'emerging organization'. Gergen, more radical, attempts to steer clear of avoidable ontological assumptions and considers agency a reified concept (Gergen, 1990). Luhmann (1984), who takes this argument to the hilt, so to speak, maintains that only communication can communicate and that any talk about an actor's action is a specific construction of the communication system. Gergen does not go that far, it seems, but has a special concept of agency in mind when reproaching it with reification, namely, knowledge as a state of mind, action as determined by an individual's intentions, and the like.

The constitution of phenomena, events, projects of action, and of acting in subjective consciousness and its intricate relations to pursuing an action and accomplishing social interaction, have been thoroughly analyzed by Alfred Schutz. His phenomenological description of the life-world furnishes a rich and detailed description of how phenomena in subjective consciousness are constituted, how experiences are formed, how actions are projected, how people make sense of their own and other's actions, how intricate the sequential organization of social interaction is, and much more. Phenomenology does not conceive of knowledge as a state of individual minds but as a process, as an ongoing constitution in subjective consciousness, based on past interactions and experiences. It does not assume that subjective intentions determine action (or worse: interaction) but analyzes the complex relation between projects of actions and actual acting in social or non social situations as an ongoing temporal

process. I wonder why these process-oriented phenomenological investigations are overlooked when talking about 'individualistic' or 'subjectivist' conceptions, or when using terms like experience, mind or typifications of actors - terms whose meaning is neither epistemologically clarified nor explained by the context in which they are used in the text.

The phenomenological analysis of the life-world could, in my view, also elucidate the proclaimed 'unity of making/thinking/doing' (Hazelrigg, 1989, p. 113). The present task, according to Cooperrider et al., is 'to develop a new theory of theory with its own vocabulary that links knowledge with poiesis...'. Fortunately, they do not talk of 'auto-poiesis' - a concept in social science that, I contend, obscures more than it enlightens.⁵ Thus their enterprise can be linked to agency more easily than other approaches of postmodern constructionism⁶. Their proposal, however, to bridge the seemingly contradicting quotations of Kurt Lewin ('There is nothing so practical as good theory') and Karl Marx ('The point is no longer to interpret the world, but to change it') by asserting a 'unity of making/thinking/doing' seems to me too simple. In a phenomenological perspective, thinking indeed can change the world: changing the interpretation changes the world-as-it-appears-to-me. In the 'natural attitude', however, it makes a difference if an actor just thinks and imagines something or if he or she expresses his or her thoughts and imaginations to other living persons. And it makes a difference if someone imagines the murder of someone or if he or she actually does it. Mundane phenomenology therefore considers thinking as acting but distinguishes between thinking and communicating, or between a discourse with oneself or with imagined others, and a social discourse with co-present others (physically present or 'appresented' by technical means, like telecommunication etc.). Baudrillard's assertion that the third world war has already happened because the simulation of it has taken place, his refusal to accept a difference between a 'simulation' and a 'real-life-event' (Baudrillard 1982), breaches the 'natural attitude' in a way that opens a nearly insurmountable gap between theoretical world and the world of people's practical concerns. Thinking hardly forms a unity with making and doing in the sense of real-world events, but doing and making in most cases - leaving aside unintentional consequences of actions - certainly include interpreting acts of an actor, in other words 'thinking' if we decide to treat interpreting and thinking as synonymous.

Mundane phenomenology also analyzes the formal properties of the perspective of someone observing an actor or interacting with him or her. This perspective is radically different to the subjective perspective of an actor. Understanding another actor means to make sense of his or her behaviour and to attribute him or her certain 'intentions' or 'motives' on the basis of specific cultural vocabularies and systems of relevancies. Obviously it is not possible to achieve direct access to another person's mind, experiences, thoughts or

phantasies, but people interact with each other, interpret each other's actions, ascribe motives or intentions to each other, tell each other stories, engage in common discourses and common social constructions. On this, I think, all constructionists agree. Less clear is the concept of organization in this context. Gergen (1992, p. 207) is perfectly right to question why social theorists tend to speak of organizations as structures rather than as clouds, as systems rather than as songs, and as weak or strong rather than as tender and passionate. Organizations are abstract fabrics for which there is no direct empirical evidence. Concepts of organizations, lay or scientific, are therefore highly selective, anonymous and abstract; they are better viewed as 'images' or 'metaphors' (Morgan, 1986) or even as 'fictions' (Hitzler, 1991). The only way an organization is made accountable, however, is by human actions. Agency, defined as a theory of the human agent engaged in interaction and an account for the conditions and consequences of action (cf. Giddens, 1979, p. 49), runs less risk of being reified than organizations. Cooperrider et al.'s argumentation, with which I agree in many respects, could be strengthened by an explicit theory of action and less postmodernist talk.

The concept of sociality

The postmodern constructionism of Cooperrider et al. is a social constructionism based on a social as opposed to a dualist epistemology. But without having explicitly clarified agency, the concept of sociality remains somewhat obscure. While I concede that sociality always remains a kind of mystery, I would suggest examining the practices with which people construct their realities in concerted actions in far greater detail. Let us thus consider again how Berger and Luckmann proceeded. It is one of the main theses of 'The Social Construction of Reality' that cultural constructs are socially stabilized by processes of institutionalization. Constructions are thus not the subjective business of singular individuals. They are socially derived and intersubjectively enacted. The social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann therefore stands in strong opposition to the subjective constructivism that people such as Paul Watzlawick and others⁷ sometimes defend. The subjective construction of reality is always based on internalized cultural knowledge and - leaving aside deep pathological aberrations - coordinated with other human actors in interactions or collaborations. As Goffman poignantly puts it: 'In some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly' (Goffman, 1974, p.1).

Subjective constructivism leaves out just what Berger and Luckmann's book is all about: reality construction in interaction and conversation, by means of

internalized social objectivations, systems of relevancies and typifications, stabilized by routines, institutionalizations and legitimations, and so on. Viewed against this background, subjective constructivism is a-historical, asocial and blind to institutions. How about postmodern constructionism? How can the sociality of phenomena be conceptualized without any ontological assumptions?

In Cooperrider et al.'s chapter one searches in vain for any reference to the plausibility structures of constructions. I agree that 'the world quite simply seems to change as we talk in it'. But we can sometimes observe rather obstinate resistance to new constructions. What are the conditions under which a reality 'shared' or constructed in common is altered? How can constructions be modified, developed, changed or replaced when they are firmly institutionalized and deeply entrenched in lore and legitimations? I would expect that in their reported medical clinic there exist several different cultural milieus, each with its own plausibility structure. I must admit I am quite puzzled that Cooperrider et al. do not report a multiplicity of perspectives when they explore and define the 'ideal membership situation' or when they envisage a 'vision of the good'. My own experience in management consulting suggests that what is good or ideal for members looks quite different depending on the actors' perspectives. I have met quite a number of persons who love to exert power and would emphatically resist any constructive change that could endanger their position. What seems good or ideal to them might be quite incongruous to what is good or ideal to other members of the organization.

Empirical reference in constructionism

Many of Cooperrider et al.'s theoretical considerations are indexical to the specific kind of research they are pursuing. Although the authors discard the difference between basic and applied research, it is important to acknowledge that there are different systems of relevance guiding concrete scientific endeavours. I certainly agree that an assembly line worker also theorizes, and that it is untenable to treat researcher and researched as isolated units if, I hasten to add, they interact during the research. Only then does it make sense to say, 'that the understanding of organizations and their/our practical transformation is a single, undifferentiated act' - our understanding of an organization affects that organization only if we interact with it (i.e. with its representatives). A constructionist view, however, does not require that the scientist help in inventing new constructions for people's everyday lives. Other constructionists, such as ethnomethodologists, conversation analysts or the German research groups around Thomas Luckmann, Hans-Georg Soeffner or Ulrich Oevermann,

try to reconstruct concerted reality constructions as local, situational and interactional accomplishments. They have no practical concerns in the sense of changing people's lives. On the contrary, they attempt to avoid any influence on the people studied and favour data gathered by hidden camera microphone. Their research furnishes detailed accounts of the intricate workings of social milieus, without any direct ambition to change those milieus. In the realm of organizational theory the work of Deirde Boden (1994) offers a vivid illustration of such an approach, in the realm of clinical research there is also the earlier work of David Sudnow (1967). Of course, this is not to say that they do not affect society; they offer new discourses that affect other people, lay persons and scientists, but these discourses typically do not affect the people studied.

Against this background, the approach of Cooperrider et al. certainly represents a kind of applied research, not in the sense that it applies some extant theoretical results of basic research but in the sense that it pursues practical goals. A more appropriate designation may be to call it a (practically) committed research. If they combine 'an explanatory approach to organizations and a program for organizational reconstruction and development', they do not mean a descriptive reconstruction of people's past constructions in everyday-life-situations, as the other approaches mentioned do, but 'a constructive co-creation of the future in the here-and-now of inquiry'. Anyway, such a commitment calls for further meta-theoretical and methodological analysis. I suppose that Cooperrider et al.'s corpus of knowledge and their system of relevancies differs in many aspects from those of everyday theorists. For example, I would presume that they in some degree commit themselves to the specific scientific rationalities that Schutz (1971, a, b) and Garfinkel (1967) have identified: logical consistency, semantic clarity and distinctness (and this 'for its own sake'), the compatibility of ends-means relationships with principles of formal logic, and others. Thus I would expect that their work somehow differs from the work of management consultants who have no theoretical ambitions. It would be very interesting to analyse empirically the interactions, procedures and practices taking place in Cooperrider et al.'s research, as Knorr-Cetina (1991) did in a natural science lab.⁸

The unity of making/imagining and of theory, practice and development proclaimed by Cooperrider et al. is bound to their own approach. Ethnomethodological studies seldom affect the people studied; the latter do not even read the publications and accomplish their everyday lives quite well without them. Much of social research however does influence people, deliberately or not. If Cooperrider et al. strive with their inquiry for 'a constructive co-creation of the future', a puzzling question comes up: how can social change be conceived of in a constructionist perspective? How can humans, acting members of an organization or observing scientists, recognize social change? In everyday life,

it seems to be relevant to people to discern if it is the 'things' which change or just peoples' 'interpretation' of those things. Avoiding the subject-object-dichotomy, Cooperrider et al. cannot distinguish the two. The same holds for phenomenology: as I suggested earlier, noesis and noema form an inseparable unity - there is no 'thing' stripped of its interpretation. The clue is not to be found in a different epistemology but in the institutionalization of social constructions: in everyday life we hold sufficient constructions constant over comparatively long periods; it is these stabilized constructions that furnish a firm basis for such decisions (if the things have changed or the interpretations).

Consider the case of that bed wetter who went to see a psychotherapist to get rid of his problem. After seven years of therapy he met a former friend who inquisitively asked him about the therapeutic success. 'I got rid of the problem', was the answer. 'I still wet the bed every night but now I like it.' To be sure, for our bed wetter the world has dramatically changed: he got rid of the normative interpretation that this is something to be ashamed of and therefore to be abolished. But if he spends a night as a guest in another bed, he will run into problems as his host may view the events in a different perspective. If we all agree that the 'fact' of bed wetting remained the same over the seven (and more) years, this agreement rests upon our practice of keeping constructions constant. A more radical therapy might have changed this basic construction itself: instead of a person wetting the bed we can picture the event as a mattress sucking the fluids out of an organic body, a scenario that could be dramatized by imagining some demons dwelling in there, planning new tricks to play upon their victim every night. Certainly, the plausibility structure might be confined to the therapist and his client and would, in a western culture, remain rather weak for a reality constructed like this.

The social actions relevant to social organizational theory and practice typically involve meanings that have little bearing on the physical aspects of bodily movements. How can people develop a sense for 'what has changed' and 'what remained the same'? In management development programs, members of an organization sometimes insist that it was only the rhetoric that changed while the actions remained business-as-usual. A vivid example is team work: the increased use of this term cannot conceal the fact that it is often employed to disguise old practices of hierarchical discrimination. This illustrates how important Schutz' postulate of adequacy of meaning is: the social scientist's constructs have to be compatible with those of people in their everyday lives. It is of utmost relevance to actors' orientations. Harvey Sacks' 'viewer's maxim', the 'if-can', although developed in a different context, may be helpful. Sacks' formulation of this relevance rule is deceptively simple: if one can see something in a certain way, see it that way! (Sacks, 1975, p. 224-225). This 'viewer's maxim', or better 'interpretation maxim', comes to terms with two

epistemological insights: that there is no thing that is not interpreted, and that not every interpretation fits. Often there exist several interpretations that fit. In the context of our practical question, how can we recognize if social change has happened, we can use the 'if-can'-maxim in a modified way: If you can still see it in the old way, be alert - nothing may have changed besides the rhetoric.⁹ Another relevant issue in this connection is the question of how certain agents manage to impose a specific reality on others - an issue that lies beyond the scope of this comment.¹⁰

Methodological individualism reconsidered

I have argued that central concepts in Cooperrider et al.'s contribution are somewhat ambiguous. My thesis was that the social constructionist approach as developed by Berger and Luckmann offers, based on the life-world analysis by Alfred Schutz, a rich resource for clarifying theoretical and meta-theoretical conceptions; for example, what social construction, relational knowledge or the relationship between social scientist and the members of an organization is all about. The present discussion does not allow more than to offer some hints regarding certain conceptual problems and their implications. As Cooperrider et al. refer to actors in their 'appreciative' approach and in their empirical illustrations, I contend that their arguments could be illuminated and strengthened more by a phenomenologically based social constructionism than by its postmodern version. The attempt of postmodern constructionism to steer clear of ontological assumptions inevitably backfires: the exclusion of agency, for example, keeps actors continually present backstage and lets them step forward as soon as an empirical reference is being established. In my view it is wiser to consider such implications at the metatheoretical level; they are readily overlooked within the practicalities of empirical research.

Moreover, it is difficult to clarify the concept of sociality without conceptualising the actors involved. Accordingly, the concept of relational knowledge remains inescapably diffuse. My thesis is that a relational theory that shies away from agency engages in exactly that which it tries to avoid: reification. There are no relations beyond actors enacting them, be it relations between humans or relations between symbols. The social does not posit itself. Apart from such ontological assertions, there arise methodological problems when the actors themselves are left untheorised. Structuralist theories of all kinds deliver vivid illustrations. And microsociological studies show well that any mechanistic metaphor, like Berger and Luckmann's (1967) 'conversational apparatus' or Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking model as a 'conversational machinery', has inevitably to be considered in its context-free and

its context-sensitive aspects, i.e. has to be related to the actual practices employed locally, situatedly and interactionally by competent actors.¹¹

In the light of these arguments I wish to object to a blunt juxtaposition of methodological individualism and relation centred, constructionist approaches.¹² As the term suggests, it is a methodological, not an ontological individualism. What this means is that it is primarily dependent on the specific context of meta-theoretical and ontological assumptions in which it is embedded. In this sense, there exists a vast spectrum of different kinds of methodological individualism: economists treat their homunculus, *homo oeconomicus*, as if it were a completely autonomous actor and decision maker. Similarly, psychologists sometimes explain human action as caused by individuals due to their specific character traits and personality structure. The problem involved is not methodological individualism but the naive ontological assumptions being made. In the light of Schutz' arguments about structures of the life-world methodological individualism has a radically different meaning: a person is always born into the socio-historic apriori of a concrete, given society and culture. The stock of knowledge of a person is relational in a twofold manner: the concept of sociality says that it is socially derived; the concept of intersubjectivity describes it as constantly enacted, produced and reproduced in social interaction. Sociality captures the static or generic, and intersubjectivity the dynamic aspect of knowledge (the doing of knowledge). Schutz has delivered detailed accounts of the intricate interplay between actors and has shown, drawing on the premises of pragmatism (Mead, Dewey, Peirce), that actors interactionally produce their life-world as intersubjectively shared in the here and now.¹³ I have stressed the fundamental difference between Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism as opposed to the so-called radical, subjectivist constructionism. Methodological individualism does not imply that actors 'cause' what happens in social settings, but rather that they enact it. It means to analyse social events at their very roots: at the practices producing and accounting them. In routine actions the subjective perspective of an actor has no special bearing, and there is often very little individualistic about it. But in others there is; neglecting this may lead to reifications from which there is no going back to reality-as-people-experience-it.

A phenomenologically-based sociology of knowledge presents a sophisticated version of methodological individualism that is highly consistent with a constructionist perspective. It differs a great deal from traditional versions that often operate with comparatively narrow and trivial assumptions (cf. the analysis of Lukes, 1977).¹⁴ In addition, the sociology of knowledge does not adopt the narrow conception of explanation as many methodological individualists (e.g. rational choice theorists) do.¹⁵ Instead, it is much more concerned with the practices of concerted social constructions, i.e. more with the how than with the why of social phenomena. It conceives of society as a complex fabric of

interrelated social actions. Thus if a person externalizes and objectifies something it immediately falls prey to diverse, sometimes conflicting interpretations in a multiplicity of actors' and observers' perspectives - the so-called 'unintentional consequences'. In other words, a phenomenologically based sociology of knowledge heavily endorses - based on agency - a relational understanding of knowledge.

Towards an appreciation of the appreciative approach

Cooperrider et al. advance an 'appreciative approach to knowledge', one that should complement 'critical theory' which, for all its negativism, 'fails to tap into the inspiring potential of human cosmogony or social innovation and leads incessantly to a narrow conception of transformative possibility' (ibid., p. 23). Instead, 'appreciative ways of knowing are constructively powerful' (ibid.). They are convinced that:

there will be no return to the old, not only because new vistas of study and construction will continue to appear, but because the theorist him or herself will come to experience what it is like to have their lives count, and count affirmatively, as it relates to the creative and crucial questions of the time (ibid., p. 15).

Cooperrider et al. do not care to describe for its own sake how members of an organization construct their life-world but want to help them to reinvent and reconstruct their world. Judged by this goal and commitment, their approach is inspiring indeed. In their empirical illustration they show that they succeeded in opening up the world for others and for themselves (in a co-enlightenment). They also show how they lived up to their epistemological considerations in their practical investigation e.g. in assessing the statistical numbers of their survey not as proof or disproof but as 'a concise rhetorical device', 'as yet one more form of theoretical language which again would enter the common culture of discourse'.

A constructionist myself, I found more in their chapter to agree with than to criticize. Thus my concern is more to expand and strengthen their approach than to dismantle it. In my view, epistemological reflections should be broader and more fundamental than just contextualizing a specific scientific approach. Closer ties to phenomenology and to a theory of action would probably be more helpful in clarifying basic concepts than the curtness of postmodern discourse. Cooperrider et al., on the other hand, may find my contribution not very helpful to them. Following Gergen (1978) they define good theory in terms of its 'generative capacity', that is, its capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of

a culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to bring about reconsideration of that which is 'taken for granted' and most important, to furnish new constructions (theories) and alternatives for social action. I doubt that my reflections increase the 'generative capacity' of their theory. For practical purposes it may be wiser to operate with rather vague concepts as most important is, as they say, 'not the content of the emerging theory per se, but the process of dialogue, debate, and organization/ theory/self-development' taking place. A too thorough concern for the basic concepts may in the end rather paralyse their endeavour, for the primary condition of successful organizational development will be their success in establishing fruitful social relationships with the members of the organization under study. My personal interest would be to study these very relations and social processes more closely, especially since they are major blind spots to the scientists-in-action. Such an investigation would not intend to change peoples' life-worlds but to teach us something about the subtleties of members' practical actions, about how they interactionally, situationally and locally construct and negotiate a common world, how they do discourse, how they do social change, and the like. Although all such findings inevitably are context-dependent, we may gain some insights that may reach beyond the context of their 'discovery'. It is these different systems of relevancies and interests of Cooperrider et al. and myself that account for some of the main arguments in our debate.

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Notes

1. I thank Deirde Boden for very valuable comments to my first draft.
2. In contrast to other philosophers, Husserl affirms that noesis and noema form a unity: A (real life) phenomenon is always a phenomenon in consciousness, e.g. a phenomenon-as-it-is-perceived. We can change the phenomenon by noetic variations (e.g. by modifying our attention to something perceived), but the phenomenon can also alter its noema (e.g. a change of the something-perceived which is independent of our way of perceiving). Thus, Husserl delivers a highly interesting analysis of naive realism: we perceive properties of phenomena and attribute them to "things out there", concealing the fact that they are phenomena-as-they-appear-to-us (cf. Eberle 1984).
3. This distinction remained implicit in Berger and Luckmann's book but can clearly be seen in the context of Alfred Schutz' writings. I thank Thomas Luckmann for endorsing my interpretation in personal communication.
4. For a detailed account of this argument against the 'linguistic' conception of Habermas (1981) cf. Eberle (1984, pp. 172-187). Schütz/Luckmann (1973) provide a detailed analysis of the complex relationship between subjective and social knowledge. The subjective stock of knowledge is not completely contained in the social stock of knowledge, and - although in a different sense - vice versa.
5. Especially the 'we' is highly indexical in the text, sometimes meaning the authors, the researchers, the group of trainers and students, the group of researchers and members of the medical clinic or the members of society at all.

6. Resurrected from ancient Greek philosophy for biological theory by Maturana and Varela (1979), the concept of auto-poiesis has been prominently launched within sociology by Niklas Luhmann (1984). There are even attempts to integrate Schutz' life-world analysis with Luhmann's autopoiesis (Srubar 1989).
7. Postmodernism is more about deconstruction than about constructionism. However, as Cooperrider et al. blend social constructionism with postmodernism, I label this and related approaches 'postmodern constructionism'.
8. Cf. Watzlawick 1976, 1984.
9. See also Latour & Woolgar (1979) and Lynch (1985).
10. For an ethnomethodological analysis of the intricate ways in which talking and acting are interrelated in social organizations, see Boden (1994).
11. On the imposition of reality in an ethnomethodological perspective cf. Mehan & Wood (1975, pp. 37-73).
12. While the terminology of 'context-free' and 'context-sensitive' was coined by Sacks et al. (1974), Heritage (1984) speaks of 'context-shaped' and 'context-renewing'.
13. This juxtaposition is constructed time and again by constructionist psychologists who refuse a specific individualistic ontology which has penetrated much of the psychological discourse; it has not been advanced by Cooperrider et al. As phenomenology mistakenly is often confused with an individualistic ontology, I try to clarify this misunderstanding.
14. Srubar (1988) calls this Schutz' "pragmatist turn".
15. Cf. also Watkins (1959). For further discussion see e.g. Giddens (1984).
16. For a lucid discussion of the relationship of a phenomenologically based social constructionism and rational choice theory cf. Esser (1991, 1993), Prendergast (1993) and Srubar (1993); cf. also Eberle (1988).

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