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Taking a Firm Stand with a Light Touch

by Sheila McNamee

One of the curious and interesting things about language is that it chops the world up into categories. Gregory Bateson talked about the danger of categorization while acknowledging that it is impossible to avoid. Once we act, we have done “this” and not “that.” This is the tyranny of language. As constructionists, we can recognize the impending threat of labeling someone with a mental illness, an inability to focus, or poor performance in the workplace. But are we equally aware of how our talk about social construction also divides the world into “those in our camp” and “those outside?”

Many of us are familiar with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*.¹ She reminds us that when we hold a single story about others, we severely limit our ability to understand, thereby reducing the other to simplistic, totalizing terms. This limited understanding unfortunately facilitates conflict, violence, and all forms of pathologizing.

So, I wonder...in what ways do we risk creating and maintaining a fractured world as we talk about social construction? I’m sure that many of you have experienced negative responses from others when you use the term “social construction” or when you champion “appreciative inquiry” over problem solving approaches. While there is nothing inherently “wrong” or “bad” about either term, social construction is unfortunately equated for some with rampant relativism, irresponsibility (i.e., do whatever you want), and devastation of any sense of social order,² while appreciative inquiry can be understood as problem avoidance, and Pollyannaish. While it seems only reasonable to defend our beliefs and point out the limitations of individualism, do we ever stop to wonder how – in these very moments – we too are maintaining unfortunate and potential divisive worlds? We have silenced those who are trying to silence us; we are categorizing and undermining.

Let us remember that social construction, relational theory, collaborative practices, and appreciative inquiry are *resources* for understanding the social world; they are not the Truth about that world. In a world where certainty and conviction are viewed as indications of knowledge, authority, and even wisdom, how can we both believe passionately that constructionist practices are generative and life giving while simultaneously remaining open to very traditional ways of talking about and understanding the world? Can we embrace the individualist orientation to the world as a discursive option – a way of talking and being in relation to the other – that might, for some and/or at some specific moment, be useful? If we can do that, we are honoring the relational, collaborative approach to the world while also honoring the commitments of others. And, in honoring both, we are stepping fully into a relational process.

As I think about living within a constructionist sensibility, I become acutely aware of how curiosity about differences builds relations and also generates possibilities for forging new understandings with others. Our task, as practitioners who adopt a relational sensibility, is to acknowledge our commitments while holding them lightly. To appreciate difference is to create space for new conversations, new possibilities, and new and unimagined worlds.

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

² While there are many critiques of social construction, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair for a good overview.