This chapter is an invitation to view research as a relational process. The focus on relational processes is the hallmark of a constructionist orientation where there is a shift from examining entities (whether they be individuals, groups, organizations or matter) to attending to what we refer to as language or language processes. To the constructionist, language is not simply a tool or vehicle used to transmit or exchange information about reality (often referred to as a representational view of language). Rather, language is seen as constructing reality. What we do together actually makes our social worlds. This is an important distinction for many reasons but, in light of the present chapter, this distinction is significant because it invites a deconstruction of our accepted, dominant view of research.

The dominant research tradition has emerged within a modernist worldview. Modernism assumes that, with the proper tools and techniques, we will be able to discover reality. Of course, part and parcel of this assumption is the belief that there is a reality to be discovered. Science and the scientific method serve as cornerstones of modernist thinking and thus the belief that research should follow accepted scientific methods remains a hallmark of modernism. Postmodernism, on the other hand, challenges the notion that there is one reality to be discovered. Instead, postmodern theorists propose that our ways of talking and relating to each other and the world should be the focus of study and therefore, the idea of multiple truths, multiple realities, and multiple methods for exploring such realities is paramount.

Research that is associated with discovery is situated within a modernist worldview. Traditional researchers are curious to discover how to understand the world “as it really is” and how to discover “new knowledge” about that world. Yet, if our view is a relational constructionist view, the “thing” (or entity) we are examining is the interactive processes of people in relation with each other and their environments. We are curious about what sorts of worlds can be made possible through particular forms of interaction, particular ways of talking and acting. Thus, the focus on relational processes that construct...
our worlds is understood as something very different from the focus on *discovering* how the world is.

In this chapter, I attempt to illustrate how the constitutive nature of language infuses the research endeavor with new possibilities. When we assume that our knowledge of the world is constructed in social processes (a postmodern assumption), we are invited to consider two important issues. First, we are invited to question our taken-for-granted ways of understanding research. Second, new ways of engaging in research are opened and thus knowledge production, itself, is reframed. Since constructionists give precedence to the constitutive nature of all inquiry, we are invited to explore what sorts of worlds we are generating as well as what sorts of knowledge and understandings are being crafted when we engage in any inquiry process.

There has been a great deal of debate (Holstein and Gubrium 2008; Woolgar 1996) concerning what constructionist research looks like, how constructionist research is conducted, what methods can be employed, and what analysis implies for social interaction. My hope is to illustrate that the divisive arguments that have emerged around these topics are not coherent within a constructionist orientation. Instead, I hope to offer alternative, relational understandings of research and the implications of this understanding for relational practitioners.

**The Divisive Issues**

Our understanding of what counts as research is most often couched within the discourse of science. What is known as the scientific method is borne out of what is believed to be objective, controlled observations by skilled researchers who employ reliable and verifiable methods to explore some phenomenon and reveal new knowledge about that phenomenon. On the basis of this new knowledge, progress is achieved. The traditional assumption is that research produces knowledge, facts, and evidence about the world *as it is*. This view of research (as a scientific endeavor) is referred to as the Received View of Science (RVS) by Woolgar (1996). This is the view of research that people commonly adopt despite the fact that it is not the view commonly shared by scientists (Latour and Woolgar 1979).

Scientists admit to the messy nature of life in the lab or in the field. They acknowledge the ways in which their research emerges within specific scientific communities, or what others have referred to as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). In this regard, the general view of what constitutes science, and therefore research (what
I am referring to here as the received view of science), is at odds with the actual practice of scientists and their description of what they do. Within the scientific community, there is acknowledgement that what one comes to call research depends upon the relational nexus within which one operates.

This notion fits well with constructionist notions where research is seen as a “form of life” practiced within different “language games” (Wittgenstein 1953). Thus what we commonly understand as the research tradition (i.e., post-positivist social science) is, indeed, a valuable form of research – but it is not the only form. There are other language games to be explored. Social construction is one.

The Language of Research: What Counts?

In an attempt to forge connections among different conceptualizations and understandings of research, Raboin, Uhlig, and McNamee (2012) suggest examining what we call “research worlds.” A research world involves “the complex interdependencies that support and give scholarly rigor to particular approaches to research” (2012, p.1). Research worlds are constituted by

any distinct way of understanding and conducting research, including its unique purposes, practices, and conventions of rigor—together with the beliefs, assumptions and standards of the professions and communities of scholarship within which it is situated . . . A research world is a comprehensive context that guides, supports, funds, conducts and evaluates research in certain ways. A research world holds and maintains a particular approach to research based on core assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of conducting research based on these understandings (methodology). What is acceptable in each world is constructed and held in place by many stakeholders. (Ibid p. 1)

We might usefully understand differences in what counts as research by understanding these different worlds. Raboin, Uhlig, and McNamee propose three different research worlds: the diagnostic (quantitative), the interpretive (qualitative), and the relational (process oriented).

Significant in this conceptualization of research worlds is the understanding that each one is constructed. That is, each one of these research worlds is the byproduct of historically and communally situated negotiations. Each research world is internally coherent while potentially (and most often) incoherent from within any other research world.
### Table 1. Understanding Consistency and Inconsistency across Research Worlds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENTIFIC METHOD</th>
<th>LET’S UNDERSTAND</th>
<th>LET’S CHANGE IT TOGETHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Traditional Qualitative</td>
<td>Relational Constructionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence Based</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prove</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>Describe/Interpret</td>
<td>Co-Create</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher/Subject</td>
<td>Research/Participants</td>
<td>Co-Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True or False</td>
<td>Situated Meanings</td>
<td>Generate New Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discoverable Truth and Cause/Effect Mechanisms</td>
<td>Contextualized Knowledge and Multiple Realities</td>
<td>Generate New Realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistically Valid</td>
<td>Authentic to Participants</td>
<td>Locally Useful/Generative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalizable &amp; Repeatable</td>
<td>Possibly Transferable</td>
<td>Local and Historical, Co-Evolving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discover Truth</td>
<td>Expand Insight</td>
<td>Generating Possibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within a relational constructionist stance, we recognize that people coordinate their activities with others and the environment – research worlds are also worlds of coordinated actions. The simple coordinations (e.g., observing and measuring in the traditional research world, interpreting in the qualitative research world, and collaborating in the construction of understanding in the relational research world) quickly emerge into patterned forms of action within a research community. For example, the importance of controlled environments and the means by which such control is ensured is a taken-for-granted pattern in the quantitative research world. These patterns, in turn, generate standards and expectations that participants use to assess their own actions and the actions of others. So, for example, researchers who inhabit the traditional quantitative research world are not expected to report the results of their research in emotional terms. Rather, they are expected
to present their data and results as objective measures of “what is there.” These evaluating and standardizing practices are carried into future interactions, where they will be confirmed and sustained, challenged, or transformed. Thus, from the very simple process of coordinating, we develop local-cultural norms and values and patterns of influence that, in turn, serve as “common sense” justification for future coordinations. This process can be summarized in Figure 1 following.

Figure 1. The Construction of Worldviews

It is important to note here that this process is happening every time researchers engage with each other and the world. Thus, the potential to construct a multiplicity of worldviews is vast. And, with each construction of a worldview, we are constructing a local ontology (what is) and a local epistemology (how we can know what exists). Thus, we are also constructing a moral order that implies what is good and what is not. Consequently, there is a challenge in coordinating among these different research worlds. As we can see, it is impossible given this orientation, to expect that there could be one unified way of understanding and conducting research. Within a research world, patterns of action are sensible; attempting to understand another research world using the criteria for sense making in a different research world yields debate about what is right or wrong at best and disqualification of entire forms of practice at worst.
To the social constructionist however, there is a pivotal assumption that provides some nuanced understandings of how we might begin to coordinate diverse and competing research worlds. In the diagram above we can see that both the quantitative and the qualitative research worlds are completely coherent internally and yet there is no point of connection between them. This, of course, is not exactly the case. In fact, much qualitative research shares many of the same assumptions concerning objectivity, validity, and reliability as the quantitative research world. However, for purposes of illustration, I have positioned these two research worlds at odds with one another – and often they might be.

Within a social constructionist orientation, the possibility for constructing new understandings, new beliefs and values, new realities is always present. Each time we engage with others and our environment, the possibility of creating new meaning and thus new worldviews is present. What is interesting about this is that we are largely unaware of how persistently we work to maintain the sense of a solid, stable, and continuing worldview. Without our own participation, these worlds of research and the inevitable version of reality they produce would not endure. We are the ones who maintain these realities, these standards. Even as we resist, for example, traditional quantitative research, we maintain the hegemony of this research world in our very acts of resistance (Foucault 1972; 1976) – in our attempts to construct alternative research worlds. And, since the possibility to create alternative forms of action, alternative standards and expectations, and alternative belief and value
systems is always present, the following illustration is a more useful representation of the diversity of world views (even in research) that are possible:

Figure 3. The Complexity and Diversity of Worldviews

The relational constructionist research world appreciates this diversity and avoids attempts to adjudicate between one research world and another in any universal way. There may be, however, particular situated moments when one research world makes more sense than another.

As we can see, the constructionist orientation creates a research world where appreciation, curiosity, and acknowledgment of alternative research worlds (in this case, quantitative and qualitative research worlds) are centered.

That said, it might be more useful to adjust the description of research worlds above. Rather than see three distinct (and mutually exclusive) worldviews, the constructionist stance is positioned in an entirely different discursive plane, if you will. The relational orientation of constructionist research and practice (as each chapter in this book illustrates) invites one into an entirely different conversation. This conversation is not about right or wrong, good or bad, truth or falsity, evidence or opinion. It is a conversation centered on reflexive inquiry.
As such, it invites us to consider which languaging communities are speaking and which are silenced. It invites us to explore the central ways in which we are implicated in all aspects of the research process - or any practice. And the intriguing thing about this is that being implicated is also evident in our ability to construct the traditional, objective research process. With a very strong caveat acknowledging that any depiction of these complex ideas is potentially misleading, I offer the image in Figure 4 as a replacement for Table 1 (see above).

Figure 4. Intersecting Research Worlds

In the quantitative research world, the impetus is to learn what happens “to most of the people, most of the time” via aggregated data so that these results might inform practitioners’ work with clients, educators’ work with students, organizational leaders’ work with constituents, and so forth. This is a practice aligned with the diagnostic research world to the extent that the search is for the “cause” of the problem so that “best practices” and “effective measures” can be put in place.

In the qualitative research world we confront an interesting confusion. Because qualitative research is not typically associated with the rigor and facticity of quantitative research (i.e., in quantitative research there is the oft quoted – and completely erroneous – saying, “the numbers never lie”), it is often associated with constructionist and other postmodern approaches to inquiry (cf, Iversen, 2000). This association might be captured in a comment such as, “Because interpretation and context
are important, qualitative methods must be used by constructionist researchers.” However, the act of counting – the use of quantitative data – is an interpretative act as well. There is nothing inherent in qualitative methods that would align them exclusively with constructionist inquiry. Furthermore, there are ample illustrations of qualitative research that is just as focused on “discovering truth” as quantitative data.

When qualitative methods are associated with constructionist forms of inquiry, we can surmise that the constructionist argument has not been understood since there is no constructionist method, per se. Social constructionism is a philosophical stance. As such, it marks a shift in orientation to the world. This shift can be summarized in many ways but suffice it to say that there is a shift in focus from self-contained, rational individuals to interactive processes (i.e., what people do together and what their doing makes). Thus, for the constructionist, the “doing” of research can take many forms. Each is, as mentioned earlier, a different language game. And, different language games construct different understandings of the world. Determining which is right and which is wrong (a modernist question) is replaced by which is most generative. We also become curious for whom it is most generative. This also invites the constructionist researcher to ask questions concerning whose voices are silenced, what practices are being privileged, and what moral orders we are creating in our research. In other words, the constructionist researcher is invited into a reflexive space where deliberation and curiosity are featured. We want to explore which inquiry process will help us know “how to go on together,” to paraphrase Wittgenstein (1953).

For constructionist researchers and practitioners, research/inquiry is not an either/or issue. In other words, there is no way of talking about or conducting research that is off limits outside of any given languaging community. This is not to suggest that “anything goes.” There are standards and collaboratively crafted realities within communities (see Figure 1 above). Identifying these locally crafted realities as moral orders helps us recognize the ways in which standards and expectations bind a discursive community together; one is not free to act in any way at all. However, once we step out of a given community, the same standards and beliefs might very well be challenged. And, it is important to note that we all inhabit multiple discursive communities. All the more reasons that the reflexive space constructionist research opens up is critical. Through constant reflexive inquiry, the constructionist researcher explores the ways in which certain research practices might marginalize some while elevating others. There is never a neutral research stance.
Shifting Discourses of Research

In order to more fully articulate the very different orientation of a constructionist philosophy, it is useful to understand three significant shifts between a modernist (scientific, quantitative/qualitative research world) and a constructionist research world. The first is a shift from individual to communal rationality. Rationality is no longer seen as a cognitive property of an individual but as a local-cultural performance. To be “rational” is to participate in the dominant discourses of some local tradition, re-constructing one’s own identity as a member of a particular community as one does so. Rationality is a relational process. My hope is that Figures 1, 2, and 3 above help to make this process clear. My hope also is to underscore the continual reflexive dialogue that social construction invites; dialogues that acknowledge the ways in which some discourses grant power to certain groups while silencing others. Through this reflexive critique, researchers maintain an appreciation for difference and recognize how what counts as rational is communally constructed.

The second shift is a movement from empirical method to social construction. This shift reflects the wide recognition that we have no means by which to understand the world apart from our ways of talking, our theories, and the methods they both inform. Critical here is the notion that the questions we ask bring forth the answers we then receive. Methods and concepts, beliefs and understandings make sense in relation to some wider tradition (theory, perspective, or intelligibility). So, for example, the way we conduct our inquiry (methods, procedures, analysis), the way we talk and write about it (using, for example, the language of variables, observations, and data) both reflect a particular tradition and are constitutive of it (Woolgar 1996).

The third shift concerns our different view of language. Unlike the realist/modernist view of language as representational, the constructionist sees language as social action and therefore, as constituting our world. Language does not merely describe what is “already there” in the world, it is a form of action. Those who have access to certain, privileged (and communally constructed) discourses are afforded recognition as “rational,” “correct,” “normal,” etc. Those who do not make use of the dominant discourse are then marginalized and pathologized. This also applies in the world of science; to engage in science is to participate in particular community-based practices. But, as I have argued, there are different ways of doing science and each is tied to a locally coordinated rationality.
Relational Research

A relational focus (as defined here) includes not only changed assumptions but also changed questions and interests. A key issue concerns the kinds of realities that we are a part of and contribute to making in our research. What sort of world do we invite each other into when we act as if it is possible to represent the *one way* things really are? And, in contrast, what sort of world do we invite each other into when we assume realities are community-based local, historical, and cultural co-constructions? Both sorts of inquiry construct local-communal realities—but very different ones. One where there are experts and non-experts versus one where there are multiple and perhaps conflicting realms of expertize.

The relational shifts I have outlined provide the possibility to engage others (theorists, practitioners, researchers, as well as all social actors) in activities that broaden our resources for social life. The interest is in the very *practice* of a constructionist research world as it might open up different possibilities, as a *performance* that literally puts into action, and thus makes available, new relational resources.

In naming these different research worlds, the hope is to generate both curiosity and respect for the different understandings each world creates concerning what counts as research. This hope is distinct from the more common practice of debating which orientation to research is more accurate, more dependable, or more authentic. In addition, borrowing the idea of different research worlds might help dispel the myth many have about constructionist research; many (typically those new to a constructionist philosophical stance or those naively critiquing a constructionist stance) presume that embracing a relational constructionist orientation requires rejecting the standards of social science research (typified in both the traditional quantitative and qualitative research worlds). My hope is to encourage a more nuanced and complex understanding of how “data” and “evidence” produced in both quantitative and qualitative research worlds might be understood differently in a relational research world and vice versa.

Adopting the relational constructionist research world requires that we explore forms of “evidence” that are coherent within a postmodern sensibility. This is in line with recent calls to engage multiple forms of description (McNamee and Hosking 2012; McNamee 2010) where the diversity of moral orders can be explored. Others have argued for the need to create a “thick description” (Ryle 1949) that extends beyond observation of behavior to an understanding of research as a contextualized and
situated practice that brings forward meaning and significance of what’s described (Geertz 1973). Elsewhere (McNamee 2000), I have suggested that attention to not only what is described but also attention to how we describe raises the challenge that validity is an issue of the politics of research (of the rhetoric within which it is constructed). We must ask, by whose standards is validity determined? Who is awarded the right to name what is valid and what is not? Are research results valid when the researcher’s theory and hypothesis are supported? When the results of the research “ring true” for professionals and their experience? Or when research participants (e.g., clients in therapy or consultation, students in educational contexts, patients in health care services) recognize the utility of certain forms of practice? We would not claim one of these options over others; rather, constructionists are interested in the collaborative construction of validity among all stakeholders.

To abandon the modernist approach (science) would be neither the constructionist nor the prudent thing to do. By rejecting empiricism in a totalizing fashion we would be rejecting one discursive frame in favor of another, which is akin to claiming that constructionism is the new “Truth” – a claim no constructionist would want to make. If we are to truly position social construction at the paradigmatic level of abstraction – a worldview defined in part by its embrace of multiplicity – then we would be failing to meet our own defining criteria. Why throw out one way of talking about the world, particularly when it is a way of talking with which so many people engage (here I am talking about modernism)? It is also not prudent to discard, out of hand, any particular discursive position. The challenge and the potential of social construction is its focus on coordinating the multiplicity of ways of being in—and speaking about—the world.

In the following section I offer a brief illustration of what I see as the current disconnect among the various research worlds described above. Specifically, the current domination of evidence-based practice in most professional fields (ranging from health care to education to organizational excellence) serves as a good example of how the problems that arise when research worlds are viewed as competitive, requiring a right/wrong determination. The constructionist (those operating within a relational research world) asks, What counts as evidence and to whom and how might that be useful to practitioners and, similarly, how might practitioners’ case studies inform future empirical research?

Ideally, as practitioners are guided by the results of scientific studies about what works and what does not, they learn in nuanced ways, on a case-by-case basis, how the application of certain practices helps or
hinders social life. These “data,” in turn, are fed back to researchers for further exploration of the large-scale effect of alternative forms of practice and/or of the anomalies that have arisen in specific cases. This focus on the circular and mutual relationship between “large N” studies and single cases highlights the constructionist focus on relational processes. Unfortunately, in practice, our understanding of what constitutes research is largely focused on one side of this relationship: how “large N” studies determine local practices so that they can be efficient and effective.

Moving Beyond an Either/Or World of Research: The Case of Evidence-Based Practice

Many careers have been built upon the debate concerning the distinction and significance of modernist vs. postmodern research, and how these traditions influence professional practice. Each approach has its merit but, as with all things, that merit is contextually defined. Within a modernist worldview, the attempt in professional practice is to objectively distinguish a problem and provide the “correct” solution or treatment, drawing on the tradition of positivist social science. Within a postmodern worldview, a professional examines how meaning and understanding are achieved in interaction with clients, hoping for the collaborative creation of an understanding that is more useful and generative for both client and professional.

The positions of modernist and postmodernist orientations are further complicated by the erroneous conflation of quantitative methods with modernism and qualitative methods with postmodernism, as mentioned earlier. Such a distinction is a gross oversimplification of postmodern philosophy and practice. As we know, postmodern approaches champion a shift in focus from the self-contained individual to the language practices (i.e., all embodied activities) of persons-in-relation. To that end, we acknowledge that quantitative and qualitative methods are nothing more than different “language games” (Wittgenstein) and neither is any more or less appropriate to any given analysis beyond a given context. In other words, numbers and aggregated data can be just as interesting and useful as can qualitative case studies. Thus, the common response by postmodernists against evidence-based practice (EBP) is not entirely warranted. What professionals react against is the idea that disembodied research about a specifically and uniquely embodied practice (e.g., therapy, health care treatment, education, effective leadership) should dictate how one engages with specific clients in contextually situated activity.
Montgomery (2006), talking about the use of Evidence Based Medicine, points out the mutually informing relationship intended between research and practice.

...the variation of the single case is the starting point for the EBM project. Valuable though epidemiological studies are, aggregated information constitutes generalized knowledge that must be applied to a particular patient. She may be younger than the groups studied – or more athletic or a vegetarian; she may be from a different ethnic group or have a late onset or a parent with the same condition. How and to what degree the studies apply in different circumstances is itself an occasion for comparative clinical storytelling, even among clinicians who know the prior probabilities for the Bayesian analysis of every malady in their specialty. The authors of Evidence Based Medicine know this. They advise clinicians to start with a question about one of their patients, research it as well as current studies allow, not only as a way of deciding what should be recommended to the patient but also to test and improve their clinical judgment. From such particular cases will come the ideas for further epidemiological and clinical investigation. (Montgomery, 2006, pp. 129-130)

The implications of the disparity between EBP as conceptualized and EBP as practiced has left many postmodern professionals in opposition to the world of research, numbers, and evidence. Rather than repel this community, the overall dominance of EBP should invite us to ask, how might research be useful in my professional practice? To pose this question is to embrace the mutually informing relationship between research and situated encounters. But first, we must turn our attention to evidence since it is the centerpiece of institutionally sanctioned professional practice and this centerpiece is most frequently viewed as emerging within traditional research worlds. To that end, those of us who position ourselves within a relational research world often feel invited into an either/or debate about the place of EBP and its institutional privilege.

What Counts as Evidence?

What counts as evidence in what circumstances is a topic to which constructionists are sensitive. Success in one professional relationship does not always offer useful practices in another. Do we want to engage in professional practices simply because “studies have shown,” for example, that cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) is more effective than
depth psychology when working with individuals? Or, would we rather explore how the use of different discourses (i.e., models) might create the possibility for therapeutic transformation? The shift here is from granting the stamp of approval (i.e., funding in the form of insurance coverage, governmental subsidies, institutional vouchers, etc.) to one brand of practice to granting the stamp of approval toward opening the possibility of collaborative conversations with clients about what is and is not working in their engagements with professionals.

What counts as evidence of successful practice will vary, depending upon the research world one inhabits. In the diagnostic research world, statistical significance of tested practices serves as evidence. In the interpretive research world, the self-reports of clients/participants serve as evidence. Yet in the relational constructionist research world, the creation of new forms of understanding that allow people (clients/participants) to move beyond identified problems serves as evidence. Here, it is not enough to report that the professional’s practice is working (interpretive research world). Rather, it is the recognition and creation of new forms of practice for clients, community members, researchers/practitioners, and all participants that signals effective practice.

Since researchers and research participants (practitioners and clients) inhabit different research worlds, re-visioning research as a process of social construction demands that we find ways to enter into curious conversation with those who inhabit different research worlds. If those who inhabit the quantitative research world of diagnosis and discovery view evidence as fact rather than one alternative for practice, then our attempts to coordinate divergent research worlds require respect and curiosity for this sense-making. Sometimes, those who purport to inhabit a relational constructionist research world deny the fact-based understanding of research results embraced by those who live in a traditional research. When they do so, they have (unfortunately) stepped into the traditional, quantitative research world view of right/wrong, truth/falsity.

Dispelling Common Myths about Research

I would like to close this chapter by highlighting what I refer to as common myths about research, each discussed in this chapter. First, is the myth that research is about discovery. As we have seen, the very idea of discovery is shaped by one’s research world. If a researcher adopts a distancing, diagnostic stance, the language of discovery is plausible. If, however, a researcher adopts a collaborative, participatory stance,
the language of discovery is incoherent. The construction of action possibilities and of new forms of understanding are byproducts of the mutuality of the inquiry process.

The second myth focuses on the suggestion that, with the right methods, we can discover the nature of the social world. Of course, this myth is not entirely distinct from the first; it simply extends the idea of discovery to the selection of the proper method. The Received View of Science (quantitative and much of qualitative research worlds) presumes just this (i.e., that the nature of the social world is discoverable with the right methods) and that discovery yields knowledge, advancement, and solutions to problems. However, when we inhabit the relational research world, we start with the presumption that the nature of the social world can be multiply defined and understood. Each understanding offers alternative forms of knowing and acting. In other words, while one answer/result might be most acceptable or appealing to one group situated in a particular context, that same answer/result might not be acceptable or appealing (or even feasible) to another group that is differently located.

The third myth suggests that practitioners are not researchers and researchers are not practitioners. This is probably the most significant myth for readers of this chapter simply because it allows any reader to recognize his or her practice as a legitimate and potentially useful research project. When we think of a harsh divide between research and practice, there is a tendency to avoid employing the resources for action that are most useful and familiar to us. Specifically, the RVS leaves us imagining tightly controlled environments, highly designed research instruments, and – probably most unfortunately – sterile, distant relations between the researcher and those who participate in the research process. Yet when we envision this view of research, we miss the very possibilities that could likely generate some significant human transformation.

Emergent Methods and Relational Responsibility

One of my former Ph.D. students, Murilo Moscheta, wrote about the debilitating effects of these myths. Murilo was interested in understanding how healthcare professionals understand and work with GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) patients. He carefully designed his research to include (1) an open invitation to professionals to participate in his project, (2) one-on-one interviews with those who volunteered for participation so that he might gain a sense of their challenges in working with GBLT patients prior to gathering the group together, and (3) a series of open dialogues with all participants.
All was going quite smoothly in his research; he had a good number of volunteers and completed his one-on-one interviews. He carefully prepared for his first dialogue session with the health professionals by summarizing the questions and concerns voiced in the interviews. He decided to open his first dialogue session with these summaries as a way to create an open and welcoming atmosphere within the group. On the day of the group dialogue, a nurse assistant who had not previously volunteered for the project (and thus had not participated in a one-on-one pre-dialogue interview with Murilo) asked if she could join the project. In the spirit of open collaboration, Murilo said, “of course!” He was attempting to be sensitive to the local practices of the healthcare professionals. However, he was shocked and dismayed (to say the least) when the newly joining nurse assistant abruptly left the dialogue session when she realized that everyone else present had participated in a personal interview. She felt marginalized.

Murilo felt that his research was a disaster at this point until he made the decision to seek out the nurse assistant to talk with her about her experience in the opening of that first dialogue and invite her to re-join the group. His decision to have this conversation with the nurse assistant opened a new horizon of possibilities in his research. The group used the “unfortunate” event as a model to think about the challenges in the inclusion of GLBT clients in healthcare settings. The nurse assistant had felt excluded; how might this incident inform them all in their challenges working with GLBT clients? Not only did Murilo achieve an emergent quality to his research design and method but also he was able to see the implications of the research process itself for the topic of his research (inclusion in healthcare professionals’ work with GLBT clients). Later he reflected on this research experience and highlighted the transformative potential of, as he described it, his encounter with “the unexpected:"

*I believe that, until that time, a great part of my training as a researcher had been based on a clear right/wrong division. The tradition in which I was trained emphasized that a good researcher would be able to carefully plan how the research should go and to anticipate possible problems in order to take suitable precautions. For omniscient pursuers like me, doubts and surprises were problems to avoid, solve or fix. Method was a way of ensuring that everything would flow as planned. Above all, researching was about controlling. And, as daunting as this god-like position could be, it was also seductive once it waved to the possibility of joining a selected and socially appreciated group.*
So it is not surprising that I would feel devastated when something unexpected happened during my research. I was striving to do everything right and, since this perspective on research is so widely acknowledged, participants were also expecting me to make “all the ‘right’ decisions.” Therefore, I first understood the unexpected as a sign of personal failure. In my efforts for perfection, my failure was later transformed into the nursing assistant’s failure, as I tried to justify myself by accusing her of disturbing my research. So my first lesson in this experience was to realize that blame is the standard game in a right/wrong model of individual responsibility. Unfortunately, that is the game that so commonly prevented me from generously understanding the unexpected and learning from it. Once I did so, the possibility of escaping the blame game allowed me to reconsider research in two important aspects.

First, I reconnected with the basic element of research. For some researchers, research is about discovering what is new, while for some others it may be more like creating something new. However, in any case, it seems that research is a process by which we somehow create the conditions where we can be in relation with novelty. So what is the point of anticipating and controlling everything? How much space is left for “the original” if I am obsessed with predictions? I’ve realized that welcoming the unexpected can be a way of learning about what I was looking for without knowing I was looking for it. Paraphrasing T.S.Eliot, research can be about finding what I was looking for, and knowing it for the first time. Most important, this perspective liberated me from knowing everything and encouraged a lot of exploration. The Blame Game gave way to playful curiosity, generous questioning and exciting cooperation. Researching was elevated back to what it was when I first became interested in it: an adventure full of surprises for a boy playing with bugs and lenses in the backyard.

Second, I’ve learned that method is a compass, not a map. I was accustomed to the commonly accepted idea that relates to method as a process. However, the way I was embracing this process was transforming it into a product. I had planned interviews, I had prepared participants, and I had designed a group dialogue. And all this was a tool I wanted to apply in my research context. However, if method is truly a process, it is always in response to whatever is emerging in the research. So the most important aspect of method for me is not what I plan to do or the tools I want to use but how I respond to whatever emerges from them. Like a traveler with a
compass, I can move toward one direction. But to get there, I need to be attentive and responsive to the signs I find in my way. How I get to my goal is more a matter of how I interact with both compass and signs than a matter of following the right track. Obviously, that does not exclude preparation and planning, for I still do a lot of it before entering any research field or starting any trip. However, it allows me to be responsive to the unfolding nature of researching. Besides that, I consider the ethical importance of inviting participants not only to collaborate with what I propose but also to engage in the collective construction of the research process. I had heard social researchers frequently say that they were open to learn from the participants. So was I as I started my research. However, the collaboration I was expecting was restricted to the content of my research. I assumed that it was up to me, the researcher, to decide about the process and to demonstrate mastery of methodological and analytical strategies. The event was embarrassing because it suggested that I could not know how to conduct the research process. However, it was exactly because I didn’t know that participants could feel invited to collaborate. Power relations were transformed and authorship could be democratized. (Moscheta 2011)

In Murilo’s compelling story we see his metamorphosis from practitioner trying to become a “legitimate” researcher to practitioner trusting his familiar mode of practice (i.e., being attentive to the unfolding, emergent nature of interaction) as a legitimate form of research.

It is important to continually remind ourselves that we make choices about inquiry – we decide what to study and how. These choices can certainly be considered “right” or “wrong” within particular contexts. However, within a relational constructionist research world, no choice is ultimately right or wrong in a universal sense. Each choice invites different consequences. To that end, research practices, analyses, and results within any research world can be useful. The critical questions pose concern about what communities we are talking to and from and whose values do we want to apply.

This raises the question of objectivity – a sacred cow in the traditional quantitative and qualitative research worlds. Objectivity is a rhetorical construction. Gergen (1994) points out that the use of “distention devices, linguistics means of placing the object at a distance from our private experience . . . the, that, those, or this . . . [as] contrasted with personalized descriptors . . . ‘My view,’ ‘my perception, ‘my sense of . . . ’” (p.173-4) serve to rhetorically create the sense of objectivity. Thus we
must ask, *whose values are being promoted as “no value?”*  

Rather than operate in controlled conditions, the constructionist embraces the relational quality of the research context, giving rise to practices such as collaborative inquiry (Lather and Smithies 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2008; Gehart, Tarragona and Bava 2007), action research (Reason 1998; Reason and Bradbury 2001; McNiff and Whitehead 2006), and dialogue processes (Chasin and Herzig 1992; Gergen, McNamee and Barrett 2001; Seikkula and Arnkil 2006).

In viewing research as a relational process of crafting meaning and understanding collaboratively, we become mindful that all accounts are simultaneously descriptions of events and part of the event itself, due to the co-constructive nature of talk, of interaction. As mentioned earlier, the questions we ask bring forth their answers. We can choose to step into the language of objectivity – that is always an option. And once we do so, we must ask what values, what political stances, what relations are (silently) being granted authority and which ones are muted. I am not suggesting that this is an issue of right or wrong; I am simply urging that we ask the question. No research will or can provide the definitive result. All knowledge is provisional and contestable (from some other languaging community). All accounts are locally, historically, and culturally specific. The most important questions within all research worlds are: *In what ways is this inquiry useful? Does it generate new forms of understanding and thus new ways of ‘going on together?’* And most important, we must remember that research itself is a practice — a form of professional practice, if you will. Thus, the research/practitioner divide is not a divide at all but a matter of stepping into diverse discourse communities. Any form of practice (e.g., education, psychotherapy, organizational development, community building, etc.) is a form of inquiry.

**References**


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