9 Social construction and appreciative inquiry: A journey in organizational theory

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Modern management thought was born proclaiming that organizations are the triumph of the imagination. As made and imagined, organizations are products of human interaction and social construction rather than some anonymous expression of an underlying natural order (McGregor, 1960; Schein, 1985; Morgan, 1986; Unger, 1987; Gergen, 1990). Deceptively simple yet so entirely radical in implication, this insight is still shattering many conventions, one of which is the long-standing conviction that bureaucracy, oligarchy and other forms of hierarchical domination are inevitable. Today we know this simply is not true.

Recognizing the symbolic and relationally constructed nature of the organizational universe, we now find a mounting wave of sociocultural and constructionist research, all of which is converging around one essential and empowering thesis: that there is little about collective action or organization development that is preprogrammed, unilaterally determined, or stimulus bound in any direct physical, economic, material or deep-structured sociological way. Everywhere we look, seemingly immutable ideas about people and organizations are being directly challenged and transformed on an unprecedented scale. The world, quite simply seems to change as we talk in it. Indeed, as we move into a postmodern global society, we are breaking loose of myopic parochialism and are recognizing that organizations in all societies exist in a wide array of types and species and function without a dynamic spectrum of beliefs and lifestyles.

Meanwhile, organizational theory has reached an impasse. For some, the issue is a crisis of relevance (Sussman & Evered, 1978; Friedlander, 1984; Beyer & Trice, 1982). For others, the discipline is in a state of bewildering disarray: 'The domain of organizational theory is coming to resemble more of a weedpatch than a well-tended garden' (Pfeffer, 1982). More than that, retorts Astley (1985), that, 'the management theory jungle is symbolic of deep fragmentation of the discipline marked by intense competition and rival paradigms' and which is daily

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becoming more dense and impenetrable'. The whole thing, especially in the international arena, seems recently to have reached the point of sterling crescendo as 'a violent babble of competing voices ... leading nowhere loudly' (George, 1988, p.269).

To this we must add that organizational theory is scarcely alone. Skinner (1985) spoke for many across the sociobehavioural sciences, when he talked about the postmodernist spectre that has infiltrated the troops, encouraging scholars everywhere to re-examine the ontological, epistemological and axiological foundations of their endeavours. It has, of course, been a heated search that has:

> ... been nothing less than a disposition to question the place of philosophy as well as the sciences within our culture. If our access to reality is inevitably conditioned by local beliefs about what is to count as knowledge, then traditional claim of the sciences to be finding out more and more about the 'as it really is', begins to look questionable or at least unduly simplified. Moreover, if there is no canonical grid of concepts in terms of which the world is best divided up and classified, then the traditional place of philosophy as the discipline that analyzes such concepts is also thrown into doubt. Epistemology, conceived in Kantian terms as the study of what can be known with certainty, begins to seem an impossibility; instead we appear to be threatened with the spectre of epistemological relativism (Skinner, 1985, p.11).

Threatened, indeed, responds Hazelrigg (1989): 'The spectre of a thoroughly radical relativism, a paralysis of thought and thus of thoughtful deed is well upon us' (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.2). The postmodern voices suggest that the Western conception of knowledge, including its romance with permanence, belief in progress, the search for reliable patterns beyond contingencies toward the service of predicting and controlling future events, has not fulfilled its promise.

Challenging virtually every assumption of a modernist science, including foundationalist verities such as an objectivity, value freedom, the picture theory of language, and the possibility of universal progressive knowledge, the critical turn has resulted in a cacophony of voices and styles which compels everyone to agree that something postmodern has happened. But nobody knows exactly what 'it' is. Part of the 'it', concludes Bernstein (1983) is an emerging consensus that seems to reverberate throughout an otherwise dissident set of encampments: that the scientific naturalism-materialism which has so confidently dominated the rest of the modernist-industrial era and so thoroughly implicated itself into every aspect of institutional life is now dying orthodoxy. For those who would continue to model the social sciences on the natural sciences, there is an all too

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conspicuous fact that is increasingly troublesome and impossible to hide: in spite of a century's worth of well-intentioned effort, there are still no universal laws (cf. Hempel) in the social sciences, not one single candidate (see Giddins, 1976). The promise for a cumulative sociobehavioural science has been an El Dorado. And it has been deconstruction of El Dorado, using words like debunking, demystification, break and rupture, that has led many, like Skinner into despair or even retreat. The quicksand of reflexivity, warns Wollheim (1980), may lead to complete immobilization of scholarship. Echoes Booth (1984), 'What could be more ironic than the making of statements about a world in which the making of statements is meaningless' (Booth, 1984, p.244).

Yet, none of this, we suggest, begins to appreciate the possibilities that can emerge in the free space for thinking. And none of this responds to the vital and empowering thesis that societies and organizations are made and imagined which means, of course, that they can be remade and reimagined (which is happening in stunning ways all around the world).

What we hope to show is that the postmodern implication that organizations are made and imagined can serve as an invitation to re-vitalize the practice of social science. The suggestion that knowledge is not a matter of accurately reflecting that world but is a relationally embedded activity, that the world we come to know and inhabit is a product of linguistic convention, is an empowering insight that can alter the way that social scientists construe their task. The postmodern move suggests that just as organizational arrangements are always and already an expression of social negotiation, so too is scientific activity relationally embedded and implicated in the universe it seeks to study (see Steier, 1991).

If organizations are indeed ours to reinvent, does not that mean, as Unger (1987) has written, that we can now cut the link between the possibility of social-organizational explanation and the denial or down-playing of our freedom to remake the organizational words we construct and cohabit? More to the crux of the matter, Gergen (1988, p.18) has written, 'the constructionist orientation invites experimentation with new forms of scientific discourse. For we as scientists are also engaged in forms of social construction - fashioning frames of discourse for living lives'. If this is our task rather than fashioning verbal mirrors, 'then isn't it true that we as theorizing scholars contribute to the forms of cultural intelligibility, to the symbolic resources available to people to carry out their lives together' (Gergen, 1988, p.10)? If it is true that as social scientists we help to create the categories and symbolic resources by which people carry on their lives, why would we want to hide our personal engagement, our own passions and interest in our research activity? Of course, none of this up to this point is so unusual (i.e., to actually attempt to take the constructionist viewpoint seriously). But in one way it is extraordinary in what it can do for the discipline,

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and it is this that feeds directly into the singular point of the present effort: That the understanding of organizations and their/our practical transformation is a single undifferentiated act. The productive act of organizational inquiry is at one stroke the production of self-and-world or subject-and-object as well as the historical context in which all living organizational theory: We must now recognize ourselves in it.

In this paper we shall attempt to bring to life this notion and explore exactly what it means for organizational behaviour to take on its own constructive project, that is, to fashion for itself a practice of social theory which simultaneously includes an explanatory approach to organizations and a program for organizational reconstruction and development. We shall begin with a brief examination of postmodernist thought and show that what is often castigated as a spectre of relativism can be read as an invitation to a relational understanding of knowledge. The relational vocabulary of knowledge, we contend, provides an opening for the constructive project at precisely that moment when things appear most nihilistic. There is a special charity in relativism, especially for a field like organizational behaviour that wishes to be of vital significance in arenas where human relatedness is by definition the focus of concern. With this conceptual prelude in mind, we shall be prepared to look closely at a firsthand experience in the field. The study contributes an illustration to an otherwise sterile abstraction or an even (mistakenly) superficial notion (i.e., that the understanding of organizations and their/our practical transformation is a single, undifferentiated act). Finally, we conclude by raising a number of key questions about the constructive project and what it means for our own discipline. We suggest that it is possible through our assumptions and choice of methods that we largely create the world we later discover, including ourselves in it.

The special charity of relativism

Briefly, the foundationalist project that came into ascendancy in the 18th century, is based on a Cartesian, dualistic epistemology: the individual mind and the external world are separate and distinct entities. The real world exists out there, independent of any attempts to perceive it or converse about it. The mind is depicted as a mirror (Rorty, 1979) that reflects the features of the world, registering sense impressions. Thus meaning making is an activity that occurs within the internal recesses of the individual mind. Within this paradigm, language is seen as a system of words that stand for something in the world and is capable of conveying meaning between subjective minds. Since knowledge is depicted as the accurate registering of sense impressions, precautions must be taken to insure that this perception is not misguided and not due to the influence

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of bias or some self-serving interest. Therefore, an attitude of scepticism and personal detachment is necessary. These are the pillars upon which positivist science has built the belief that bias and contaminating influences must be eliminated so that the facts about the world emerge independent of any particular vested voice or any particular locale. What is deemed knowledge is based on objective explanations that causally connect verifiable patterns that can become translated into transhistorical formulas. Thus, under the discipline of empirical rigor, objective knowledge can be accumulated and this will lead to the discovery of immutable laws among the contingencies of human affairs.

All of these assumptions, the separation of subject and object, observer and observed, words as representation devices, the elimination of bias, the rigorous discovery of a-contextual patterns and immutable laws, are being challenged by constructionists within a number of different fields. Today we can mention the names of Feyerabend, Rorty, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Habermas, Gadamer, Foucault and others without fear of scurrilous laughter or attack, or at least, as Becker (1980) would put it, with confidence that the scoffers are uniformed. In the last few years a new understanding has been taking place across the disciplines leading to a profound range of intellectual and cultural transformations, in what many now call the postmodern turn in social theory. What is most notable, as Hazelrigg (1989) is quick to point out, is that the work of someone like Derrida, though still widely criticized for its obscure and almost inaccessible approach, has not yet been contradicted or neutralized in quite the same way as Nietzsche, for example, whose work was dismissed for so many years as the jabberings of a madman. For some, the loosening of the naturalist claims that advocate a search for reliable patterns and predictable laws based on unbiased perception of objective fact, represents a threat to the very act of scholarship/knowing.

In this section we shall consider what some of these developments mean in relation to our discipline. Postmodernism, we argue, is more than a movement of endless negation. The five broad themes which we shall outline hold intriguing implications for the project of building a constructive organizational theory.

The truth of human freedom must count

It has been argued that postmodern thought has begun to forge new understanding of knowledge with which to carry to extremes the idea that originally inspired it - the view of society as an artifact. At the heart of the new discourse is, therefore, an uncompromising presumption of impermanence. The idea, as mentioned in our introduction, is that no matter what the durability to date, virtually any pattern or structure of socio-organizational action is open to

revision. There are no iron clad laws. The only non-contingent fact of collective existence is its ultimate plasticity. While all human activity is contextual and thus affected by constraints of every conceivable kind, all contexts can be broken, that is, 'at any moment, people may think or associate with one another in ways that overstep the boundaries of the conditional worlds in which they had moved 'til then' (Unger, 1987, p.20).

While we may never overcome context dependence, we may alter it, re-shape it, and continuously find reminders that patterns of social-organizational action are not fixed by nature in any direct environmental, technological, psychological or deep-sociological way. While we create the contexts that constrain our practices (see Giddins, 1976), humans as agents are not rule-bound to obey the patterns of history or the procedures of familiar structures upheld by repeated practices. Indeed, to the extent to which human actions are vitally linked to the manner in which people and groups understand or construe the world of experience, and to the extent that people are capable of reconstructing the meaning of life events in an indeterminate number of ways, then any existing regularities discovered in the social world 'must be considered historically contingent' (see Gergen, 1982, p.16). No mistake about it, if there is anything uniting the postmodernism chorus of voices, it is this: 'The truth of human freedom, or strange freedom from any given structure must count, count affirmatively, for the way we understand ourselves and our history' (Unger, 1987, p.23).

Why has so little attention been paid to the possible ramifications of impermanence and plasticity for a theory of social science? More important than a quick answer is the challenge to unravel the assumptions that would depict humans as passive objects rather than active agents. Again, a Unger (1987) summarizes:

> The aim is not to show that we are free in any ultimate sense and somehow unconstrained by causal influence upon our conduct. It is to break loose from a style of social understanding that allows us to explain ourselves and our societies only to the extent we imagine ourselves as helpless puppets of the social worlds we built and inhabit or of the law-like forces that have supposedly brought these worlds into being. History really is surprising; it does not just seem that way (p.5).

Postmodernism is perhaps best known as a protest (whose own style unfortunately receives the vast share of public attention and thereby serves to deflect conversation from its explanatory and programmatic potential) if not outright rejection of the naturalist premise and any of its disguises in neo-naturalist compromise or equivocation. The naturalist premise has, of course,

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been an entrenched, if not pervasive, element at the epicentre of social thought throughout history. Its character has been expressed in a myriad of ways: the search for foundations (Rorty, 1979); constant appeals to laws or iron constraints removed from the understanding of creative agents (see Giddins, 1976); belief in an enduring or transcendent reality independent of the observer as a 'that-which-is-already' (see Hazelrigg's 1989 analysis of the historical roots of the spectator theory of knowledge); and the belief in some privileged authority with special access to the truth and thus able to pass out judgments about the natural state of affairs and the inevitable status and rankings within that natural order (see Gould, 1981). In whatever version, one of the greatest contributions of the new discourse is that it has brought to light, time and again, the recognition that the naturalist premise inevitably downplays our constructive freedom; it thereby produces and reproduces a vocabulary of society and organizations as established beyond the perspective of human interaction and will:

> Such is our quest for assurance of safety that we construct an assuring agent, clothe it in dim mists of forgotten Origin, and name it this or that intelligence to be accorded our everlasting homage. The name may be Providence, Divine Wisdom, Nature's Laws, Natural Right, Reason in History, Historical Laws, Unmoved Mover - it is all the same. And it is the same when we ask the authority of as *theoros* to tell us the ready path to all that we wish the world to be but is not, the ready path to our Utopia: asking the *theoros* to tell us that, just that, requires as our earnest the presumption that there are as yet 'laws' that stand behind us, or can stand behind us, as a universal intelligence - some sort of certification, scientific or otherwise, about an outward march of history - and to which we have only to put ourselves in harness for its direction, like ingredients in a recipe for cosmic stew (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.69).

But is there anything left after the postmodern protest (see Rorty 1989, p.319: 'hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled'). Is there anything more than the rejection of the major explanatory scandal of social theory? The challenge, we will now elaborate, is to recognize that the truth of human freedom is merely the beginning of insight, not the abandonment of explanatory ambitions (Unger, 1987).

Words enable worlds

One of the cornerstones of modernist, foundationalist discourse is what Rorty called the 'picture theory of words' (Rorty, 1979), the theory that the mind is a mirror that reflects features of the world and captures them in words. In this

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vein, referred to the conduit metaphor language, the belief that words actually contain information and are conduits by which people transfer meaning back and forth.

In its onomastic function, language is the vehicle that makes knowing possible by describing or picturing the objectivities of a 'that-which-is'. The illocutionary point (as speech-act theorists would say) is the neutral discovery and factual declaration of what one finds. The perlocutionary force of an utterance, the reverberating effect of the spoken word 'upon feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or the speaker, or of other persons' (see Austin, 1975, p.101), if admitted at all, is viewed as a contaminant which must be cleansed or neutralized through greater operational precision. For Hazelrigg (1989) who traced the whole matter historically, the picture theory of language is the single most powerful tradition that has guided the development of dozens of conventional dualisms: littera and figera, theoros and poiesis, denotative and connotative, fact and fiction; and others.

In our own field, for example, Warriner, Hall & McKelvey (1981, p.173) ambitiously invited all organizational scholars to monitor the accuracy of their terms and to participate if formulating 'a standard list of operationalized observable variable for describing organizations' (Astley, 1985, p.497). Francis Bacon's early admonition retains salience: 'Words are but images of matter' and 'the truth of being and the truth of knowing are one, differing no more than direct beam and the beam reflected' (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.78).

It is here, in the linguistic turn that postmodernism presents us with ideas that could reshape the way we think and do organizational theory. Today the presumption that language operates in a Baconian sense as a picture of the world has, of course, been brought into sharp question by Wittgenstein (1963), Saussure (1983), Austin (1975), White (1978) and many others. As it relates to our effort, Barrett (1990) and Gergen (1985) provide the best overall synthesis of areas of conclusion and wide agreement.

First, what we take to be the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which such out there is understood. Words operate and derive meaning, not from their degree of correspondence to the world, but from their context and position within a language game. Within a given cultural context (or language game), one learns to read gestures and utterances in ways that facilitate interaction. For example, if we were to see two men striking one another and uttering loud sounds, how do we construe this situation? We might label these actions as aggression. Or perhaps we would say that the men are celebrating or dancing or performing a renewal ritual. If we see them laughing we might revise our account because such a response is inconsistent with our understanding of aggression. Or if we see one of them crying and holding his arm, we might eliminate the possibility of dance or play. We continue to make interpretive

moves and revise our accounts depending on the network of words and concepts that are available. Would it be possible to perceive them practising karate with one another if no such word was in our vocabulary?

Not only does external reality not dictate the terms of which the world is understood, it may be the other way around. That is, we confront the world with languages already in place, terms which are given to us by the social conventions of our time: rules of grammar, structures for storytelling, conditions for writing, and common terms of understanding. In this sense, the function and purpose of words is not to picture an out there, but to help us navigate and coordinate our living relations with one another. Ordinary language philosophy (Bloor, 1976; Winch, 1946) proposes that it is no longer useful to think of words as pictures, but instead to think of words as tools that do something, as navigation devices that allow members of a culture to move about and coordinate ongoing relations with one another. Consider the word achievement motivation is useful if I want to explain a subordinate's poor performance. It is a useful word to talk about behaviour within a culture that values individual performance, the accumulation of capital, hierarchy (hence the word subordinate), etc. The concept may not make sense within a commune or religious organization. Words emerge in order to facilitate and support patterns of relevant activity.

What this suggests is that people have at their disposal a range of vocabulary that expands and contracts the repertoire of possible actions that are likely to follow. Each relational scenario is an ongoing negotiation process and the available expressions are like steering devices that lay out a possible pattern of interaction.

Since every word has meaning due to its position within a language game, a single word is never a single word. One word may carry a whole perspective that reverberates with a myriad of possible meanings. From this perspective, language is dialogical (Bakhtin, 1986) in that every utterance carries traces of meaning from other utterances spoken in other social contexts. 'Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere .... Each utterance refutes affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account' (Bakhtin, 1986, p.91). So, for example, to refer to an organizational member as a subordinate triggers traces of other utterances that cite words like manager, chain of command, performance measures, etc. Fish (1980) refers to such groups as 'discourse communities', contexts in which members develop an agreed upon way of talking. Common presuppositions are triggered that allows people to communicate without explicitly articulating every warranting assumption. So, for example, when a medical student learns terms, diagnoses, treatments, she is joining a community of professional who employ similar interpretive repertoires that guide what they notice and talk about in relation to the human body. The

discourse rules of the community dictate what is deemed reliable knowledge. Most physicians would not consider an intuitive sense of the patient's health problem as warranting a particular treatment. Rather, the physician lives in a community that regards hard scientific data backed by statistically sound studies as legitimate claims that warrant one particular treatment over another. An apprentice in homeopathic medicine adopts different linguistic practices with different implications for action that join her to quite a different interpretive community. Discourse communities involve membership in a linguistic practice in which certain convictions, beliefs, and perceptions are arguable and others are not (see Fish, 1980).

One central theme in constructionist thought is the indeterminacy of meaning. The culturally accepted meaning of a word does not determine how it will be applied in the future. Words develop new meanings through novel applications and alter the fabric of interpretive assumptions. Words are continuously extended beyond the boundaries of their existing applications. Wittgenstein addressed this directly: usage determines meaning, it is not meaning that determines usage (see Bloor, 1976). Wittgenstein likened the situation to the growth of an expanding town: like the creation of new roads and new houses, language is constructed as we go along. Consider, for example, the recent Quality revolution in American companies. It can in one sense be depicted as a rhetorical revolution, an altering of familiar words that reconstitutes peoples' experiences. What does it mean for example to shift the application of the word customer to include coworkers and other internal departments? The dislocation of this one word (that usually refers to external customers) and its family resemblances create a repertoire of potential actions that were once not under consideration. (A leading manufacturer recently issued a policy statement that reads: The job is not finished until the customer is delighted, and that includes the internal customers too.) It would be hard to imagine an assembly line foreman in a General Motors plant in the 1960's being chastised for not satisfying the internal customer. There was no network of commonly accepted words and no behavioral repertoires would allow the foreman to glean any sense from such an utterance. It does not mean that the conversation would have been false, or further away from the real nature of things. It simply means people did not talk that way and organizational patterns of activity would not render such an utterance intelligible.

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While the traditional view holds that knowledge is the result of pure observation, the constructionist perspective holds that is not possible to perceive an object or event without some pre-understanding that guides what is noticed and how it is talked about. There is no such thing as immaculate perception. Whether one is talking about paradigms, schemas, disciplinary matrices or 'foreconceptions' in Heidegger's terms, all observation is laced with historically embedded conventions which anticipate and condition what is taken to be true or valid, and to a large extent govern what we as theorists and lay persons are able to see. Consider this example: an employee hears the CEO making references to winning and beating the competition. She probably does not read these gestures as referring to conflicts he is having with his son or ideological differences between his rabbi and a neighbouring priest. The cultural horizon within which she interacts consists of a network of words and family resemblances consistent with capitalistic organizational norms. Also, she knows that he is not suggesting that the competition should be physically beaten. Within her organizational culture, she has become familiar with these patterns of linguistic expression that depict other organizations in the industry as competitors to be conquered. However, if she were to hear references to beating the competition on an evening sports newscast, she would likely construe a different meaning. Even though these are the exact same words, she might construe a version of two football teams that do engage in physical struggle. As a competent discourse user, she is able to place utterances within varying contexts and networks of meaning and thus she is able to continue to carry on intelligibly with others. What allows her to successfully construe a meaning is her ability to place these words in different contexts and sets of social practices.'

Indeed, as Unger (1987) not too deliberately put the matter, 'The contextual quality of all thought is a brute fact', but it is not necessarily a cruel one. Gadamer (1975) argued the interpreter's prejudgments do not so much get in the way but provide the necessary anticipation of meaning that draws us into constructive relationship where we are, our prejudices, and the object of understanding are all situated. Every access to the world, every way of reading the world is made possible because we are part of it and 'what exists ... is related to a particular way of knowing and willing' (Gadamer, 1975, p.408). All understanding, in this sense, is relational, like being part of a conversation or perceiving a piece of art (Barrett, 1990); and all knowing, as an anticipation of meaning, involves some kind of a priori basis on which to proceed: 'Never, in fact, does an interpreter get near to what his text says unless he lives in the aura of the meaning he is inquiring after' (Ricoeur, 1976, p.351). This is why the prejudices far more than judgments of fact 'constitute the historical reality of our

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being' (Gadamer, 1975, p.245). And this is why every generation will read a given situation or text in a different way with no means of determining which, if any is the more accurate interpretation: 'Gadamer's view has yet to succumb to criticism' (see Gergen, 1988, p.5). Thus we can begin to see that the locus of meaning begins to shift from the individual perceiver to the interaction between object and perceiver. The role of the perceiver is no longer seen as the passive recipient of sense data. Rather, the perceiver's projection of meaning is what makes knowing possible.

As it relates to the enterprise of knowledge, what this means is that from an observational point of view, all socio-organizational action is open to multiple interpretations, no one of which is or can ever be superior in a strict objectivist sense. Every theorist, as Kuhn (1970) and others have vivified, dwells within a unique historical context whereby particularized practices of knowing prevail. 'There are no bare facts', said Feyerabend (1976). While it would take us into too much complexity to try to trace the intricate and subtle variations in this argument, we must listen to the overall conclusion: 'If there is one single theme that runs the gamut of postmodernism, it is multiplicity of perspective' (Gergen, 1990, p.2). Yet, as reasonable as these views seem, we somehow forget, as Heidegger (1927) argued, that there must be some primary unity of subject and object prior to any effort at knowing. We continue to speak from the mother tongue of a dualist conception of knowledge using words like independent observation or subject and object (see Sampson's 1989 critique of the continuing bias of self-contained individualism in Western conceptions of modernist science). These words are important and have a perlocutionary force that directly affects, even if blindly, the way we do knowledge.

Every theory celebrates

The linguistic argument applies no less potently to our constructions and utterances we call theory To the extent that the primary product of science is systematically refined word systems - or theory - science, too, must be recognized as a powerful agent in the relational exchange governing the creation or obliteration of social existence. Social theorists are, argue Foucault (1972), authorities of delimitation; in our society they have been granted an extensive authority and privilege. Furthermore, terms such as learned helplessness, revolutionary praxis, and Theory X/Theory Y are not the result of an unclouded mirroring of the world. The observational terms and categories through which our understandings of the world are sought are themselves social artifacts, that is, real products of social relationships historically situated. As a powerful linguistic tool created by practising experts, theory may enter the meaning systems of a group or even a whole society and in doing so alter the patterns of

social action. In this sense, all social theory is normative. This is precisely what Alvin Gouldner (1970) meant in what has become most often quoted sentences in today's conversation: Every social theory facilitates the pursuit of some, but not all, courses of action and thus, encourages us to change or accept the world as it is, to say yes or nay to it. In a way every theory is a discreet obituary or celebration of some social systems.

In what Giddins (1976) calls the double hermeneutic, theoretical knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and the social world. Social relations are ordered and re-ordered as linguistic constructs of theorists alter social conventions. By creating linguistic categories and distinctions that guide how people talk about life, how they report their own and others' experience, indeed how people actually have experience, social scientists are publicly defining reality (see Brown, 1978). It would be unlikely for a 19th century housewife to describe herself as codependent, for example. The constructionist contention is that it is not human nature that has changed but the language we use to talk about experiences and social theory helps to create what is regarded as normal and legitimate. Would it be possible, for example, to talk about someone's behaviour as unconsciously motivated or to depict one's athletic activity as sublimated energy if the terms of Freudian theory were not available? Further these linguistic repertoires expand the range of imaginable action. For example, once a word like codependency and its family resemblances becomes part of the linguistic repertoire of a discourse community, a set of inferences and actions become possible (such as the formation of support groups, seeking therapy, departing unhealthy relationship, etc.).
Often, as Hazelrigg (1989) comments, we adopt a foundationalist language, that denies the unity of making/thinking/doing:

> This abstracted thinking, whether addressed in the claims of language-as-science or those of language-as-poetry, reproduces itself in a division of labour that not only tries to separate head from hand, or 'intellectual ' from 'manual' labour, but also then struggles to relieve itself (i.e., its authorization of by/as 'the intellectual') of any odious identification as labour. It is self-alienated thinking because it denies its concrete historical integrity in/as poiesis, production (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.113).

So, again, we encounter the stubborn and coercive power of words. We 'discover' knowledge. We don't make it or invent it or see it as a poiesis (a making). When we do research, we are not creating but finding. We are searching to discover some truth regarding some mythical that-which-is-already. As we have argued throughout, something critical is involved here in the choice of such words, especially those words that arbitrarily separate theory from

practice and downplay the idea that societies are made and imagined. The difference, for example, of continuing on with our utterances of a found world as opposed to a constructed world is enormously consequential for us. The difference is implicated into the way we do knowledge. Hazelrigg (1989) continues on this point:

> If a 'found world' is nothing more than a 'made world' travelling under disguise, if the (social organizational world is made and imagined) from beginning to end, then to continue 'telling our stories' in the traditional language of 'found world' is to reproduce passivity in regard to responsibility. Stories so told, practices so enacted, are stories/practices of a 'world' the most elemental basis of which (e.g., 'small bits of matter') and the most regular features of which (e.g., 'unchanging forces of nature') are placed outside the domain of human responsibility because they are placed outside the domain of human will. That is an enormously dangerous consequence of any retention of the 'found world' language storytelling (p.165).

In our view, the constructive potential of postmodern thought centres around the acknowledgment of our role in creating the world we pretend to find in our research. Our world changes as we talk, and the more rapidly it changes, the more the language of discovered world becomes irrelevant to contemporary concerns. If this reading is correct, our present task is to develop a new theory of theory with its own vocabulary that links knowledge with poiesis and, indeed, makes every act of inquiry an explicit celebration. Gergen (1978) has taken the single most important step in this direction with the proposal that the primary task of science is no longer the detached discovery and verification of social laws allowing for transhistorical prediction and control. Argued instead is an understanding that defines good theory in terms of its generative capacity, that is, its capacity to challenge 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. Instead of attempting to present oneself as an impartial bystander or dispassionate spectator (as if one were not part of the world) of the inevitable, the social theorist would conceive of him or herself as an active participant, an invested participant whose work might well become a powerful source of generative conversation, affecting the way people see and enact their worlds. The constructive chorus discernible in postmodernism is that it invites, encourages, and requires that students of social-organizational life exercise their theoretical imagination in the service of their dynamically constituted vision of the good.

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The final theme is largely a summarizing one. Throughout this sketch, one factor stands out among all others: Somewhere toward the defining centre of the postmodern dialogue is the emergence of a social as opposed to a dualist epistemology, or what more simply can be called a relational understanding of knowledge. Gergen (1988) has concluded in his synthesis of the postmodern challenge and aim: 'The concept of knowledge as a state of individual minds should be brought into sharp question. Much needed at this point is a view of knowledge that places it not in the hands of individuals, but within communities of discourse users'. Because of the multiperspective nature of knowing, the relational embeddedness of language, the impossibility of immaculate independent observation, the perlocutionary force of theory, the contextual quality of all thought, the idea that words are not autonomous pictures or maps of an independent out there or that-which-is-already, that historical conventions govern what is taken to be true or valid, it is for all these reasons and others that one can safely conclude that there is one more thing that unites many voices in the new era: the truth of human relatedness, our primary mode of connectedness must count, count affirmatively, for the way we understand ourselves and our history.

By the democratization of mind, we mean to suggest that one of the exciting agendas that must be placed high on the list in the creation of a constructive social-organizational theory is to actually place the practice of constructive inquiry into the hands of people in living relation, including ourselves in it. Programmatically, postmodern thought can be read as an invitation, as a call, to bring what we shall term secondary mode activity (the practice of knowing/making/developing) into congruence with life's primary mode (i.e., the preeminence of social relatedness) for the purpose of our constructive making and imagining of our common future. We have inherited it seems, a bad habit of treating the relational entities we call researcher and researched as if they were isolates. More than that, charges Hazelrigg (1989), we have fallen heir to the great conceit of intellectual labour, setting itself apart, simultaneously denying its presence in/as labour (i.e., making, producing, doing) and valorizing itself (without seeming to) as being superior to that which has been defined as doing and making.

> For where it is written that only an elite 'intellectual' can be a theory-maker? The historical condition of a 'division of labour' that gives distinctive space to 'intellectuals': or 'scientists' and 'philosophers' no doubt assigns them to the peculiar 'function' ... But does that mean that an assembly-line worker never theorizes? That a janitor or a nurse or a short

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order cook never makes theories? What a terrible conceit that is. But it is, of course, a conceit that infects - no, that is integral to - the historical condition of intellectuals - though not only them, for it is also integral to the historical condition of janitor, nurse and other, insofar as they themselves are quite convinced that they never theorize at all (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.115.)

Thus, while postmodernist thought goes to extremes and is careful not to valorize one methodology over another, it does have a special interest in bringing primary and secondary modalities into congruence and hence, a democratization of knowing which advocates an engaged pluralism.

So, now in conclusion to this sketch we must return to the original question: What kind of domestication is afoot? What about Skinner's spectre of relativism and Wollheim's prophecy of an immobilization of scholarship? Does abandonment of the naturalist premise of any quest for foundations mean that inquiry is, therefore, meaningless cut loose, devoid of purpose? Does multiplicity in perspective and the so-called hermeneutic circle of thought sealed inside itself or the brute fact that all thought is contextual (scheme dependent, historical, language dependent) imply that our hands should be thrown up in despair? Surely we can no longer say that words operate as neutral pictures merely reflecting the contours of a world out there and surely we cannot say that words do no work? So does this mean we should do the next best thing and cleanse them as much as possible and then continue to talk as if unclean words were clean (whatever that means)? And what about the claim that theories are just another form of language, and that all theory is a value-saturated celebration or obituary for some social form. Furthermore, if theory really is labour and there is no way to judge the ultimate validity of various claims to good social theory, then why do we continue habitually to treat relational entities we call researcher and researched as if they were isolates? Would the democratization of theory intensify and ensure the spectre of relativism as a babble of competing voices, and topping it all off leading nowhere loudly?

It is our sympathetic belief that all of the fears concerning the vaunted paralysis of relativism are valid, so long as we cling to the conviction that social-organizational theory is (should be) a science based on any remaining trace of the naturalist premise. The problem of relativism exists as such 'only in dependence on a half-clothed wish for, or assumption of, an absolute standard for true or valid or even verisimilitudinous knowledge' (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.153). The reluctance to push to extremes the idea that society and organizations are made and imagined is habitually justified by the fear that its outcome will be nihilism. 'What precludes a Hitler from the building of a future?' or 'What firm ground, (i.e., what subject-independent and self-identical ground) is there to

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prevent the unleashing of all sorts of irresponsible claims, deeds, etc.?'

> Questions such as these are calculated to stop all talk of 'making rather than finding' ... As if we might actually awaken one morning to a world, even to an imagination, devoid of constraint, order control! Of course, we may build a Hitlerite future, or worse. Of course, we may end history a month or a year from today. However, an unquestioned belief in a found world as opposed to a world of our own making, will preclude neither possibility ... An argument of making, (i.e., of poiesis of subject-object relations, persistently argues against abdication of responsibility - our responsibility in/or/for the making of world, people, each other (Hazelrigg, 1989, p.261).

In its relational understanding of knowledge, postmodernism opens the door for a constructive co-creation of the future in the here-and-now of inquiry which is simultaneously the joint production of subject and object. The special charity of relativism begins the moment we see ourselves in it. It is to concrete illustration of this whole notion that we shall now turn.

A construction from the field: the emergence of the egalitarian organization

Kurt Lewin has said that there is nothing so practical as good theory. Karl Marx has observed that the point is no longer to interpret the world, but to change it.

In the study that follows we hope to advance the constructive project. In this case, which takes place in a large medical centre, we explore what will be discussed as the inevitable enlightenment effect of inquiry. As a side note, it can be recalled that according to modernist science, all potential enlightenment effects must be reduced or limited through experimental controls. In social psychology, for example, deception still plays a crucial role in doing research; enlightenment effects are viewed as contaminants to good scientific work. Sampson (1978) argues that all of this is tied to a paradigm committed to a bias of self-contained individualism and belief in the possibility of a contextual approach to the discovery of universal facts. Incredulously the force of the paradigm showed its grip on the human sciences when Rosenthal's (1966) discovery of experimenter effects was received with such stirring response. Today we would argue that it is precisely this, the reactive nature of social inquiry that provides organizational theory with its unique purpose, its potential impact and, ultimately, its *raison d' être*. Even if it could be controlled, we would not.

Early in 1980 we were presented with an opportunity to do an organization wide analysis of the Cleveland Clinic (CC), a private, non-profit, tertiary care

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centre located in Northeastern Ohio. In contrast to the typical image associated with the word clinic, the CC is one of the largest medical centres in the world. At the time we began, the CC had over 7,000 personnel and a physician group practice of more than 400 members (the second largest in existence). With over 100 specialties and subspecialties, the CC provided care annually to some 500,000 patients. The organization had a public reputation as a cutting edge professional partnership capable of providing high quality care in treatment of the most complicated of diseases. Recognized nationally, the United States Congress had awarded the CC the title of National Health Resource because of its pioneering advancement in clinical research, the development of new technology for patient care, and the education of future generations of physicians.

Beyond its medical contribution, however, the physician group practice of the CC was of theoretical interest as a social invention (Whyte, 1982) for the study of participation potential. Excitement for the exploration was ignited during an earlier study begun in 1979 concerned with the question of how professionals, when trained exclusively in their own medical discipline, would apply their professional instincts to the management of organizational activities (see Jensen, 1982). During that particular study it became readily apparent that the general spirit and guiding logic behind the organization's growth was markedly different than the predominate bureaucratic rationality of efficiency and effectiveness (Thompson, 1966). Somehow the professional mentality brought something different to the task of management. At the CC, an emerging consensus about the primary logic of organizing went beyond the economizing functional one (to make profits or fulfill a market demand) and centred around a broader, open-ended psychological one. The efficiency logic of instrumental rationality was by no means inoperable or rejected; it was simply circumscribed by the professionals' practical concern for the ongoing development of an interactive, responsive and cooperative relational process (later we refer to this as an interhuman rationality) in an organization committed to a democratic/participatory form of management.

It was no accident, for example, that the title of a book depicting the organization's 60 year history was 'To Act as a Unit' (Hartwell, 1985). Preeminent concern for the health of the relational side of organizing was focal, early on, in the awareness of each member in the group practice. Yet the full implications of this for a coherent theory of administration was admittedly fraught with ambiguity, myth and mystery:

> It is like Ezekiel's vision of the wheel, in which the big wheel moved by faith and the little wheel moved by the grace of God. The keys to success are the participants' desire to do what is best for the Clinic and their

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confidence in one another's integrity. Businessmen looking at this 'unhierarchical' organization feel as mystified as Ezekiel did about what made the wheels work. But they do, and the reason can best be summarized in the expression of 'esprit de corps' (Hartwell, 1985).

Our effort began, therefore, as an attempt to understand this 'spirit' in terms of participation potential and soon progressed into a broader exploration seeking to generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) into the defining dimensions, categories, and dynamic representatives of the emerging egalitarian or post-bureaucratic organization.

At the time we were beginning our study, we were advised by the Director of Human Resources at the CC of a recent article in Administrative Science Quarterly outlining a provocative research agenda for the field on the very topic of participation potential (see Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). Among other things, the authors raised a whole series of critical concerns about the field's allegiance to cannons of normal science. In particular, one question stood out as central: Why was participation potential such a conspicuously neglected area of study? There were numerous explanations offered, but four in particular, captured our attention and influenced virtually every step in our subsequent work. First, it was pointed out that research in this area, while obviously dealing with a social phenomenon, has, in its own biased way, emphasized individualistic and psychological qualities and has not grappled with the question of integrating the social-phenomenological and structural-functional considerations that integrate participation potential into a coherent systems of psychosocial and contextual factors. The second was even more disturbing: The continuing romance with the belief in value-free research. Here the authors were short and to the point. The traditional scientific view which maintains that value judgments and scientific inquiry are basically incompatible 'makes it difficult, if not impossible, to adequately research the potential of participatory systems' (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978) because the very word potential is normative and requires the research to enter into the realm of non-science and take on a moral burden of discussing what is meant by potential or improvement. Thirdly, as was sharply discussed, much of the organizational research (particularly in America) is politically conservative and frequently has a focus on pathology rooted in an economically utilitarian cultural matrix. The deficiency orientation is inherently conservative, argued the authors, because: the pathology (or management problem) is usually defined by those who hire the researchers; the statement of deficiency implies an a-priori set of assumptions about what is normal which generally typifies the status quo; and by being married to a view of what constitutes the ideal, the problem oriented approach tends to exclude the impulse toward novelty which, of course, is antithetical to the enterprise of generative theorizing (e.g., not many

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organizational theories in this area were found returning from their explorations refreshed and revitalized, like pioneers returning home, with news of lands unknown but most certainly there).

However, once one realizes that traditional science is not the only game in town, each of these concerns is not only defused but vitally transformed from sources of embarrassment into beacons of insight. As we have argued, the postmodernist turn has done more, much more, than criticize the received traditions of social theory. By beginning to take the ideas of society as made and imagined to the hilt, it has inaugurated a constructive view of the task of social-organizational theory which includes both an explanatory approach to theory and a program for social-organizational reconstruction. As discussed previously good theory, like any new idea unleashed in the world, is agential or formative in character and simply cannot be separated from the ongoing negotiation of everyday social reality. The question is not so much if theory is valid or good but what 'good' does the theory do? Because of this, all social-organizational research is a value concern, a concern of social construction and direction. The choice of what to study, how and what, if offered in public discourse, each imply some degree of responsibility. It also confronts us with exciting opportunity: the very choice of research topic, positive or negative, may be the single most critical determinant of the kind of world the scientific construction of reality helps bring to focus, and perhaps to fruition.

We were approached by the CC to continue our study on the professional mentality but to add to it an organizational diagnosis. Obviously in medical terminology the word diagnosis has a long tradition and is very much linked with a disease orientation as well as the idea of treatment and cure. So we made a counterproposal which essentially argued that health was not merely the absence of disease and that what we were interested in was the former. Following this logic we proposed a process of co-inquiry into the factors and catalytic forces of organizing that served to create, save, and transform the institution in the direction of its highest potential for a participatory system, a condition we later called the ideal membership situation. Data would be collected, a theory would be constructed, and a written article would be published and distributed to the entire organization.

With full agreement of the Board of Governors we began to refine the topic of participation potential with a group of co-researchers from inside the CC. While full details of the methodology have carefully been described elsewhere (Cooperrider, 1986; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1986), it is important to point out that extensive data were collected, mostly through ethnographic methods, and that the data collection lasted for over a year resulting in more than a thousand pages of notes from the field. We conducted surveys that looked at the group's values and practices at various periods throughout our six year relationship. We

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facilitated dialogues and discussions about the survey results as well as plans and actions that emerged from these discussions. Equally important was our constructive interest and appreciative focus. We wanted the inquiry to be applicable and provocative, helping to stretch the organization's imagination and expand its sense of the possible. In this regard, our approach must be differentiated from other more ethnographic or cultural mappings. Especially during the data analysis, our approach was highly selective, looking specifically at those factors of organizing (social arrangements and unique cultural meanings) that appeared in association with the intensity, breadth, and duration of what became a dynamically defined notion of the ideal membership situation. The approach was like looking through a microscope seeking to understand even the tiniest markings of the ideal embedded in both reported and observed practices.

Stripped to bare essentials, the approach was based on:

a   an uncompromising presumption of the presence of the topic under scrutiny (since then we have come to the conclusion that virtually any topic related to human or social existence can be studied in virtually any organization anywhere);

b   a belief that grounded theorizing based on examples and discourse from the field, would have greater generative potential than more deductive or purely speculative methods;

c   that the generative potential of our work would be heightened to the extent we could selectively utilize positive deviations in the data to help ignite the theoretical imagination and mind; and

d   our constructive intent was to create a theoretical discourse with perlocutionary force, to help foster dialogue into that which was taken-for-granted and to generate compelling options and possibilities for continued organizational transformation.

In the rest of this section we shall quickly review the theory and then trace what happened.

In keeping with the constructionist principles we outlined earlier, to the extent that inquiry is the beginning of a conceptual order upon an otherwise 'booming, bustling confusion that is the realm of experience' (Dubin, 1978) then the first order of business of the theorist/inquirer is to specify what is there to see, to provide an ontological education (Gergen, 1982). The very act of asking questions highlights not only the parameters of the topic or subject matter but becomes an active agent as a cueing device, a tool which subtly focuses attention on particular possibilities while obscuring others. In some sense, the questions we ask in social science interviews guides what will be talked about and so can

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determine what we discover. This, of course, can be an occasion for the construction, renewal, or transformation of the interpretive repertoires of a discourse community - like any conversation.

As we mentioned earlier, in this study we were interested in taking an appreciative view into the participatory potential of the organization and focused our interview questions very deliberately so as to shape the contours of the conversation. For example, this was one of the interview questions: Please describe a moment in your career at CCF when you felt most alive, most effective, or most engaged? As a response to this question, one would scarcely envision a respondent recalling experiences of personal failure or illustrations of mechanical bureaucratic dysfunction. Typical in our interviews instead were passion-filled discussions of creativity, courage, achievement, and teamwork. Here is an example of a quote from one of the physicians interviewed:

> Without a doubt, one of the highpoints for me was one of the meetings when we were deciding whether to expand one of our facilities. I had only been here a few years, but I was learning quickly that this was unlike any other hospital I'd ever experienced. The doctors meet and meet and meet and discuss and debate issues that doctors at other hospitals have no voice at all in. Here we were sitting in this long meeting with docs from all different disciplines - it was like a town meeting - and we had been debating the issue very vigorously. And I mean vigorously. There were strong emotions on all sides. At one point I remember thinking that this was deadlocked. This is going nowhere. But then it started shifting. People started changing their views. And I got in it too. It was emotional. People were persuasive. Here's this famous brainy, unemotional, detached neuro-surgeon standing up there holding this fiscal study his committee had done, shaking it in the air and arguing very passionately that this idea would work. I remember thinking to myself, wow this is a dynamic place. People really care about what happens. Not only that. No one here is going to railroad a proposal through without letting all of us get in on it.

Clearly the direction of our question was an occasion for this physician to reinforce, if not create an interpretive repertoire that depicts competent physicians as passionate debaters, engaged in persuading one another to adopt various strategies for the future of the clinic.

Perhaps most interesting, even more than the framing of the discourse, was how news of the inquiry spread quickly to others. As the first series of interviews were completed it was not unusual for people to anticipate our questions and be thoroughly prepared for us. Here is an example of how one interview began:

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Interviewer: 'We are here to ....'
Respondent/physician (interrupting):

> I know what it is about. My colleagues in surgery have warned me you are
> good interviewers. Actually 'warned' isn't the right word. They said they felt
> inspired by their talk with you. I'll tell you what makes this group vital and
> alive when it is working well. Let me tell you something about this group.
> When dealing with major issues we have to resolve it through consensus
> ....

This physician had begun to answer a question that the interviewer had not yet
asked. His anticipation of the interviewer's intent and formulation of an
appropriate discourse is testimony to Bakhtin's (1986) notion that every
utterance is coauthored. The presence of the listener (interviewer) shapes the
response of the speaker. Later in the same interview, we probed this physician
in order to understand how she had been so prepared for our entry, what
conversations she had engaged in with her colleagues in regard to the on-going
interviews.
Respondent/physician:

> You know you set off quite a stir with this organizational study. People are
> talking about how precious our group practice democracy, our shared
> governance model really is. I think you called this the 'egalitarian
> organization'. The great opportunity here is to be involved in the
> information flow, the dialogue, and the negotiation of decisions.

What we want to emphasize here is how the inquiry we initiated created
conversations and versions of events.
Consider the following response by one of the physician's we interviewed:

> Let's see, a time I felt good about being here. Well one time I guess was
> when I was on the committee overseeing the move to the new clinic
> building. It could have been a disaster, but it went very smoothly. We
> worked very closely together and we kept everyone informed - at time I
> thought we were overdoing it - but it was the right thing to do. The other
> docs just needed to be kept up on things so there were no surprises. But you
> want to know what made it rewarding for me?

Interviewer: 'Yes. What happened that made you feel effective?'
Respondent/physician:

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Well I guess it was because no one really knew how much I was behind the scenes making all of this happen. I didn't want to be too bossy. I didn't want to be in control - at least not in terms of flashy power. I just made sure that everybody was included and everybody had input to the decisions about allocations and everything. It could have been a real battle. But it went very smoothly. I guess I was being pretty effective because there were no turf battles or anything. I just worked behind the scenes, got everyone's input and consent and coordinated this major move.

This is testimony to the relational formulation of knowledge. Who is doing the recalling here? Is it the physician whose simply triggers a ready-made schema from his long-term memory? Or is it the interaction of the physician and the interviewer as the interviewer provides a context and a cue that triggers a response? Relational basis of knowledge argues that all understanding is dialogical. The first physician's response, his description of the organization as vital and alive are categories and attributions that emerge in the space between him and the interviewer. This is testimony to the contagion effect of the inquiry and the dynamic, evolving nature of discourse communities. Would the doctors be reflecting and having conversations about their shared values if we were not there asking them these questions? And further, as we reflect back to them our construal of their experiences in our language - using words like egalitarian - do these utterances then become part of their interpretive repertoire, giving them another way to constitute their organizational lives? It is to this point that we address next as we constructed surveys that looked at their ideals and values.

Based on the real-life stories from the interviews, we constructed a survey in which inquiry into the egalitarian organization was extended by asking: To what extent do you feel the egalitarian theory is important as an ideal to be pursued by its organization? Which parts of theory (values) are most important to you and why? and To what extent is the theory reflected as an actuality in practice? The survey was created in correspondence to such questions and was used in a two-fold manner. The first would be to use the survey itself as a means for bringing the egalitarian theory directly into the culture of the CC and to the widest number of people for dialogue, debate and further development. Because of this, the survey was constructed a bit differently than most surveys intended supposedly for statistical analysis and independent measurement. The major difference was that the survey items often contained numerous concepts linked together, in contrast to the simple, concise one-concept items used in scientifically designed survey items. For example, the following statement has at least three different concepts in it, linked together showing the causal relations among concepts, as if it were a theory:

In this group practice there are minimal bureaucratic constraints because members are able to initiate changes when formal rules, procedures or structures are no longer useful or relevant. There is nothing sacred about any organizational arrangement that shouldn't be questioned or changed once it has lost its usefulness.

The second function of the survey was to collect quantitative data concerning members' agreement or disagreement with the ideals as it related to their own experience. These data would then serve not as proof or disproof but would serve as yet one more form of theoretical language which again would enter the common culture of discourse through processes of feedback. In this sense, then, numbers would play an important generative function because they are a concise rhetorical device which (in our Western culture) carry a great deal of authority and hence, have the power to stimulate dialogue and consideration of constructive alternatives.[1]

Feedback meetings were held with the various divisions in which members reflected on the results of the survey and continued their conversations about the values as they applied to division's culture. The divisions began holding half-day and full-day retreats at which members discussed and debated their strategic direction in light of these values. We found increasingly that the language of the surveys was permeating their discussions. Further, new action possibilities were proposed.

In its pragmatic form, the inquiry was designed around the idea that organizations are made and imagined and can, be remade and reimagined. Our hope was to contribute to what we now refer to as an organization's constructive integrity, that is, to contribute to its context-revising freedom on a collective organization-wide basis and to help increase the system's capacity to translate shared ideals into both experienced practices and responsive structures. Did this occur? Tables 9.1 and 9.2 present t-values for reported changes in organizational practices in two separate divisions of the CC over a two year period. Also, in the administrative division, a task force was assembled to discuss what changes had been initiated since the inquiry began. Table 9.3 presents a summary of their report. Most notable was the structural creation of a division-wide 'governing board' which would be made up of elected participants from every level in the organization. All in all there were more than 50 structural, behavioral, and relational-attitudinal changes reported by the group and each of these were supported by survey data that showed significant increases in such things as face-to-face interaction, consensus decision making, unity of purpose, opportunity for involvement, and others. Of important interest as well, data suggested that not only were people able to make their values known and used them as a guiding force for practice, they were also becoming increasingly

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idealistic as a group. Table 9.3 shows, for example, that virtually every rating in response to the question, 'How important is this statement as an ideal for the organization?' went up from time one to time two and seven moved significantly. What was most remarkable about the apparent shifts is that they happened in relation to values that were high to begin with. For example, tolerance for uncertainty, viewed as essential to an emerging egalitarian organization went from a mean importance of 5.79 to 6.37. There is just not much higher to go on a seven-point idealism scale.

The contagion effect of this theoretical inquiry on the discourse community did not end here, however. Analysis of data resulted in a set of theoretical propositions published shortly thereafter (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1986). The primary ideas set forth in that paper argued quite forcefully that any organization, if it so chooses, could become an egalitarian system and that the iron law of oligarchy was, in fact, not a law but a construction, one which has served notoriously to undermine our sense of the possible. Our intent was not to downplay or deny real world constraints. Nor was our approach utopian. But what we were doing, as has been said, was searching for an explanatory practice that, by providing a credible account of emergent social novelty or innovation in a more egalitarian direction, would inspire rather than subvert the constructive project. In brief, the theory proposed:

a   that participation potential is activated by simple choice and commitment to three overarching values - inclusion, consent, and excellence;

b   that once publicly agreed, these egalitarian values give rise to an interhuman organizational rationality and discourse that will supersede the techno-rational mode as the basis for decision making about the organization itself;

c   that an interhuman logic serves to focus attention on possibilities for eliminating arbitrary barriers to active participation which seem inevitably to arise in organizations; and

d   that an interhuman logic seeks to create structures of interaction that empower human relationships in the work and political spheres (e.g., shared governance structures whereby there is no such thing as a formal hierarchy of authority in which subordinates are expected to surrender their own judgments to the commands of a superior) and serve as a democratizing and group building force.

Again, most important at this point, was not the content of the emerging theory, but the process of dialogue, debate, and organization/theory/self-development that took place over the next five years (see Cooperrider, 1986; Hopper, 1991). At this point we need to make something perfectly clear. At no

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point during the last six years did the authors make a contract with the organization that a long term project would be taking place in order to help the system improve its functioning. The only thing that was agreed to was that research would take place and that results would be shared and used by the organization, 'if' it so desired. We put the word 'if' in quotations because it is part of our common vocabulary which still thinks of research as though there is a difference between basic and applied research. In this case, at least, the phrase 'if it so desired' was false. There was no choice.

This is mentioned because we had literally no expectation of working on the study for the next five years. But as events unfolded, the process of inquiry took on a life of its own. After the Board of Governors reviewed the emerging theory, numerous departments and advisors came forward asking for copies of the article for discussion throughout their sections. For weeks we were contacted and asked to give presentations to managers, employees, and other professional specialists. Likewise, on the basis of the paper, we were invited to participate in literally dozens of departmental planning retreats. In one Division alone, which we will discuss in more depth, the authors attended more than 100 meetings from 1981-1983, all revolving around discourse and experimentation with the egalitarian ideas. Since that time plans were launched to make the emerging theory part of: socialization programs for new incoming members, and the newly created physician-in-management annual one-week management training program. We were even invited to speak to visitors of CC from overseas, all of whom came ostensibly to learn about the CC's unique approach to management.

We were continually struck by how the publication of the journal article became the springboard for many discussions. At one meeting with Medical Division council, members spoke about the impact of the article, illustrating that theoretical discourse has the potential to create the very phenomena that it proposes to find. One physician remarked:

> When I read this article I felt excited. Someone finally put words to what I think gets at the heart and soul of this organization. As I said in my interview, a person trained in management is just an administrator. That type of person hasn't a feel for this kind of organization or our field. They don't know how I think or what motivates a person like me. They only know what motivates them. They want to get to the top of the pyramid and jockey people around.

Another physician remarked at the meeting:

> Lately we have heard complaints that the consensus culture we've developed here is too slow, too many committees, too cumbersome. But I

think the study is right. It is not whether or not to operate democratically, it is a question of how to mobilize consensus faster. Without the consensus mode we will again experience a hardening of the lines of authority.

Note how, following Derrida (1978), the discussion of the article becomes an occasion to utter sets of differences that create and maintain the traces of what is taken as normal in this community. The definition of conventional managers/administrators as those who seek efficiency, keep memos, climb pyramids, create a sterile environment becomes an occasion to depict physicians as different: they have a feel for the organization, should not be invested only in efficiency, climbing the hierarchy, or creating sterile environments.

Karl Weick (1983) contends that managerial theories gain their generative power by helping people overlook disorder and presume orderliness. Theory energizes action by providing a presumption of logic which enables people to act with certainty, attention, care, and control. Even if the theory is inadequate as a conceptual description of current reality, if it is forceful it may provoke action that brings into the world a new social construction of reality which then confirms the original theory. Weick explains:

> The underlying theory need not be objectively 'correct'. In a crude sense, any old explanation will do. This is so because explanation serves mostly to organize and focus the action. Thus the adequacy of organizational explanation is determined by the intensity and structure it adds to potentially self-validating actions.

As linguistic phrases, such as egalitarian organization achieve acceptance as explanatory devices, further actions become justified which leads to more forceful explanations. Since situations can support a variety of meanings, their action-stirring potential are dependent on the way in which the theory enters into the domain of a given discourse community. By providing a language, a presumption of logic, and a basis for forceful action, theory goes a long way in forming a common set of self-fulfilling expectations for the future. Obviously in a single-case field study, it is impossible to isolate the transformative role that theory played in producing such change. Nor is that our intent. To say that the egalitarian theory caused the developments would be to fail to see that the transformations were also causing the theory and in this would serve only to contradict the point we hope to vivify. And what is that point?

It is here that we need a marriage between the two epigrams that opened this discussion. As Lewin put it, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory'. But Marx apparently began to feel otherwise: 'The point is no longer to interpret the world but to change it'. Castoriadis (1987) makes an important observation when

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he says that the blinding light of Marx's statement does nothing to clarify the relationship between knowing and changing. Nor does Lewin's, for that matter. Each in their own way seems to imply that there may be a choice between the two. But a constructive view of knowledge cannot agree and posits that the enlightenment effect of all inquiry is a brute fact; all theory is at one stroke a doing that always involves an undergoing. By establishing perceptual cues and frames, by providing presumptions of logic, by transmitting subtle values, by creating new language, and by extending compelling images and constraints, perhaps in all these ways, organizational theory becomes a constructive means whereby norms, beliefs, and actual cultural practices may be altered.

There is one closing note on the CC experience. Looking back over the whole series of years, one episode stands as most memorable.

Shortly after the end of the first year, the Medical Division asked one of the authors to provide training at a staff retreat. The training was to centre around the very well known model of decision making by Victor Vroom. In brief, the model provides a decision-chart structure for helping a superior determine when it is appropriate to include subordinates in group decision making (GII) and when it is more effective for the superior to make the decision him or herself (AII). Articles on the model were handed out prior to the meeting so the lecture was brief, just enough to get people started analysing a few cases. Things went well. The author began thinking that the training was a perfectly good idea. Certainly it would be useful in exploring the ideas in the egalitarian theory because, as he recalled, most of the cases showed the reason and need for GII decision making. The author was taken back then when during a break one of the young physicians came up to him and said: 'You know this is all bullshit don't you!' He said then: 'I bet if you counted in both the article and your lecture the number of times the word subordinate was used, it would be close to fifty times.' The author responded: 'I hadn't realized that, but I guess it certainly is interesting.' The young physician then continued: 'The problem is that these ideas may be all right for the business world, but they won't do here. As you said yourself the other day in your survey, we are a partnership of physicians. I'm not a subordinate. I'm not just an employee here. I resent what your training is trying to do to us.'

The experience was powerful. It made the author think back to his use for years of this particular training program and how he had used the term subordinate unthinkingly thousands of times in his work with managers. But when he got home that night he mapped out what must have been going on for this young physician (see Figure 9.1).

As is obvious now, the word subordinates was not just some neutral descriptive term. There is no such thing as a subordinate out there somewhere in reality that can be pointed to and objectively described. The word subordinate

is virtually nothing, meaningless as a descriptive term, until it is seen as a key link in a broader theory of bureaucracy, a theory that says that organizations work and work best when there is a hierarchy of offices and a clear chain-of-command. In such a system, orders are to be issued by those above and those below have the duty to carry them out. In fact, what makes the whole thing work is that the orders are impersonal, they are issued from offices or roles at a necessary higher level of command. The beauty of the whole thing is that, ideally, everyone just does his or her own job according to the prescribed scheme. As Weber (1947) himself put it, 'bureaucracy advances the more it is dehumanized'. There is no such thing - or need - for an emotion filled sense of partnership, responsibility and ownership for the whole. What is so memorable, then, was the author's virtual lack of awareness that he, himself, had time and time again helped to support and reproduce, in interaction with others, a powerful bureaucratic theory and ideology.

The language of bureaucracy, like all theoretical language, helps cue our attention on what is there to see. It helps to set expectations about what the world is or should be; and it subtly constrains our attention and our ability to recognize other possibilities. It was not until the young physician rejected the training that the author really began to recognize and ponder the role of theory in the scientific construction of reality. As it was, the egalitarian theory seems also to have had some impact: 'I'm not a subordinate', he said, 'I'm a partner'.

Conclusion: the constructive task of organizational theory

No discipline has ever taken the idea of society as made and imagined to the hilt. But once done, it can be surely anticipated 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. For our own field, to say that organizations are made and imagined does not go far enough. To pause at this juncture will only lead to further equivocation and aimless babble. To take the essential modern management insight to its logical conclusion, immediately brings the not-so-innocent question: If organizations are made and imagined, how can we excuse the organizational theorist from the same argument? Clearly the study discussed here is only a beginning. It was offered as illustration and as an open invitation to further exploration into the intimate unity of theory/practice/development.

We believe there will be an immense harvest of creative theoretical contribution when the constructed/constructuring nature of our work becomes the common and explicit property of all. The opportunity posed by this issue is

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so fundamentally important to the vital reconstruction of organizational theory that it would truly be impossible to overstress it. To say that the truth of human freedom must count; to acknowledge the primacy of multiperspective in social knowing; to affirm that words enable worlds; to state that every theory celebrates; or to grapple with the democratization of mind; no matter how the basic point is made, to place this at the epicentre of social-organizational thought is to take the crucial step in fashioning a theoretical enterprise of creative significance to society.

The 'how' or programmatic basis of a constructive approach to organizational theory is beyond the scope of this discussion. But a number of possibilities can be quickly put forward. All are based on the bedrock idea that the constructive co-enlightenment effect of all organizational theory is a brute fact. That is, the understanding of organizations and their/own practical transformation is a single undifferentiated act that consists of two moments: the moment of enlightenment whereby theorizing on organizational processes continuously enters into, reconstructs, and becomes part of the reality being considered, and the moment of reverse enlightenment, (i.e., by constructing ways of knowing in one or another manner the doer of this activity becomes their preconceived vision and concomitant construction). The following possibilities for constructive organizational theory are based on this understanding and stem from our experiences with organizations that have actually experimented with the idea on a collective and organization-wide basis.

A role for human cosmogony

Inquiry into organizations, if it appreciates human cosmogony (Barrett & Srivastva, 1991), can serve to cleanse our perceptions and de-reify our basic assumptions, liberating us to act in a world that appears more malleable. We need to study organizations as evolving and transforming, social constructions, malleable to human freedom. We need to appreciate history and the continuities in collective life, not in the sense of history as unfolding and predetermined as Comte, Hegel, or Marx would have it, for this kind of historicism would further the sense of inevitability and necessity for human action. Rather we need to appreciate the human cosmogony, the creative birth of diverse social arrangements. We need to direct our efforts not so much toward explaining why something functions but rather understanding how and under what conditions something was created, the choices considered and not taken, as well as the paths chosen, the conjectures, the possibilities, the accidental and unintended.

A focus on social innovation

The constructionist project requires that we actively cut the link between the possibility of social-organizational explanation and the denial or downplaying of our freedom to remake the social organizational worlds we construct or cohabit. It is partly because of our failure to notice alternative possibilities that we continue to be seduced into the frozen reality surrounding the naturalist premise. High on the agenda of the constructive project is to develop those explanatory practices that by providing us with credible accounts of discontinuous change and social novelty, inspires rather than subverts the constructionist's transformational aim: the effort to open the world, through our understandings and knowledge to our ever evolving values and constructions of the widest possible good. In our own work for example (Cooperrider & Pasmore, 1991; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990), we have inaugurated a ten year program of research into social innovations in global management. Here we are trying to create a new discourse into what we feel is the most important social intervention of our time, the people-centred global social change organization (GSCO). These transnational organizations which have emerged since World War II to deal with world issues of all kinds have a great deal to teach about the prospects for collective action at a global level (e.g., eradication of smallpox). Yet, in spite of its rapid proliferation and number (est. 20,000 GSCOs in the past 40 years), this social invention has been conspicuously overlooked in the leading organizational and administrative science journals in the field (not one article has been written about them in ten years). Many of the materials for generative theorizing are close at hand. To carry to extremes the idea that organizations are made and imagined requires that we capitalize on all these positive deviations instead of staying locked in the confining and belittling worlds of encrusted habit. History is really surprising, but only if we take time to notice.

No need to apologize for appreciation

Much of our work in recent years has been proposed as an approach to knowledge that complements the critical theory which somehow never goes far enough with its own constructionist arguments (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990). For all its negativism, much of the field fails to tap into the inspiring potential of human cosmogony or social innovation and leads incessantly to a narrow conception of transformative possibility. In a world in which most everything is under assault, it has been our feeling that there is a need for a new vocabulary and grammar of understanding that is no longer imprisoned by the cynical, intimidated by the positive, or pulled into empty-headedness by the blatantly wishful. Appreciative ways of knowing are

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constructively powerful, we have argued, precisely because organizations are, to a large extent, affirmative projections. They are guided in their actions by anticipatory forestructures of knowledge which like a movie projector on a screen, projects a horizon of confident construction which energizes, intensifies, coordinates, and provokes action in the present. Our own work with appreciative forms of inquiry has left us with the ever present question: Is it possible that through our assumptions and choice of method, we largely create the worlds we later discover?

For much too long we have painted the picture of organizational life by leaving out a whole series of colours. One of those colours has been us.

Table 9.1
Means, standard deviations and T-values for administrative division practices across time

Item	Time One N = 49		Time Two N = 40		T-Value
	x	s.d.	x	s.d.	
Unity of Purpose	3.65	1.42	4.05	1.17	-1.44*
Shared Ownership	3.83	1.53	3.97	1.29	-0.47
Collective Authority	3.40	1.59	3.32	1.40	0.26
Face-to-Face Int.	4.10	1.63	4.97	1.42	-2.69**
Consensus D-Making	4.04	1.28	4.55	1.76	-1.93*
Communal Pol. Phil.	3.51	1.31	--	--	--
Free Choice	3.38	1.51	3.45	1.41	-0.21
Ongoing Learning	4.91	1.59	4.47	1.05	1.54
Candid Debate	4.00	1.53	4.00	1.67	0.00
Coll. Work Rel.	3.93	1.43	4.10	1.46	0.52
Tol. Uncertainty	4.12	1.31	4.02	1.47	0.33
Reward Diversity	4.20	1.64	4.65	1.83	-1.18
Ideas on Merit	4.20	1.67	3.82	1.39	1.17
Spirit of Inquiry	4.58	1.44	--	--	--
Opps-Involvement	3.12	1.64	3.72	1.89	-1.58*
Coll. Reward System	3.27	1.40	--	--	--
Trust & Confidence	3.76	1.50	3.67	1.43	0.29
Innovative Org.	4.75	1.45	4.45	1.56	0.92
Devotion to Excellence	4.65	1.45	4.72	1.20	-0.25

Inspirational System	4.28	1.51	3.77	1.87	0.78*
Colleague Control	14.15	1.38	--	--	--
Dev. Leadership	3.77	1.60	3.90	1.37	-0.41
Min. Bureaucracy	4.31	1.81	4.25	1.69	0.17
Dem. Partnership	3.59	1.51	3.87	1.57	-0.84
Permanent Dialogue	4.28	1.29	4.58	1.61	-0.95
Significant Work	4.63	1.66	4.35	1.51	0.84
Self-Authority	3.97	1.73	--	--	--
Dev. Colleagueship	4.27	1.63	4.55	1.37	-0.87
Shared Information	3.87	1.55	3.97	1.52	-0.30
Dem. Leadership	4.20	1.58	3.95	1.39	0.80

* p=.05 one-tailed test of significance
**p= .01 one-tailed test of significance

These items were taken off the second survey by the Division's newly founded representative council.

Table 9.2
Means, standard deviations and T-values for the medical department's practices across time

Item	Time One N = 49		Time Two N = 40		
	x	s.d.	x	s.d.	T-Value
Unity of Purpose	3.50	1.46	4.60	1.24	-2.26**
Shared Ownership	2.81	1.32	4.26	1.32	-3.04**
Collective Authority	2.18	1.22	0.33	1.44	-2.37**
Face-to-Face Int.	2.93	1.53	4.40	1.50	-2.65**
Consensus D-Making	2.62	1.20	4.40	1.40	-3.77***
Communal Pol. Phil.	2.64	1.39	4.33	1.34	-3.32***
Free Choice	2.50	1.41	3.93	1.33	-2.90**
Ongoing Learning	5.00	0.89	5.33	1.59	-0.28
Candid Debate	3.37	1.58	4.33	1.49	-1.73*
Coll. Work Rel.	4.12	1.40	5.00	1.30	-1.79*
Tol. Uncertainty	3.50	1.46	4.13	1.18	-1.33*
Reward Diversity	4.00	1.78	4.13	1.72	-0.21
Ideas on Merit	3.75	1.52	4.26	1.43	-0.97
Spirit of Inquiry	3.75	1.48	4.13	1.30	-0.77
Opps-Involvement	2.62	1.40	4.33	1.75	-2.87**
Coll. Reward System	3.62	1.20	4.00	1.60	-0.73
Trust & Confidence	4.50	1.46	5.26	0.79	-1.83*
Innovative Org.	5.00	1.15	4.93	1.28	0.15
Devotion to Excellence	5.50	1.15	5.46	0.99	0.09

Inspirational System	4.12	1.40	4.66	1.29	-1.12*
Colleague Control	3.31	1.49	4.73	0.79	-3.33**
Dev. Leadership	2.81	1.37	4.00	1.64	-2.17**
Min. Bureaucracy	3.19	1.51	3.66	1.67	-0.83
Dem. Partnership	2.50	1.50	3.40	1.50	-1.67*
Permanent Dialogue	4.00	1.55	3.86	1.55	0.23
Significant Work	4.43	1.41	5.00	1.04	-1.25
Self-Authority	3.53	1.50	4.33	1.39	-1.51*
Dev. Colleagueship	4.56	1.36	5.26	1.20	-1.48*
Shared Information	2.68	1.44	4.26	2.05	-2.46**
Dem. Leadership	2.75	1.57	4.26	1.48	-2.76**

*   p= .05 one-tailed test o significance
**   p= .01 one-tailed test o significance
***p= .001 one-tailed test o significance

Table 9.3
Positive changes attributed to appreciative intervention ('E.T.') by members of the administrative division

Structural/Procedural Changes

a   Formation of shared governance (Representative Council)
b   Increased use and effectiveness of cross-departmental temporary project teams
c   Formation of career ladders (i.e., interim positions)
d   Regular division-wide discussion versus informal meetings
e   Division-wide 'brown-bag' lunches
f   Interdepartmental meetings
g   Division representative at directors meetings
h   Formalized team-building program for each department
i   Implementation of flex-time
j   Development workshops for non-exempts
k   More/new responsibilities given to non-exempts
l   Introduction of new performance review system
m   Division-wide job audit
n   More frequent updates on strategic plans
o   Clarified tasks and interrelationships between individuals and departments
p   Monthly 'press meeting' luncheons
q   Participative agenda setting procedures
r   Career development program, cross-training, increased educational support
s   Establishment of move coordinators and participative planning process
t   Participation in the planning for new technology (i.e., computerization for the division)
u   New orientation program for division

Relational/Behavioral Changes

a   More members taking responsibility for self and their concerns
b   Improved divisional communication and less misunderstanding
c   Improved individual and departmental cooperation
d   Improved divisional work effectiveness through elimination of 'cracks' between departments
e   Increased dialogue in all departments and between departments
f   Increased opportunity for exempts and non-exempts to present and represent their ideas to the division

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g More recognition given to non-exempt employees (e.g., speeches at division-wide meetings)
h Has allowed for more participation and contribution by people not otherwise involved
i More sharing of information before decisions are made
j Directors are listening more
k More mentioning between specialists
l Everyone behaves more as if they have power
m Less unhealthy competition
n Stronger, more open leadership
o Learning group leadership skills among all levels

Relational/Attitudinal Changes
a Heightened awareness of group and individual feelings throughout the division
b Heightened awareness of the extent to which our practice is short of our ideals
c Non-exempts are viewed more accurately and positively versus stereotypically
d Increased readiness to deal with important issues and concerns
e Non-exempts feel more included, more important
f Less of a gap between the three levels, more equality
g Feel like a whole division
h Increased desire and drive for consistency around values
i Increased mutual respect
j More commitment and follow-through on projects
k More integration of values into our day-to-day work with the organization and trying to help others understand and embody the values
l Increased shared awareness of divisions/issues
m Reduction of the caste system
n Greater sense of professionalism
o Feelings of optimism concerning the future

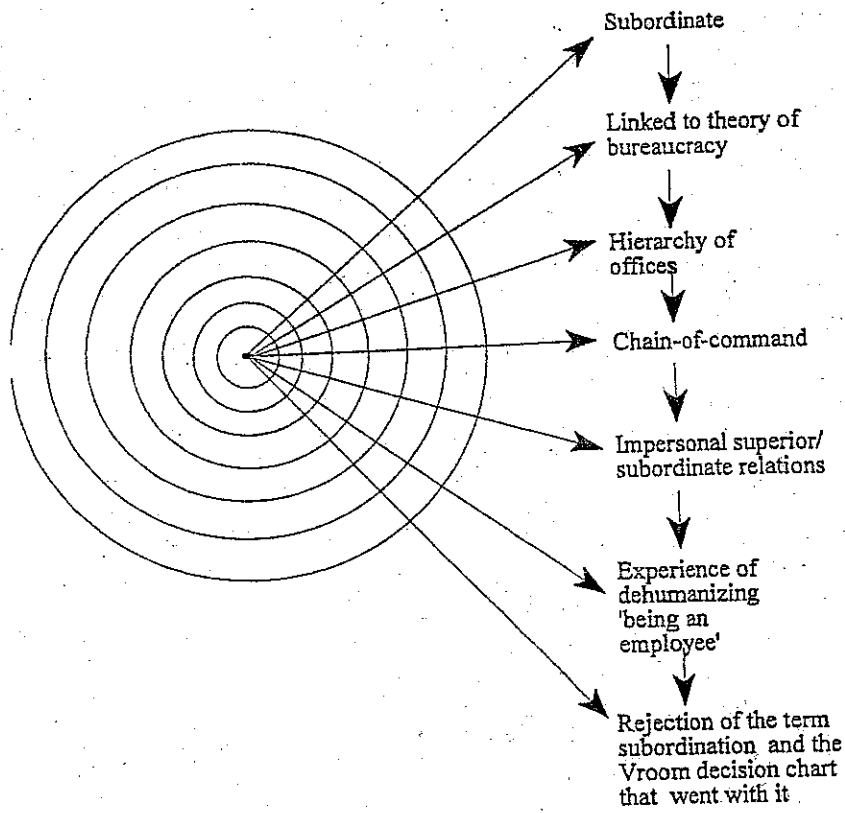Subordinate

↓

Linked to theory of
bureaucracy

↓

Hierarchy of
offices

↓

Chain-of-command

↓

Impersonal superior/
subordinate relations

↓

Experience of
dehumanizing
'being an
employee'

↓

Rejection of the term
subordination and the
Vroom decision chart
that went with it

Figure 9.1 The ripple effect of the power of theoretical language

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Notes

1. We felt that this was especially important for a physician culture, grounded in positivist science. When the doctors received the statistical results of the survey, they spent little time arguing about the validity and reliability of the claims and instead discussed the relevance of the values and ideals as well as the transformations they were witnessing. Put simply, numbers and statistics constitute vital languages in this discourse community in that they make certain claims arguable and others not.