

---

1-1-2010

## (Re)constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach

Diane Marie Hosking  
*Utrecht University*, [d.m.hosking@uu.nl](mailto:d.m.hosking@uu.nl)

Bettine Pluut  
*Utrecht University*, [b.pluut@uu.nl](mailto:b.pluut@uu.nl)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Hosking, D. M., & Pluut, B. (2010). (Re)constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(1), 59-75. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1140>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## (Re)constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach

### Abstract

This article distinguishes three discourses of reflexivity in relation to human inquiry. One of these arises from a post-modern, relational constructionist perspective which radically re-conceptualizes reflexivity: (a) as a local and co-constructed process oriented towards the question (b) how are we 'going on' together, and therefore paying attention to (c) the realities and relations we are co-creating during the research process and so (d) is concerned with local pragmatic and ethical issues (Gergen & Hosking, 2006; McNamee, 1994) rather than with the quality of truth claims. Regular reflexive dialogues as part of, and directed at, the research process can heighten the local use value of research for all participants and can facilitate new possible realities and relations.

### Keywords

Reflexivity, Relational Responsibility, Responsive Inquiry, Relational Constructionism, Postmodernism, and Ethics

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## **(Re)constructing Reflexivity: A Relational Constructionist Approach**

**Dian Marie Hosking and Bettine Pluut**

Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

---

*This article distinguishes three discourses of reflexivity in relation to human inquiry. One of these arises from a post-modern, relational constructionist perspective which radically re-conceptualizes reflexivity: (a) as a local and co-constructed process oriented towards the question (b) how are we 'going on' together, and therefore paying attention to (c) the realities and relations we are co-creating during the research process and so (d) is concerned with local pragmatic and ethical issues (Gergen & Hosking, 2006; McNamee, 1994) rather than with the quality of truth claims. Regular reflexive dialogues as part of, and directed at, the research process can heighten the local use value of research for all participants and can facilitate new possible realities and relations. Key Words: Reflexivity, Relational Responsibility, Responsive Inquiry, Relational Constructionism, Postmodernism, and Ethics*

---

### **Introduction**

In the last twenty-five years or so, publications in the general area of human inquiry have embraced a wider range of social science perspectives and methods. Discussions have explored the relative merits of "modernism" and "post-modernism," and meta-theories such as critical theory and social constructionism have been further articulated and critiqued. In addition, the use of qualitative methods has increased and their merits, relative to quantitative, much discussed. Gradually, an increasingly contextualised and nuanced approach has emerged that assumes discussions of inquiry necessarily "put to work" *particular* meta-theoretical assumptions and interests *that could be otherwise*.

Of particular relevance to our interests in this present article are discussions of post-modern, meta-theoretical assumptions together with their implications for research interests and practices. Important issues include the stance and role of the researcher relative to other research participants, possible forms and styles of reporting, possible quality standards, and reflexivity. It is the last of these issues that provides our framing and focus in this article in that a "post-modern" position involves a very *particular* construction of reflexivity, that is one that reflects a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (e.g., Chia, 1996; Gergen, 1999; Steier, 1991).

Our interest is in relational constructionism and its potential implications for reflexive practices in human research. We begin by outlining our post-modern, relational constructionist premises and say something more about our particular interest in reflexivity. We then put our premises to work to distinguish and discuss three different constructions of reflexivity. The first two, "removing bias" and "making bias visible," are well known; they are outlined and commented on from a relational constructionist standpoint. The third, "ongoing dialoguing," is less well

articulated and less commonly practiced. It follows directly from relational-constructionist meta-theoretical premises and can contribute to a further expansion of possible purposes and practices in human inquiry (see e.g., Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).

### **A Relational Constructionist Meta-Theory**

When speaking of different meta-theoretical positions writers used terms such as “paradigm” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kuhn, 1970), “research orientation” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), “intelligibility nucleus” (Gergen, 1994), “thought style” (Chia, 1995; Fleck, 1979) and “perspective” (Cox & Hassard, 2005). Meta-theoretical positions are defined by their differing assumptions concerning ontology, epistemology and methodology. In this section we draw upon an extremely wide range of literatures with equally wide-ranging interests to summarise “relational constructionist” premises; more detailed elaborations can be found elsewhere (Hosking, 2006a).

#### *Ontology is given to relational processes*

It is very common, both in everyday life and in the literatures on human inquiry, to assume that persons have an interior world (of thoughts and feelings and so on) and inhabit an exterior world consisting of sentient and non-sentient objects, and events. As a consequence, research is directed towards producing knowledge about interior and/or exterior worlds (Deetz, 1996). In contrast, our meta-theoretical assumptions do not centre stable, bounded, and independently existing people and things as ‘real’ and knowable realities. Nor, unlike some versions of social constructivism and social constructionism, do we centre knowledge about these realities as more or less objective or more or less subjective. Rather, we give ontology to relational processes and the local realities they make, break and re-construct. Borrowing Chia's felicitous phrasing, we assume an “*ontology of becoming*” rather than the more usual “ontology of being” (Chia, 1995, 1996).

Given our centring of processes, self-other and relations are viewed as ongoing relational constructions; constructions of identities and relationships become the centre of interest in human inquiry (Hosking, 2006b). Among other things, this implies that we do not start with the traditional identity construction of The Researcher in place and we do not go on, so to speak, by taking it for granted, e.g., through seeing The Researcher as the (one and only) expert knower and seeker-after-truth (see e.g., Gergen & Hosking, 2006). Rather we assume that, for example in organising processes, identities and relations are always ongoing relational realities rather than inputs and/or outcomes of mediating processes (Pearce, 1992).

But *how* may relational processes be further theorised? We can begin to answer this by turning our attention to language.

#### *Multiple relational realities are co-constructed in language-based relational processes*

Theorists who centre separate and bounded individuals (an ontology of being) and their subjective and objective knowledge also centre conceptual language as the means by which individuals represent the reality of internal and external worlds (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). In contrast, we discourse *language as relating* and

so constructing relational realities. This gives emphasis to language as action and invites a wider inclusion of the many ways in which relating ‘goes on’ such as e.g., non-verbal gestures, posture, movement and voice tone, and involving what some might call natural objects together with artefacts of human activity. Our interest is in relating – in “any act or artefact that might be coordinated with in some way, so constructing a communication” (Hosking, 1999, p. 120).

Our focus on relating and emergent identities requires a way of theorizing what is related with what. So, for example, we might speak of acts supplementing other acts i.e., inter-acts, or we might speak of relating texts in multiple text-con-text relations or inter-textuality (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1995). Returning to the context of inquiry and the construction of identities, we can reflect on how an act such as handing over a questionnaire might be supplemented by, for example, someone taking the questionnaire, sitting down and filling it in. Of course other supplements are also possible such as tearing it up, making a paper plane or making the “reverse suggestion”- “why not fill it in yourself”? By this we see that some act-supplement relations or inter-textualities may emerge and be regularly re-constructed as conventional. At the same time, other supplements or con-texts are rendered unconventional, inappropriate, foolish or just plain wrong.

#### *Constructions are local-cultural and local-historical*

Following from the above, it is clear that relational processes construct and re-construct what can and cannot go as far as local relational realities are concerned; so we are not saying that “anything goes.” Our premises direct attention, both to the varying possibilities of particular texts or acts being performed, and to the possibility that they will be supplemented, and if so – with what effect – such that they are “socially certified,” “credited,” or “dis-credited” as relevant or irrelevant, good or bad (Gergen, 1995; Hosking & Morley, 1991). This means that relational realities are assumed to be *local* to the (organising) processes in which they are made and re-made – local-cultural and (simultaneously) local-historical; we shall say more.

First, “local” has meaning in contrasting relation to the assumption of a universal, stable reality and transcendental knowledge of its characteristics. The relational realities of which we speak are presumed to be local to the processes in which they are made and re-made. We are taking a view somewhat similar to Wittgenstein’s talk of “language games” and the “forms of life” of which they are a part (Wittgenstein, 1953). Returning to the construction of research, we may think of our earlier mentioned questionnaire study as part of a research programme conducted by researchers committed to the same view of science and therefore to the same methodological standards and quality criteria. The inquiry process will carry “traces” of these relations (Gergen, 1999), that is, of the researchers’ particular scientific community or “*form of life*.” The inquiry process will also reflect “traces” of the research object’s “form(s) of life.” The researcher’s form of life may dominate e.g., as in controlled experiments, or the inquiry process may be more open and pluri-vocal e.g., as in participative action research (Allard-Poesi, 2005) or Appreciative Inquiry (Allard-Poesi; Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004).

Second, our reference to local includes a historical aspect in the sense that relational processes and realities have an “always already” and ongoing quality. To continue our example, it is because researchers act in relation to a very particular “form of life” – such as their local science culture – that they evaluate the quality of their research in terms of already conventional (scientific) definitions of reliability

and validity. So their claims will be warranted as (not) “scientific” in relation, for example, to the grand narrative of progressive science (Alvesson, 2002). It is in such moving constructions that history is made and re-made by re-creating stabilities, by changing (previously stable) relational realities, and by constantly offering possibilities for transforming identities and relations (Hosking, 2004).

### *Reflexivity as local construction*

Our relational constructionist premises invite a view of research processes as ongoing processes of (re)constructing self (perhaps as a researcher), other (perhaps as the researched) and relationships (McNamee, 1994; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). We can now shift from the positive science interest (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) in finding out about how things really or probably are to reflecting on the kinds of people and worlds that are under construction or “becoming.” This shift makes space for quality criteria that positive science positions as outside its scope including, for example, ethical and aesthetic considerations and local (perhaps multiple and differing) criteria of local usefulness (perhaps for all participants; McNamee, 1994; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Further, given the always ongoing quality of processes, these considerations apply to all aspects of the research process including what positive science would call “design and planning,” research procedures, report writing and presentation.

The above considerations all open up a very different “possibility space” for reflexivity. The latter: is no longer a matter for the community of science alone; is no longer restricted to evaluating the quality of research methodology, methods and knowledge claims in relation to what is (probably) true, and; is no longer theorised as individual activity. Reflexivity now can be discoursed in relation to the multiple local conventions, norms and interests of the various participating “forms of life.” This introduces an ethical aspect concerning relations between these “forms”: whilst equal co-construction is assumed in principle, in practice one form might dominate others. So, for example, the scientific “form of life” often achieves power over other local community-based rationalities. Continuing this theme, the possibility of different but equal relations introduces a possible reconstruction in which reflexivity becomes a matter of ongoing dialogues throughout the research process. In this view, reflexivity becomes a relational process in which ethics and relevance are variously constructed in relation to the (differing) particularities of the communities whose “traces” are implicated (McNamee, 1994). Reflecting ‘from within’ some ongoing research process opens-up the space for multiple local constructions, for dialogue and transformation.

With each reflexive reprise, one moves into an alternative discursive space, which is to say, into yet another domain of relatedness. Reflexive doubt is not then a slide into infinite regress but a means of recognizing anterior realities and thus giving voice to still further relationships. (Gergen, 1994, p. 48)

### *Summarizing words*

Our relational constructionist premises say nothing about “real” reality or knowledge of the same. Indeed, our premises position familiar dualisms such as reality and knowledge, individual-social, self and other, language and action, subjective-objective, and process-outcome – as *possible constructions* that can be

otherwise. We have collapsed the traditional analytical philosophy demarcation between the context of discovery - the context of science, of empirical work - and the context of justification - the context of philosophy, of reason or rational work (Harding, 1986; Hosking, 2008). Our *different* starting point has been to centre an ontology of becoming in which the relational realities of self-other and relations (persons and worlds) are in ongoing construction in local-cultural, local-historical, language-based processes of inter-action. Our relational-constructionist premises give us a position from which to view existing constructions of reflexivity and open-up a "possibility space" (Harding, 1998) for newly relevant practices of human inquiry.

### Three Discourses of Reflexivity

We can now put our meta-theoretical assumptions to work, so to speak, to review existing constructions of reflexivity in research. First we outline the perhaps best-known practices - oriented towards producing valid and reliable knowledge about some pattern of relations between real world objects. Because it is perhaps the best-known discourse we feel we need only briefly to summarize its main characteristics. The second discourse, when viewed with "a relational constructionist eye," appears to be a not very radical revision of the first. However, because the differences between this and the third discourse are often overlooked we engage in a more extended discussion. Third, we return to our earlier sketch of the new possibilities enabled by relational constructionist premises and discuss reflexivity as ongoing dialoguing. Table 1 gives an overview of the three discourses.

Table 1

#### *Overview of reflexivity discourses*

<b>Discourse</b>	<b>1. Minimizing bias</b>	<b>2. Making bias visible</b>	<b>3. Ongoing dialoguing</b>
<b>Meta-theory</b>	Positive science	Positive science	Relational constructionism
<b>Main concern</b>	Checking the soundness of knowledge claims	Checking the soundness of knowledge claims and/or use-value for 'locals'	Quality of ongoing processes
<b>Agency</b>	Individual act of researcher	Individual act of researcher	Relational process
<b>When</b>	Beginning and end	In multiple phases and emphasizing end report	Continuous
<b>Approach to ethics</b>	Quality concern peripheral to scientific interest in generalizable knowledge	Quality concern peripheral to scientific interest in generalizable knowledge	A central quality concern, interwoven with use-value
<b>View of intervention</b>	Separable from inquiry	Separable from inquiry	Inquiry is intervention, Intervention is transformation

### Discourse 1: Minimizing Bias

(Post)positivist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) or “positive” science constructs research - and therefore reflexivity - as an *individual act* oriented towards evaluating the scientific quality of knowledge claims. Assumptions about epistemology centre knowledge of “real world” objects and distinguish between subjective and objective knowledge “about the world in its so being.” The job of empirical research is to produce *objective knowledge* (in so far as that is possible) that can provide firm foundations for generalizations and predictions about possible relations (particularly causal). Given these themes, scientists discourse reflexivity as one of the special and defining characteristics of science - as something that science does to check the reliability and validity of its knowledge claims (Gergen, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hosking, 1999; Kerlinger, 1964).

For the empiricist researcher, the hypo-thetico-deductive method is the method of choice (Gergen, 1994; Kerlinger, 1964). The meta-theoretical assumptions centre an individual researcher with a knowing mind who knows of the possibility of error and distortion as it might affect the quality of his observations and knowledge claims. The potentially rational researcher attempts to produce knowledge that approximates the true state of things by systematically *designing* and attempting to *standardize and control* his methods and procedures for data collection. His design and procedures are intended to provide data that can verify or falsify the null hypothesis. To act as a member of some (post)positivist research community, the researcher must reflexively examine his theory, methods and procedures to estimate how they contributed to his research findings. In this construction, reflexivity is largely a retrospective act that evaluates inputs (such as measures) and processes to determine the *quality of the research outcomes* - the “findings” - of what is regarded as a now finished research process.

Reflexive practices apply (often statistical) techniques for evaluating the data. Questions of reliability and validity are centred: how reliable are my measures and findings and do they measure what I say they measure? These practical applications or checks are limited to the “context of discovery” (i.e., to the empirical domain). This means that reflexive practices rarely include examination of the meta-theoretical assumptions defining the “context of justification” and so, ignore major contributing contexts that contribute to shaping the research. It is true that some such as Frederick Kerlinger theorise “construct validity” (one aspect of reflexivity) as “much more than technique.” Indeed, Kerlinger suggests construct validity is “heavily philosophical” in the sense of having a wider concern for the theoretical and meta-theoretical context in relation to which methodology is designed and data collected (Kerlinger, 1964). But practical application of this view is exceedingly rare.

### Discourse 2: Making Bias Visible

The positive science construction of reflexivity is oriented around minimising “error” – understood as unexplained variance. This is somewhat revised in our second discourse which stresses that certain sources of error *cannot be eliminated* and should therefore *be made visible* insofar as this is possible (see also Hardy, Philips, & Clegg, 2001; Linstead, 1994). Reflexive researchers now must attempt to make visible what positive science constructs as their *sources of subjectivity* such as their ethnic and gender biases, reasoning and paradigm. In addition, so the argument goes, they must do so in order that *readers can make their own judgements* about the quality, accuracy



and usefulness of the research outcomes. Last, we should say that this construction of reflexivity also continues to embrace positive science assumptions of bounded individuals with minds who construct individual knowledge that may be more or less objective. Research practices continue to centre The Researcher and the researcher's "form of life" by striving for objectivity. In this way, research can be claimed as useful for producing data that can serve as the basis for subsequent interventions.

Examples of writings that construct reflexivity as individual activity of this sort include: Abma (1996), Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), Lewis and Kelemen (2002), Gouldner (1970) and Stake (1975, 1995). We will discuss two examples: Stake's work on "responsive inquiry" and Alvesson and Sköldberg's "reflexive methodology." We do so for three reasons: to justify our positioning of this discourse as a "not very radical" variant of Discourse 1; to reflect on meta-theoretical differences from our own view (Discourse 3), and; to clarify those aspects that could be seen as similar to our discourse of reflexivity. In each case, we will briefly summarize their work, their meta-theoretical assumptions and the ways these are reflected in their constructions of reflexivity.

*Example 1: Robert Stake's responsive inquiry*

Central to Stake's responsive approach is his aim to increase the usefulness of research for the people involved in inquiry and not just the researcher (Stake, 1975). He assumes value pluralism and therefore considers it essential to give voice to the differing perspectives of those involved. This implies that Stake prefers a research design that is, in some degree *emergent*. According to Stake, the primary focus of an inquiry must not be on a method and design predetermined by the researcher because this would imply that s/he could know in advance what will be important, which variables will need to be studied and which criteria will need to be employed. So: as the program moves in unique and unexpected ways, the evaluation efforts should be adapted to them. (Stake, 1975, p. 29)

Following data collection and analysis, Stake prefers to communicate the results in the form of thick (as opposed to thin) descriptions *so that the diversity in values and in perspectives is shown in the report*. It should be stressed that, although Stake values the voices of those involved in an inquiry, The Researcher-evaluator continues to be centred and is expected to remain in control of all aspects of the study (Abma & Stake, 2001; House, 2001). Stake is firmly opposed to stakeholder participation in scientific decisions because, in his view the researcher has, "the professional talent and discipline to carry out an inquiry" (Abma & Stake, p. 9).

What Stake calls "responsive" inquiry is aimed at making research useful for the participants involved. For this reason, Stake introduced two concepts that are central to his approach and that suggest the key to his construction of reflexivity. The first he called "vicarious experience" - defined as "drawing experiential understandings from the narratives of others" (Stake, 1995, p.173). Researchers have the important task of writing research reports using thick descriptions so that readers can judge the quality and usefulness of different values and judgements and the research results. In other words - and here the second concept comes in - the vicarious experience makes it possible for readers to make "naturalistic generalizations." By this Stake means that readers may judge for themselves the possible utility of these particular research findings in other contexts.

We need to turn to Stake's meta-theoretical assumptions in order better to understand his construction of reflexivity (see e.g., Stake, 1975, 1995). First, he seems

to make a sharp distinction between objective and subjective knowledge. Together with other post-positivist researchers, he believes that objectivity is unattainable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Nevertheless, he believes that researchers should strive for what he called "sophisticated constructions" and "accurate descriptions" of reality. Vicarious experience and naturalistic generalizations are Stake's preferred solution to the problems that follow from the (generally accepted to be) blurred distinction between subject and object. In his view "research is not helped by making it appear value-free. It is better to give the reader a good look at the researcher" (Stake, 1995, p. 95).

Second, as we have seen, Stake (1995) sees The Researcher as the one who should be in control of the inquiry. For Stake, it is the individual researcher who is responsible for the research, for reflexivity, and for making their descriptions as accurate as possible. In other words, Stake constructs the researcher identity as the knowing subject – who acts towards other as a knowable and formable object (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Hosking & McNamee, 2006). Research and reflexivity are limited by the scientific community's community-based *normative standard* whereby The Researcher must strive for (though necessarily fail fully to achieve) subject-object relations (Gergen, 1994).

Third, for Stake (1995), reflexivity has the function of heightening the quality of an inquiry in the dual sense of enhancing the accuracy of representations and the visibility of bias. An important assumption centred in Stake's approach is the existence of a world "out there." The epistemological priority in his work lies in representing this reality as accurately as possible. Making bias visible must contribute to the realization of this objective.

Fourth, the concept of vicarious experience suggests that Stake (1995) makes a sharp distinction between process and outcomes. Fifth, for Stake reflexivity is something that is most relevant at the end of an inquiry in that it is mainly concerned with reporting strategies.

#### *Example 2: Alvesson and Sköldberg's reflexive methodology*

These authors criticize empirical work that focuses on techniques and procedures to the neglect of meta-theoretical issues. At the same time they emphasize the subjectivity of every research enterprise (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). They also believe that meta-theoretical debates in organisation studies have not proven to be very useful for doing research. Therefore they characterize their "project" as "an intellectualization of qualitative method" and a "pragmatization of the philosophy of science" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, p. vii).

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) discuss and reflect upon empirical approaches together with hermeneutics, critical theory and postmodernism. Whilst others view these as "incommensurable" (see e.g., Thompson & McHugh, 1995) Alvesson and Sköldberg take the view that each has an important contribution to make to the construction of a "reflexive methodology." They argue that a) empirically oriented methods teach us to make contact with empirical material, b) hermeneutics raises the awareness of the interpretive act c) critical theory shows the importance and influence of political-ideological contexts and last, d) postmodernism helps the reflexive researcher in handling the question of representation and authority. Thus, for Alvesson and Sköldberg reflection means: "interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical

eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, p. vii).

Whilst Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) believe in the value of combining different meta-theoretical positions they do not explicitly set out the meta-theoretical assumptions that underpin their view. Let us try to see what they might be, starting with their focus on interpretations. First, on epistemology, although they criticize those who believe in the possibility of objective knowledge they leave intact and continue to centre the objective-subjective binary. Thus, like Stake (1995) they address some of the problems associated with the positivist construction of objective knowledge and look for solutions by reflecting upon subjectivities

Second, on ontology, Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) state that they find it: "pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a reality beyond the researcher's ethnocentricity and the ethnocentricity of the research community" (p. 3).

In their view, reflexivity is important because it helps the researcher to come closer to an accurate description of this assumed reality. This shows how in this second discourse reflexivity is *an epistemological priority*. This is not our view. Last, and consistent with these assumptions, it seems that Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) view reflexivity as an individual act and an individual responsibility – and it is The Researcher's responsibility to be reflexive in order to do "good research." Again as we shall show we take a different view.

### *Concluding remarks*

This second discourse of reflexivity continues to assume relatively stable and bounded individuals, with knowing minds, acting in relation to other individuals and relatively stable structures that constrain and support individual action. Reflexivity continues to be oriented around an epistemological interest, although findings are recognised as value-mediated. "Good research" continues to be defined in relation to the norms and interests of identifiable scientific communities where varying emphasis is given to (the now blurred distinction between) facts and values. What we find attractive and resonates with our own position is Stake's emphasis on use-value to "the locals" and Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2000) view of reflexivity as intrinsic to the entire research process. This said, following our different meta-theoretical position we will show that our view of reflexivity constitutes a radical departure from the first two discourses.

### **Discourse 3: Ongoing Dialoguing**

Our relational constructionist meta-theory implies that the processes that some call "research" are processes in which the identities of researcher, research object and related realities are in ongoing re-construction. Part of what this means is that subject-object relations or indeed some alternative, perhaps "softer" self-other differentiation, are viewed as constructions implicating perhaps multiple "forms of life". The centring of construction invites a view of research as intervention, the centring of relating implies that ethics and responsibility be re-constructed and centred e.g., through reflexive dialogues, and talk of multiple forms of life invites attention to multiple local ways of knowing and "power to." We shall finish with a brief discussion of each of these themes.

## Research as Intervention

Some argue that the current status of the sciences is at the margins of cultural life (Gergen, 1994). John Shotter, for instance, asks: “why do we think that the best way to make sense of our lives and to act for the best is in terms of theoretical formulations provided us by experts (rather than in terms of more practical, everyday forms of knowledge?)” (Shotter, 1993, p.19). Science formulates research findings in its own particular (community based) language and is concerned with generalization rather than particularization (Abma & Stake, 2001). Tineka Abma and others suggest that these practices increase the distance between scientists and other sorts of practitioner (see especially Gergen, 1994, p. 30-64) such that the latter feel they cannot meaningfully apply scientific knowledge to their own local practices (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006). Yet technical rationality (Schön, 1983) assumes that science produces applicable knowledge and that, indeed, scientific knowledge is superior to e.g., the knowledge of day-to-day practices (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Relational constructionist premises neither sharply distinguish nor elevate science above other "forms of life." Furthermore, they provide no necessary grounds for differentiating inquiry (as finding out) from intervention (grounded in already acquired findings). On the contrary, our relational premises imply that participating in inquiry inevitably (re)constructs peoples' lives in some degree (McNamee, 1994) and imply that *all* participants – including scientific researchers – construct and reconstruct their *local* (community-based) knowledges, identities and relations. From this it follows that research may be practised in ways that construct researchers as co-practitioners and practitioners as co-researchers (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006). Viewing research (or, as we prefer to call it, inquiry) as intervention, and shifting reflexive attention to the research process itself, enables a relational conception of ethics and responsibility – which is the next "possibility space" we want to explore.

## Relational ethics/Relational Responsibility

The ethics of a "modernist" (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996) or "mainstream" (Thompson & McHugh, 1995) meta-theory largely focus on how *not to* intervene in the lives of the researched, for instance by guarantying anonymity of interviewees, by not asking inappropriate questions and by having ethical audits before and after the data collection phase (see e.g., Baker, 1999). However, as we have said, our relational premises imply that inquiry is intervention. Participants draw upon the “forms of life” in which they participate and, in this sense, inquiry draws from and can contribute to the daily lives of participants. What we now want to emphasize is that this both broadens the scope of ethical issues and reflexivity *and* gives them a much more central place. So for example, it now makes sense to reflect on the *possibilities* that any particular inquiry may open up and develop. In principle, reflections on the local use-value in relation to each and every participating "form of life" could be centred (Gergen & Hosking, 2006). And if one form of life (e.g., science) is not to dominate others, then ongoing open, reflexive dialogues about “how we are going on together” would be required. Sheila McNamee speaks of this as a matter of *relational* (rather than individual) *responsibility* (McNamee, 2004) – relational responsibility for *the research process* – and the kinds of people and worlds it (re)produces. This seems most likely to require a continuing and open-ended process of exploration in which conversations concern themselves with relationships and possible ways of performing them (McNamee & Gergen, 1999).

## Ongoing Reflexive Dialogues Directed at the Research Process

Discussing the ways constructionist premises can expand possible research practices Gergen outlined three important "overtures to innovation." The first was deconstruction - "wherein all presumptions of the true, the rational, and the good are open to suspicion" (Gergen, 1994, p. 62). The second was democratization or "relational responsibility", and the third – reconstruction – "wherein new realities and practices are fashioned for cultural transformation" (Gergen, 1994, p. 63). Reflexive dialogues are a way of putting these "overtures" to work in research. This can be done by inviting communal reflection (Gergen & Gergen, 1991) throughout the inquiry. Another possibility is to "start" an inquiry by organising a reflexive workshop in which participants dialogue about what they want from the process. Dialogues can articulate differing research questions and objectives, perhaps heightening the possibility that multiple local realities will be potentiated. Further, such dialogues might make it more likely that participants feel responsible for "making the inquiry work."

Below we address three topics that communal reflections can address: research identities; who participates and the narratives on which they draw, and last; reporting strategies.

### A) *Emerging research identities*

When a researcher asks someone to participate in an inquiry (e.g., as an interviewee) it is highly probable that s/he considers this person an expert on a particular topic (McNamee, 1994). In other words, the researcher (implicitly) believes that such a person has practical knowledge, or practical theories relevant to a particular research topic (Schön, 1983; Shotter, 1993). However, and as we have said, it is usually The Researcher whose voice dominates the what, the how, and the why – in relation to values, norms and interests from his scientific "form of life."

Relational constructionist premises allow that research participants can dialogue research identities and relations. In this way a subject-object understanding of research relations might be de-constructed or "unforgotten" (Chia, 1996) – opening-up other possible constructions of identities and relations. To put this slightly differently, reflexive practices can include reflections on power as it seems to be and as it could be constructed in the ongoing here and now. This can be theorised as a moral or relationally responsible practice; in this way a research process can "become" a process in which The Researcher becomes someone who contributes *one expertise among many* as the identities of researcher and researched are more fluid and open.

### B) *Who participates and the narratives they mobilise*

For many practitioners, an important ethical issue in every inquiry is the issue of whose voices are (not) included, who's muted and who's silenced. This also can become an important topic for reflexive dialogues. Drawing upon actor network theory, Hardy, Philips, and Clegg (2001; see also Latour, 1987) suggested that researchers would do well to encourage reflexive dialogues on the narratives participants draw on and thus, the local constructions they mobilize. "Self" may try to enrol "other" (Latour) - for instance, interviewees may try to promote their story and constructions of its truth-value by trying to fix their identity as reliable and

trustworthy. At the same time, “interviewees” may relate to the researcher as the one who decides what themes need to be addressed during an interview. The Researcher, for example, can try to generate new ways of relating by exploring *other participants'* research objectives and inviting them to into dialogues of equals to co-create relational responsibility for the process. In ways such as these, reflexive practices can open up possibilities for transforming realities and relations (Gergen, 1994).

### C) Reporting strategies

The research report is traditionally seen as the place to present The Outcomes – the end results of the (now ended) research process. Our meta-theoretical assumptions offer a different view – the process is the product (Brown & Hosking, 1986); but the process has no clear “end” to report. Part of what this can mean is that writing “about” the research also can be seen as research (Richardson, 2003). Relational responsibility would again require practices that cast a reflexive gaze on how self-other relationships are characterised – this time - in the written text. Indeed, Rhodes and Brown (2005) argue that

responsibility to the Other might be considered a guiding principle in writing research... An ethics of research writing emerges through the characterization of the relations between self and other in the text. (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 470)

So, for example, the style and content of the report can (re)construct subject-object relations by presenting a knowing subject who can speak for and about other as an object. Alternatively, the style, form and content of the reporting strategy can be more open and, for example, oriented towards processes, possibilities and generative theorising.

Another possibility is that full and equal participation is attempted in the writing of the report. Participative research practices can be extended to include "co-generated reports" (Allard-Poesi, 2005) and, of course, the process of writing itself can stimulate reflexive dialogues. Communal reflections on such matters constitute another way of putting relational responsibility or ethics to work and can be another way to further articulate multiple local knowledges in research processes.

Finally, the style of the reporting strategies can be one of “thin” and/or “thick” descriptions (Stake, 1995). Our earlier arguments all lead in the direction of thick description as a way of opening up to multiple local language games and their related forms of life. Tineke Abma is one of a number of writers who has proposed a narrative reporting strategy as a way of stimulating reflexivity (see Abma, 1996). Together with the use of an open, and exploratory style, a narrative approach can also make the text more widely accessible to readers who participate in different language games.

### **Multiple Local Ways of Knowing and “Power to”**

Relational processes (re)construct more or less loosely interconnected “forms of life” including their local knowledge(s), be they what some might call intuition or “rules of thumb” (Cunliffe, 2003; Schön, 1983) or, indeed, what other “forms” call propositional knowledge. The latter, for example., as produced by science, is relatively explicit in comparison to “participatory ways of knowing” (Cunliffe &

Shotter, 2006) which are ways of “knowing-in-action” (Schön), knowing rather than knowledge, knowing that can be said to be “unbounded, fluid, bodily sensed and often tacit, implicit in one’s practices and expressions” (Cunliffe & Shotter, p. 235).

Reflexive research, by giving space to *multiple* local-cultural and local-historical realities in different but equal relation, has the possibility to develop local practical theories and other forms of “knowing-from-within”. Perhaps this is why some suggest that reflexive inquiry can be conceptualized as a communal learning process (Cunliffe, 2002). Our relational-responsive emphasis invites *all research participants* to share responsibility for learning:

notions of symmetry [...] become key as (teacher-student) power relations are repositioned from that of expert/learner (where the expert believes in his/her legitimacy to impose his/her views) to that of [...] a shared responsibility for constructing learning. (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 14)

Another way to say this is that relational premises open-up the possibility space for power relations to include *power to* - practices that allow the construction of different but equal forms of life - and not just the *power over* associated with subject-object ways of relating (Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995).

### Conclusions

We described a relational constructionism that gives ontology to relational processes and treats self-other and relations as emergent constructions made and remade in these processes. We outlined three discourses of reflexivity and their associated meta- theoretical assumptions. Our third discourse provided the standpoint from which we reflected on the other two as two *possible* relational constructions and offered other possible ways of radically reconstructing reflexive practices. In this radical reconstruction, reflexivity: is no longer oriented towards generalizable knowledge that is distinct from practice; is neither an individual activity nor a matter of individual ethics; and is no longer a matter of looking back on a finished process. Instead it becomes an ongoing relational process of “turning back” on the construction of the “inquiry.” Reflexive dialogues, directed at the research process, can open up new ways of going on together by mobilizing local knowledges and communally reflecting on research identities and relations. These dialogues can all be considered attempts to construct soft self-other differentiation. In this way reflexivity is not a slide into infinite regress, but an opening up to multiple local forms of life and to possibilities rather than probabilities (Gergen, 1994; Hosking, 2008).

Future research might explore how reflexivity could be stimulated within particular local communities such as organizational consultancy or intervention work with communities. Of course, given our focus on local-cultural, local-historical relational realities we cannot assume that the specific “content” of relational realities can be generalized across time and place. However, the various ways we have outlined of practicing reflexivity in inquiries could be taken up and made useful elsewhere. In addition, writing and discussing reflexivity in particular inquiries and communities could help others more easily to locate relevant analogies (Gergen & Hosking, 2006). We hope this article may contribute to the furthering of reflexive, relationally responsible inquiry.

## References

- Abma, T. A. (1996). *Responsief evalueren: Discoursen, controversen en allianties in het postmoderne* [Evaluating responsively: Discourses, controversies and alliances in the postmodern]. Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon.
- Abma, T. A., & Stake, R. E. (2001). Stake's Responsive Evaluation: Core ideas and evolution. In J. C. Greene & T. A. Abma (Eds.), *Responsive evaluation* (pp. 7-22). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Allard-Poesi, F. (2005). The paradox of sensemaking in organizational analysis. *Organisation Studies*, 12(2), 169-196.
- Alvesson, M. (2002). *Postmodernism and social research*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. (2000). *Doing critical management research*. London: Sage.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldböck, K. (2000). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, England: Addison Wesley.
- Baker, T. L. (1999). *Doing social research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Brown, H., & Hosking, D. M. (1986). Distributed leadership and skilled performance as successful organization in social movements. *Human Relations*, 39(1), 65-79.
- Chia, R. (1995). From modern to postmodern organizational analysis. *Organization Studies*, 16(4), 579-604.
- Chia, R. (1996). The problem of reflexivity in organizational research: Towards a postmodern science of organization. *Organization*, 3(1), 31-59.
- Cox, J., & Hassard, J. (2005). Triangulation in organizational research: A representation. *Organisation*, 12(1), 109-133.
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2002). Critical pedagogy: Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. *Management Learning*, 33(1), 35-61.
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2003). Reflexive inquiry in organizational research: Questions and possibilities. *Human Relations*, 56(8), 983-1003.
- Cunliffe, A. L., & Shotter, J. (2006). Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, management and the dialogical. In D. M. Hosking & S. McNamee (Eds.), *The social construction of organization* (pp. 226-241). Malmö, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Dachler, H. P., & Hosking, D. M. (1995). The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism* (pp. 1-29). Aldershot, England: Avebury.
- Deetz, S. (1996). Describing differences in approaches to organization science: Rethinking Burrell and Morgan and their legacy. *Organization Science*, 7(2), 191-207.
- Fleck, L. (1979). *Genesis and development of a scientific fact*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, England: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1995). Relational theory and the discourses of power. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and*



- organization: *Relational alternatives to individualism* (pp. 29-51). Aldershot, England: Avebury.
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, M. (1991). Toward reflexive methodologies. In R. Steier (Ed.), *Research and reflexivity* (pp. 76-96). London: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J., & Hosking, D. M. (2006). If you meet social construction along the road: A dialogue with Buddhism. In M. Kwee, K. J. Gergen, & F. Koshikawa (Eds.), *Horizons in Buddhist psychology* (pp. 299-314). Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute.
- Gergen, K. J., & Thatchenkery, T. J. (1996). Organization science as social construction: Postmodern potentials. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32(4), 356-377.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1970). *The coming crisis in Western sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. London: Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). London: Sage.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Milton Keynes, England: OUP.
- Harding, S. (1998). *Is science multicultural?* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hardy, C., Philips, N., & Clegg, S. (2001). Reflexivity in organization and management theory: A study of the production of the research 'subject'. *Human Relations*, 54(5), 531-560.
- Hosking, D. M. (1995). Constructing power: Entitative and relational approaches. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organization: Relational alternatives to individualism* (pp. 51-71). Aldershot, England: Avebury.
- Hosking, D. M. (1999). Social construction as process: Some new possibilities for research and development. *Concepts and Transformation*, 4(2), 117-132.
- Hosking, D. M. (2004). Change works: A critical construction. In J. Boonstra (Ed.), *Dynamics of organizational change and learning* (pp. 249-279). Chichester, England: Wiley.
- Hosking, D. M. (2006a). Bounded entities, constructivist revisions and radical reconstructions. *Cognitie, Creier, Comportament*, 9(4), 609-622. .
- Hosking, D. M. (2006b). Organizations, organizing, and related concepts of change. In D. M. Hosking & S. McNamee (Eds.), *The social construction of organization* (pp. 54-68). Malmö, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Hosking, D. M. (2008). Can constructionism be critical? In J. Holstein & J. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 669-687). New York: Guilford.
- Hosking, D. M., & McNamee, S. (2006). Subject-object relations: Knowledge and power. In D. M. Hosking & S. McNamee (Eds.), *The social construction of organization* (pp. 86-90). Malmö, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Hosking, D. M., & Morley, I. E. (1991). *A social psychology of organising*. Chichester, England: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- House, E. R. (2001). Responsive evaluation (and its influence on deliberative democratic evaluation). In J. C. Greene & R. E. Stake (Eds.), *Responsive evaluation* (pp. 23-30). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- Kerlinger, F. N. (1964). *Foundations of behavioural research*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Latour, B. (1987). *Science in action*. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press.
- Lewis, M. W., & Kelemen, M. L. (2002). Multiparadigm inquiry: Exploring organizational pluralism and paradox. *Human Relations*, 55(2), 271-275.
- Linstead, S. (1994). Objectivity, reflexivity, and fiction: Humanity, inhumanity, and the science of the social. *Human Relations*, 47(11), 1321-1346.
- McNamee, S. (1994). Research as relationally situated activity: Ethical implications. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 6(3), 69-83.
- McNamee, S. (2004). Therapy as social construction: Back to basics and forward toward challenging issues. In T. Strong & D. Pare (Eds.), *Furthering talk: Advances in the discursive therapies* (pp. 253-271). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press.
- McNamee, S., & Gergen, K. J. (Eds.). (1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearce, W. B. (1992). A 'camper's' guide to constructionisms. *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation & Management*, 3, 139-161.
- Rhodes, C., & Brown, A. D. (2005). Writing responsibly: Narrative fiction and organization. *Organization*, 12(4), 467-491.
- Richardson, L. (2003). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 499-541). London: Sage.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. London: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (Ed.). (1975). *Evaluating the arts in education: A responsive approach*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.
- Steier, R. (Ed.). (1991). *Research and reflexivity*. London: Sage.
- Thompson, P., & McHugh, D. (1995). *Work organizations: A critical introduction*. Basingstoke, England: Macmillan.
- Van der Haar, D., & Hosking, D. M. (2004). Evaluating appreciative inquiry: A relational constructionist perspective. *Human Relations*, 57(8), 1017-1036.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford, England: Blackwell.

### Author Note

Dian Marie Hosking is Professor in Relational Processes at Utrecht University School of Governance, The Netherlands. Her research interests include relational constructionism and its implications for organisational and community development, theories of organising, leadership processes, and approaches to inquiry. Her books include: *A social psychology of organising* (with Ian Morley), *Management and organisation: Relational alternatives to individualism* (edited with Peter Dachler and Ken Gergen) and, most recently *The social construction of organisation* (with Sheila McNamee). Her most recent writings address the issue of 'can social constructionism

be critical' (The Handbook of Constructionist Research), explores connections between relational constructionism and Tibetan Buddhism (e.g., with Ken Gergen); she and Sheila McNamee have just finished a book on relational constructionist approaches to inquiry. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to USG, University of Utrecht, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Telephone: 013/466-3326; E-mail: d.m.hosking@uu.nl.

Bettine Pluut is a doctoral student at Utrecht University School of Governance, The Netherlands. With here PhD she explores how Electronic Health Records could create a sense of 'relational responsibility' within medical encounters and in this way can contribute to a higher level of health care quality. She stories her research project as a 'social intervention' process, based on the assumptions and ideas that are described in this article. Bettine also works at Zenc, a Dutch research and consultancy agency. E-mail: b.pluut@uu.nl.

Copyright 2010: Dian Marie Hosking, Bettine Pluut, and Nova Southeastern University

#### **Article Citation**

Hosking, D. M., & Pluut B. (2010). (Re)constructing reflexivity: A relational constructionist approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(1), 59-75. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-1/hosking.pdf>

---