Chapter 4

Inquiry as Engaged Unfolding

“when I find a thing . . . it’s generally a frog or a worm”

The question of method

Something that comes up time and again in our workshops is the question of method. We are often asked: “What method should I use?” “Is this a constructionist method?” We have found that many people assume, for example, that discourse analysis is a relational constructionist method (because it focuses on language). And they think that using a questionnaire is not (because it deals with numbers or categorical responses). There are a number of important points to make here. The first is that there is no such thing as a relational constructionist method. Relational constructionism is a meta-theory or discourse of (human) science. It provides a general orientation toward all relational processes, including those that might be called inquiry, intervention or development, leadership or organizing. This general orientation invites us to view all activities in which humans participate, all inquiry and theorizing – including relational constructionism – as a relational process. In principle this means that we could use anything that positive science would call a method including, for example, statistics, experiments and surveys.

Our second point follows from the argument that methods have no meaning in and of themselves. As we said in the conclusion to the last chapter, how we think about methods, use them, talk and write about them, activates a particular meta-theory or discourse of science. In other words, methods are neither free standing, nor are they
necessarily attached to any one particular discourse. What becomes central for the
constructionist is how we practice any particular ‘method’ or, more generally, how we
‘do’ our inquiry. For us, relational constructionist assumptions guide the questions we
ask, how we try to answer them, what we count as a fact, what we recognize as rigor, the
language tools we employ – indeed, all aspects of inquiry.

To illustrate this, let us further consider how ‘method’ is understood in the context
of post-positivist inquiry. ‘Method talk’ is usually associated with relatively fixed
notions of procedure where the latter can be evaluated. If you have ever tried to analyze
large amounts of written text, such as interview transcripts, you might recall your
attempts to find rules of method that you could follow. We feel safe in guessing that you
did not find them. Speaking more generally, we can say that the possibility of method –
of being able to specify ahead of time what to do, how and so on – very much depends on
how much you can and want to simplify and control your inquiry. Regardless of your
meta-theory, a considerable amount of “craft work” (Silverman 2010) is always required.
So if you are thinking you will ‘use’ some sort of interview, ethnography, document
analysis, or whatever, you will have to work out how to use it in relation to your meta-
theoretical assumptions, your research purposes, and so on.

This brings us back to relational constructionism: In what sorts of relational
realities do you want to participate? Do you want to feature and elevate the practices,
values and interests of positive science, for example, or would you prefer to give more
space to other (non-science) communities and their ways of doing things? What do the
local communities participating in the inquiry process want? Any inquiry is likely to
involve multiple community-based rationalities and interests so it will be necessary to consider at what point and how they might enter into the conversation.

This brings us to our third point which is that the issue of ‘method’ or form is not necessarily one for (only) you, in relation to (just) your science community, to decide and not necessarily one that can be decided ahead of time. Some decisions obviously must be made in advance. Yet, these decisions also are made within a relational context. Your choice to examine a particular issue, topic, or situation emerges in the context of our own community-based participations. This brings us back to your inquiry as a process that (re)creates particular realities and relations. If you feel attracted to relational constructionism you may well want to depart from ways of relating that construct your self as the knowing inquirer and other as available for you to know and influence; this is what we earlier called subject-object relations. If so, you will probably want to be sensitive to other – to other local-cultural rationalities or communities who are in some way implicated in your inquiry. Additionally, you might want to be sensitive to place, to local language games and forms of communication such as talk or e-mails, dance, poetry and so on. The following case illustrates this.

Dian Marie was the Ph.D. advisor for a development worker in the Philippines. Shayamal is a native Bangladeshi; he spoke none of the languages of the communities with whom he was working. Many of the locals could not read or write and his NGO wanted him to use questionnaires and to produce statistical summaries of his findings. Dian Marie encouraged him instead to use a storytelling approach, inviting the locals to tell their stories in the ways they wanted to tell them. They did so, not only in words but also in dance and drawing. Of course in writing his thesis he had to work with the forms
and language of yet another community (academia). The ‘how’s and whys’ of any inquiry will be many and varied depending on the particular communities involved. The more relationally sensitive and engaged you want to be, the more you will want to leave open the space for multiple community-based voices to influence the what, how why or what or who for.

Our fourth point follows from this. If you wish to be relationally responsive, in the moment, as the inquiry progresses, this is likely to lead you to lean away from design and methods. Most likely relational responsiveness will require a great deal of talk, conversation, and dialogue. Often you will not be directly involved in these conversations. You let go of control or rather the illusion of control. You will attempt to craft a process that opens up to multiplicity, to ongoing-developing-changing realities and relations, to Other(ness) – including possible changes in self and in your positions on particular issues. You will probably lean towards ways of working that make space for thick textured descriptions, rather than statistics (although this is not necessarily the case). Indeed, you may well find yourself drawn towards approaches that use the language of narrative or storytelling, discourse, or ethnography.

Giving space for inquiry processes to unfold in these ways may mean that your relations with particular practice communities may vary considerably during the course of your inquiry (Ceglowski 2001). Returning to the example above, Shayamal had to find ways to be responsive to his employer, to the communities with whom he was working, and to the scientific/academic community in which his thesis would be evaluated. These differing relations came in and out of prominence at different points in the inquiry process and were played out in different relational forms or media. For
example, the thesis for the scientific/academic community required a written form but Shayamal’s inter-actions with the villagers in remote mountain settings involved other forms such as talk, listening, playing and living together (Saha 2010).

Last, we should again emphasize that relational processes go on in many forms other than conceptual language. However, as soon as we think, talk and write about relational processes, conceptual language is necessarily implicated. It would be a pity if we forgot that relating is embodied and includes the construction and use of artifacts together with other bodies, sentient or not. Relating is much more than ‘just’ conceptual language; it is live and ongoing (Shotter 2010). It might be good to retain considerable humility over what is possible once we talk and write about ‘it.’

Let’s summarize our discussion (so far) on method:

- There is less of a concern about method (as in finding the ‘right’ one) and more of a general orientation towards all human activities;
- What is important is how we craft our ‘methods’ – given our meta-theory – in all aspects of our inquiry;
- One issue is that of how we can give space to multiple, local, community-based rationalities;
- One distinctive possibility is to look for ways to practice relationally responsive inquiry (McNamee and Gergen 1999);
- And, since relating is much more than conceptual language, we want to explore how to give space to this.

Perhaps we have reached the point where an overview of some key orientations implied or opened-up by our relational constructionist approach to inquiry would be
useful.

**Key relational constructionist orientations**

Key to everything is our assumption of the co-constructed nature of relational realities. Just as methods are community-based, they are also co-constructed performances with members of particular communities. To that end, the unfolding nature of our performances together becomes central. When we position ourselves as inquirers, we have ideas about what and who and where and how we want to focus our inquiry. Yet, as a constructionist inquirer, that original positioning is always open to amendment. Using the language of Alvesson and Deetz (2000), our positioning would be “local-emergent” rather than “elite, a priori.” Rather than work with design and method, we prefer minimal structures and improvisation. Of course, some important decisions must be made before we embark on any inquiry. Yet, as we mentioned earlier, even these emerge within particular relational communities and then are more or less open to crediting or discrediting by those with whom we conduct our inquiry.

Further, we start with the assumption that multiple practice communities or stakeholders participate in our inquiry. In other words, we do not center the “consensus” assumption (Alvesson and Deetz 2000) of one single external reality and descriptions of the same, but rather, we orient towards multiplicity, fragmentation, or what Alvesson and Deetz called “dissensus.” For us, the challenge is to give space to these multiple local rationalities and to let them be. In addition, we might want to lean towards opening up rather than closing down possibilities, a move that is distinctly different from the proclivities of positive science.
Also important are the many local and practical concerns of those who participate in the inquiry. Not all inquiry interests need be oriented towards the production of new knowledge or new solutions to societal problems. We will pause for a moment and give you some space to think through some possibilities.

**Reflection**

- *How might an organization or community struck by AIDS use inquiry to create new ways of working and living together?*

- *How might a study of leadership facilitate ways of leading that make space for collaborative relations between multiple, different local rationalities?*

- *How could a community development worker give space to multiple local rationalities rather than imposing science-based norms and values?*

In the remainder of this chapter we hope to give you some help in thinking about possibilities. We will focus on narrative or storytelling, discourse and discourse analysis, interviewing, and ethnography. We will concentrate on how you might think about and work with these approaches, paying particular attention to how this would differ from a positive science approach.

**Narrative or storytelling**

Given our relational constructionist discourse, all inquiry – whether an experiment, a survey, or an interview – can be viewed as narrative or storytelling/making. According to Foster and Bochner (2008) inquiry embraces “the details of lived experience, the reflexive relationship between personal interaction and cultural contexts, and the dialogic and dialectical complexity of relationships and communities” (92). As we said earlier, the inquirer is literally engaged in the process of *making* self an
inquirer in relation to particular others (Howard 1991) as well as in relation to narratives of science, professional practice, organization development and so on.

The explicit use of the language of narrative or storytelling has become increasingly popular in communities such as psychology (Sarbin 1986), organizational studies (Boje 1995; Calas and Smircich 1991; Czarniawska 2001) and therapy (White and Epston 1990). Work of this sort can include narrative interviews and narrative analysis of interviews. It also includes different sorts of narrative analysis of written and spoken texts including documents, archival materials, emails, telephone calls, films, and magazines – the possibilities are endless. However, we must remind you of what we said earlier about ‘method.’ Methods are neither freestanding nor tied to a particular meta-theory. Just because the language of narrative or story telling is used should not be taken to imply that the meta-theory is necessarily postmodern, relational constructionist. Indeed, narrative approaches are often employed within a post-positivist perspective.

Modernist approaches to narrative assume that they have a beginning, middle, and end and perhaps other structural characteristics (thus, not all text is narrative). In addition, identified narratives are treated as individual (rather than relational) texts to be collected, made sense of, and spoken about by the expert researcher/scientist. Parker (2005) warns that, in a positive science approach, narrative analysis is presented as if the researcher has captured the story of the research participants. He further warns that analysis proceeds as if the narrative serves as a “good example” of what this issue/topic is about, and as if there is one (probably) correct interpretation. The relational constructionist differs from the positive science approach in all these aspects. In the
following, we focus on postmodern, relational constructionist forms of inquiry that utilize narrative.

As we set out earlier, we see actions or texts as more or less local and thus embedded in multiple inter-textual relations. This means that we view narratives as emerging within local rationalities, and as co-constructions where the inquirer is part of, rather than apart from, the narrative. Our postmodern, relational constructionist purpose now may be thought of as articulating “local and practical concerns” (Gergen and Thatchenkery 1996). As we said in Chapter 3, this means articulating multiplicity, and in this way giving voice to practices and possibilities that usually are muted, suppressed or silenced. In this view we see:

- Story construction as a process of creating reality,
- in which self/story teller is clearly part of the story, as is the addressee;
- Narratives as co-constructions - not individual subjective realities;
- Narratives as situated, con-textualized in relation to multiple local-cultural-historical acts/texts;
- Inquiry may articulate multiple narratives and relations.

Narrative interviews

We have said that our relational constructionist perspective implies all inquiry can be viewed as narrative. Explicitly, narrative inquiry often proceeds through relatively unstructured interviews. The interviewer leaves space for the other to tell his or her story in relation to some broad question such as, “Could you tell me about your experiences of the corporate change program and the changes you have tried to introduce since you arrived?” Part of the inquirer’s intention is to get out of the way, so to speak, of what
other wants to say in response to the question. The interviewer might also act to make explicit things such as why he or she is asking the question(s) and who may do what with the texts (Kvale 2008). From a relational constructionist perspective, these constructive acts/texts are viewed as con-texts by contributing to the particular narrative that is told in the interview. At this point in the inquiry process we would understand the interviewee’s narrative as “twice constructed” (Riessman 1993); first, by selecting and punctuating some phenomenal stream of lived experience and second, by telling about it in the interview (Riessman 1993). We should add that we might not use the terms “interview” and “interviewer” but instead, “participants” or “co-researchers.”

Narrative analysis and deconstruction

The process of construction continues when a text is transcribed from a tape recording and decisions are made about what to do, for example, with simultaneous talk, unclear words, pauses, and punctuation. It is important to note that decisions about these features are not viewed as right or wrong but as coherent within some local context. This implies that, as an inquirer, you should make the rationale for your choices clear and be aware that these decisions could have been different thereby constructing potentially different relational realities. The transcript is analyzed, perhaps its more appropriate to say re-constructed, in relation to con-texts such as those of the inquirer’s own local cultures (gender, professional, ethnic…), human science discourse, narratives of purpose, etcetera. And as Riessman (1993) shows so clearly, the resulting narrative is re-constructed every time someone reads it.

A postmodern and/or relational constructionist discourse implies a particular approach to narrative analysis. In general, it aims to preserve as many text-context
relations as possible, to articulate muted, suppressed, and excluded voices, and in this way to re-situate dominant voices/stories, enable a play of differences, and open-up new possible realities and relationships. Some speak of this as “de-construction” (Culler 1982). It involves breaking up the seeming unities in a text (the organization, the way we do things around here, etcetera.), questioning taken-for-granted dualities (management-employee, old timers and newcomers), pluralizing, de-entifying, de-naturalizing, re-contextualizing and opening-up new possible local practices of power (Boje 1995; Chia 1996). Boje (2001) offers some guidelines for story deconstruction. Seven interrelated tactics are proposed: search for dualities (the system/me); re-interpret the hierarchy; look for rebel voices and for the other side of the story; deny the plot; find the exception; and trace what is between the lines.

For example, Boje (1995) investigated the possibility that there might be stories about Walt Disney and the “Magic Kingdom” that did not fit the (official) universalizing tale of happiness. He explored the voices of employees and former employees, historians and others who might rupture the official narrative about Disney. He was interested in these alternative narratives and how competing voices were silenced and excluded. The focus of his inquiry was on the multiple and contentious relations between stories, and on how research might become complicit in constructing one happy story over the competing voices. Boje used the Disney archives including tape and video recordings of Disney leaders making speeches, giving interviews, impromptu conversations, PR films and tapes of meetings.

He deconstructed these texts. For example, he looked at multiple variations of stories, not just positive, and not just negative. Examining the various versions, he
explored how alternative stories (a) covered up a great deal of ambiguity (b) gave voice to some and not others (e.g., absence of screen credits for artists, removal of Roy Disney from the studio sign), and (c) essentialized people and things. He did this by looking at cacophony and discord rather than “the managed harmony of the official story” and by showing organizational culture as fragmented and conflicted. Thus, the organization was now seen as a site of multiple meanings engaged in a constant struggle for control.

Working narratives, multiplicity, and power to

In our relational constructionist approach, inquiry and intervention can be quite deliberately interwoven. So, for example, we can work with texts in a variety of ways that have the explicit intention of development or change. Inquiry may facilitate what Gill (2001) calls “design conversations” in which multiple voices/narratives are explored through dialogue. The varying voices and stories are not explored for purposes of selecting the best or the ‘right’ one, nor are they explored in order to merge them into one narrative. Rather, the purpose of opening dialogue among varying stories is to give space to each local coherence and, for example, open up possible re-storying.

Other relevant ways of working within texts can include working with metaphors (Barrett and Cooperrider 1990; Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar 1995, see Chapter 5), “dialoging” (Anderson-Wallace, Blantern, and Boydell 2001), generating and supporting narrative multiplicity through “appreciative inquiry” (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987), and dynamic narrative approaches to organizational learning (Abma 2000). Ways of working can also help others (clients in therapy, organizations and communities) to generate their own ways to go on and help them to avoid presuming a singular expertise and voice. Work of this sort assumes that (a) people’s lives are heavily influenced by the
stories they tell about themselves, (b) stories are empowering or dis-empowering, helpful or unhelpful, (c) people may be trapped in stories of “problems” and “helplessness,” past failures, and so forth that pathologize self and, (d) both the ‘change agent’s’ and the client’s stories should be listened to and reflected back to assist dis-solving and re-storying.

Drawing on the narrative work of Michael White and David Epston (1990), David Barry’s work with organizations (Barry 1997) is a good example of working with narratives to develop ‘power to’ go on in ways the locals find more helpful. Following White and Epston, David focuses on identities and relationships. He explored “influence mapping,” “problem externalization,” “identifying unique outcomes,” and practices of “witnessing.”

In influence mapping, people expand their stories, giving them a more coherent, story-like nature. This helps tellers assume a more agentic role. He maps the interrelations between persons and problems over time, thereby mapping the influence of ‘the problem’ on persons (how has this problem influenced a person’s or group’s life, organization, etc., perhaps making the problem less monolithic and factual). He also engages in a mapping of persons on the problem (how a person has influenced the problem or when has the person controlled or limited the problem, thereby giving greater sense of agency).

In externalizing the problem, a storied problem is narrated as a trap. The aim here is to employ reflective listening to dis-connect the story from the teller. A person no longer “has” a problem but is now storied as “being under the ‘spell’ or ‘control’ of the problem. In this way, conversation can open on the circumstances under which the
problem “takes hold” of the person as well as circumstances under which the person “beats” the problem. The relationship between person and problem is thus highlighted as opposed to centering a story of a person for whom the problem is part of self or character.

Identifying unique outcomes entails finding previously untold story parts (e.g., when some competitor or context did not get the better of them) and expanding this alternative story line. Participants can be encouraged, as well, to imagine, envision, or create a collaborative dream. Finally, witnessing performance(s) acknowledge and encourage storytellers’ efforts to enact a preferred story by, for example, proposing new conversations, writing letters of reference to clients, asking for reflections from a broader group of stakeholders, and so forth.

Storytelling brings out and works with multiple voices - with multiple constructions - rather than obscuring the multiplicity in totalizing discourses, averages, 3rd person reports, de-contextualised accounts and other practices that aim to speak for ‘Other.’ Storytelling change-work analyzes or in some other way ‘starts from’ the assumptions, norms, metaphors, language tools, and social practices that resource and constrain possibilities. Work of this kind can open-up new ways of being in relation and new possible worlds.

**Discourse and discourse analysis**

Approaches that use the term discourse are not necessarily very different from narrative approaches. The distinction between the two is most easily understood in terms of whose work has been central in crafting the particular "language game" and related “forms of life.” Discourse studies examine how relational processes create structures of power and authority that we treat as already existing and outside of us.
Some forms of discourse analysis focus on dominant discourses and our own participation in their (re)creation. These forms often draw on the work of Michel Foucault (1972, 1979). For example, we could examine the ways in which our own use (perhaps as patients) of the medical profession’s discourse of diagnosis serves to simultaneously maintain the authority of the medical profession and entrap us in stigmatizing and pathologizing descriptions. As we define ourselves as ‘depressed,’ for instance, we participate in the perpetuation of “disciplinary regimes” that control and subjugate our very being. Other approaches are less interested in what Foucault calls “institutional power” or “institutional practices.” Instead, they attend to taken-for-granted ways of acting in communities. Whether influenced by Foucault or, for example, by Potter and Wetherell (1987), discourse studies explore how participants themselves create and sustain the practical and moral orders within which they live. Exploration of the very patterns by which such ordered ways of living emerge can allow participants to enter into new forms of relation, thereby generating possibilities for social transformation.

In relational constructionist inquiry we are drawn to discourse or discourse analysis because we center language-based construction processes. Foucault (1972) describes discourse as “practices that form the objects of which they speak” (49). In keeping with Foucault’s idea of discourse as practice, Potter and Hepburn (2008) use the term discourse by claiming it “as a verb rather than a noun” (276). A discourse can be thought of as any taken-for-granted way of talking and acting more generally that instantiates that which we assume (or take for granted) exists.

*Some examples of discourse analysis (DA)*
In his discussion of radical approaches in psychology, Parker (2005) summarizes four key ideas of discourse analysis: multi-voicedness, semiotic construction, resistance to power and discourse as a chain of words and images. Looking for multi-voicedness involves searching out multiple and perhaps contradictory themes rather than expecting or looking for a singular theme. Semiotic construction directs our attention to both how we make meaning together and how that meaning constructs us. “The description of oneself or someone else as suffering from ‘mental illness,’ for example, may not only construct an image of the self as a medical object but also construct a certain kind of career through the mental health system” (Parker 2005, 90). Parker sees exploring resistance to power as “a way of illuminating how language keeps certain power relations in place or challenges them” (90). We might as, for example, if there were moments in the discourse being analyzed where the participant was able to reject a label or categorization being offered by some authoritarian voice. And last, when viewed as a chain of words and images, the concept of discourse allows us to talk about, understand, and know this and not that.

Returning to Temi’s story in Chapter 1, we might suggest that he explore the ways of talking and other kinds of action (discourses, see above) that kept Mutunga from being tested for HIV/AIDS when he first started feeling ill. In opening conversation/inquiry in Mutunga’s community about when it is appropriate and inappropriate to be tested, Temi and community members might not only come to learn the practices that dominate this community but he might also invite community members to articulate the taken-for-granted discourses that they re-create in their daily activities. Temi and others could also explore the ways in which local health centers publicize
HIV/AIDS testing (or the ways in which they do not publicize such testing). How are those wishing to be tested expected to make known their desire? Can they request testing in a confidential setting or must such a request take place in public? This could be seen as an example of a Foucauldian approach to discourse and discourse analysis. It could be seen as a way of “unmask[ing] oppressive discursive practices and resist[ing] dominant constructions that obscure, silence, or marginalize lived experiences that fall outside the ‘mainstream’” (Foster and Bochner 2008, 94).

As we said earlier, we are not talking about precise and fully codifiable methods. Potter and Wetherell (1987) provide helpful guidelines for discourse analysis. But, of course, these reflect their discourse of science. They stress that discourse analysis is best learned through doing. When using DA as an approach to inquiry, we might carefully read documents, letters and emails. We might read transcripts or interviews, look at a video tape, observe the practices of health centers and ask ourselves, “How else might someone make sense of this?” “In what ways does this particular reading of the interaction position (e.g., pathologize) participants?” In the context of our relational constructionist perspective, what is important is some sort of critical engagement with the taken-for-granted practices and understandings, exploring how these might be otherwise. It is in these sorts of analyses that the multiple and diverse communities of participants and inquirers can collaborate to generate alternative understandings.

Again, as with narrative and all other ‘methods,’ discourse analysis can be approached from some sort of post-positivist or critical view of science. Here, like narrative analysis, researchers assume that they can (probably) correctly identify discourses for example, that oppress, pathologize, legitimize, and sanction certain ways
of being in certain contexts. The science orientation of the inquirer may distinguish between conceptual language/written texts (as discourse), discursive practices, and the ‘wider’ societal context and focus (Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 2008). We feel that it is important to be attentive to any impulse to employ discourse analysis as a way to fix things and to prove a point. *The relational constructionist attempts to use discourse analysis to open up alternative practices that the locals find more helpful for their own local forms of life.*

**Interviewing**

We have often encountered two potentially conflicting notions about interviews. One is the quick association that some make between interviews and constructionism. If I conduct an interview, I am a constructionist. But as we have said, there is no constructionist method and there is no method that is not constructed. The second conflicting idea about interviews is the common practice of using interview texts as the basis for making positive knowledge claims ("I found that..."). We have certainly found ourselves making such claims! For us, what is central in our orientation towards interviews is our assumption of co-construction, our interest in multiplicity, and the possibility that inquiry may transform the participating forms of life.

One illustration of interviewing practices that reflect our relational constructionist stance is the relational (or circular as they were originally called) questioning of the Milan Associates (Selvini et al. 1980; Tomm 1985). Here, the basic idea is to ask questions that generate a relationship. These forms of questions are based on Gregory Bateson’s (1972) idea that information is a difference and a difference is a relationship. Thus, if we ask, “How long have you been depressed?” the answer (“three months”) is
likely to be viewed as factual. Yet, if we ask, “If I asked your wife how long you have been depressed, what do you think she would say?” the answer provides information about the relationship (“She would say one month,” to which the wife, with a surprised look on her face responds, “Really? You think that I would say that?”). The conversation is directed to the relationship among ideas, people, contexts, etc. and away from a fact-finding expedition. We are no longer ‘digging for the truth’ but are now engaged in the language game of opening up multiple descriptions. Relational questioning allows participants to become reflective observers of their own relationships (the wife in the example above says, “I never realized you thought I had that understanding of you”). With such observation comes the possibility for transformation.

Another illustration can be found in the collaborative language approach of Harlene Anderson (1997). Anderson’s interviews are guided by what she refers to as a “not knowing” stance. What she means by this is that the interviewer is “not too quick to know.” While we might assume that we understand the other (particularly if we are the professional and the other is seeking our help), Anderson warns us to approach each interview with curiosity and uncertainty. The task is to invite the participant to tell his or her story without the interviewer assuming she or he already understands.

Last, we should add that much of what we said earlier about postmodern approaches to narrative and discourse is also relevant here. This means that we see the interview or conversation as an ongoing relational process that is co-constructed. It further means that the interview text is treated as a relational (and not individual) text – as a dialogical, multi-voiced performance.

_Ethnography_
Ethnography is very often employed as a ‘method’ in relation to a positive science discourse. As a method, it entails close study, through participation, of a culture or community. While it is most often associated with cultural anthropology, ethnography is commonly used in organizational studies, education, communication and healthcare. The ethnographer records the history of his or her observations of community practices. Of course, the significant question is: who is privileged to record and interpret the practices of a community or culture? Within positive science, the ethnographer brings an already formed science perspective that assists him or her to make sense of observations. In addition, the ethnographer relies on “cultural informants” to describe and explain local practices and makes sense of them in relation to his or her own narratives or discourses. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) would call the latter an "elite/a priori" approach.

Given our relational stance, it is not necessary for us to impose some pre-conceived theory, conceptual framework, hypothesis or content-specified interest on other. We would rather be attentive to who stands as a cultural informant and for what purposes. In their presentation of constructionist approaches to inquiry, Holstein and Gubrium (2008) note:

... constructionist analytics recognize that reality constituting “language games” (Wittgenstein 1953) are frequently institutionalized, which sets the practical conditions for talk and interaction. The experientially real is simultaneously and reflexively constitutive of, and constituted through, ongoing social relations. Constructionist ethnographers gaze both at and beyond immediate discursive activity to examine the ways in which
broader – if still socially constructed – circumstances, conditions, and interpretive resources mediate the reality-construction process. (376)

A further extension of ethnography adopted within a relational constructionist stance could be auto-ethnography. Ellis (2004) defines auto-ethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political (xix). Gergen and Gergen (2003) see auto-ethnography as allowing us to become “‘witnesses’... rather than reporting on ‘subjects under observation,’ the auto-ethnographer serves as the subject... giv[ing] first-hand insight into a form of life, making it available to the broader community” (62). In the auto-ethnographies we have seen, critical self-reflection is central, opening multiple voices/multiple interpretations and generating new action potentials for the inquirer and for the reader.

In our view, ethnography and auto-ethnography could be developed in ways that more fully realize the potential of a relational constructionist perspective. Some approaches move in this direction by claiming a “critical” orientation (Carspecken 1996; Thomas 1993). For Thomas this means “conventional ethnography with a political purpose” (4). He continues, “conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it; critical ethnographers do so to change it” by opening up alternative possibilities (40). Issues of dialogical relations, power and dominance, ethics and multiple (community-based) voices stand central in this line of work (Conquergood 1997; Madison 2005). There are also examples of auto-ethnography that center multiple relational voices and offer new ways of being in relation. For example, Fox (1996) integrates multiple voices in her analysis of child sexual abuse. She includes her own voice as both research and former victim of sexual abuse, the voice of the sex offender
and the voice of the victim in an attempt to expose the multiple orientations to child
sexual abuse. Last, and most consistent with our relational constructionist perspective,
some take the view that any critical inquiry should also include an auto-ethnographic
element (Hosking 2008; Howeling 2010).

**Reflections**

*When preparing for any form of inquiry, we are confronted with a host of decisions.*

*From a traditional research orientation, our choices distinguish our work as good
science or bad science. Yet, when research/inquiry is approached as a process of
relational construction, our choices are “fateful” but not necessarily right or wrong,
good or bad. Since we are speaking out of and into diverse language communities, the
meaning of our inquiry and our choices will vary.*

- **How might this orientation liberate you to engage with others involved in ways
  that are more sensitive and responsive to the multiple local rationalities?**

- **Try re-storying your current or some previous investigation in terms of (a
  postmodern orientation to) narrative, discourse, ethnography. What different
  possibilities does each open up?**

**Looking back**

What we have tried to offer in this chapter is an understanding that, when we lean
towards inquiry as constructionists, there are ways of positioning ourselves in relation to
our work. This orientation and positioning becomes more important than any particular
method. We consider methods as forms of practice. Each form of practice opens some
possibilities and closes others, just as does the choice of method in positive science. Yet,
unlike positive science where the selection of a method is evaluated as being good or bad
- given the research question, scientific interest, and so forth - within a constructionist sensibility, the selection of a form of practice is considered a potentially relationally responsive act. It now becomes possible to attempt to practice inquiry with (rather than on) participants who act in relation to multiple different but equal local realities.

We think it important to remember that the features that pull us toward narrative, discourse, interviewing and ethnography (or some other form[s]) are the multi-voiced, thick-textured, relationally engaged practices they allow. To the constructionist, a method is a resource for engagement. Being relationally engaged means that, for us, there is no neutral stance - there is no “god’s eye view” from nowhere (Putnam 1990). Each move in the relational dance of inquiry emerges out of and contributes to co-constructed practical and moral orders and relations - whether or not the relations are equal.

Some of the significant shifts we make in understanding the process of inquiry as relational constructionists are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Received view of science</th>
<th>Relational constructionism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>On-going Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Minimal structures &amp; unfolding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Forms of practice/performance <em>in context</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Generativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>Usefulness to the (multiple) local communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol</td>
<td>Emergence &amp; reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; scientist centered</td>
<td>Ongoing processes centered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shifting in thinking about inquiry

In the next chapter we explore the ways in which our inquiry processes transform the worlds we inhabit as well as the worlds of those who participate in our inquiry. We offer some useful illustrations of transformative work as elaborated by participative action research, appreciative inquiry, and transformative dialogue processes.