



## Informed by Diversity: Relational Self/Other Practice, Language Performance, and Social Realities as Critical Approaches to Persons, Peoples, and Organizations

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This article introduces critical approaches to persons, peoples and change efforts that involve the assistance of practitioners. Such approaches place an emphasis on:

1. An evolving relational, embedded and distributed Self
2. The idea that language constructs or re-constructs social realities, and
3. Reconstructions of practitioner knowledge, from the assumption of a world 'out there' that can be measured and known, to focusing on social realities and including client-local knowledge.

I argue that these approaches can further inform and develop our practices. In an integrating, global society it is time to move from constructions of persons, peoples and organizations as separate and static, to constructions of relatedness, collectivity and fluidity. The need for change (effected through, for example, individual coaching, therapy, family dynamics, organization development, diversity awareness building, and community development) is often identified and mobilized within a context of Self/Other interactions. Similarly, evidence of a change is also identified through the experience and perspectives of observing Others. I will therefore be referring to all of these contexts with the broader term, 'social change'.

I launch this article with a case involving two groups of Muslim refugees, with whom I debriefed war crimes and performed psychological screening for trauma. I share a fascinating discovery: a relational embedded and distributed Self rather than an independent and separate Self. I then reflect on the relational Self by using critical ideas that are now informing post-modern approaches to social change. This includes literature from Samoan culture and social/family change, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language games and forms of life, Foucault's philosophy of power relations and its relevance to knowledge, and the relational (social) constructionist approach to understanding how relations of change occur and what they produce

(Hosking, 2004; Hosking & McNamee, 2007; Gergen, 1995).

### The Case of the Muslim Refugees

The first group of refugees arrived in Canada in 1999. These several hundred Kosovars were victims of paramilitary forces. Many had witnessed their villages being burned and their intellectuals being taken away; some had witnessed mass executions of loved ones; and others had been raped. Many said they were forced to march through forests; some had escaped. Virtually all had been airlifted to Canada from refugee camps.

Our approach included questions informed by the strength-based practices of appreciative inquiry and solution-focused therapy, both of which concentrate on client resources rather than deficits. One of the key questions, designed to access resourcefulness, was "What kept you going through this difficult time in your life?"

The Kosovar refugees provided three kinds of responses to my questions:

- "God" [kept me/us going]
- "My family" [kept me/us going]
- "What else could we do?" [but keep going forward]



Several years later, immediately after the 2004 Indonesian Tsunami, I debriefed 125 male Acehnese. These refugees were also Muslims, and had been involved in a long revolution in the Indonesian province of Aceh, the epicenter of the tsunami. Many had come from prison camps and had been tortured. Many had lost family members in the tsunami, were in various states of trauma, and were waiting to be reunited with family members. The Acheneese were also faced with the challenges of organizing their community in the Vancouver area, and provided the same range of answers to my screening questions.

### Reflection on the Kosovar and Acehnese Responses

As I reflected on the answers from these refugees, and their stories, I concluded that they were living out of a collective identity rather than separate individual identities. Their lives seemed to be embedded in God, family, and going forward with their lives, and these intelligences seemed to be embedded in them. Self seemed fluid. There was little talk of "I".

During that period I completed both masters' and doctoral research, studying for over a decade with social/cultural anthropologists and social psychologists. My research was on social, organizational and family change practitioners and post-modern interactions with clients. Through this research, and practice as a clinician with multiple cultures, I discovered the notion of a relational Self, embedded with various intelligences. These intelligences come from loved ones, teachers, and others. Tomm, Hoyt, & Madigan (1998) refers to these embedded intelligences as "internalized others". Foucault (1982) refers to such intelligences as internalized discourses that socially construct our positions in the social world. Penn and Frankfurt (1994) refer to them as "the many voiced aspects of ourselves". Other scholar/practitioners suggest that we draw from these aspects of Self/Other as resources, embedded from a myriad of relations (Gergen & McNamee, 1999; Kavanagh, 2008), and that we often exist as multiple lived-identities of simultaneity (Holvino, 2012). I have referred to these as community-based identities (Kavanagh, 2008), describing them as constructed over time in our interactions with different life circumstances. It makes sense that related learnings remain present and shape us.

The self-referent language of many non-Western and aboriginal peoples indicate they are members of collective societies that recognize the embedded nature of Self/Other. Referring to the Samoans of the South Pacific, this embedded and distributed Self has been described by Tamesese et al (2005).

"... There is no such thing as a Samoan person who is independent (of others). You cannot take a Samoan out of the collective context. I cannot say that I am a person, just me; (because) then I will be nothing without my other connections . . .

The idea that a person can be an individual unto him/herself is a new concept which was introduced with Christianity. Christianity introduced the notion that one looked to oneself first. The Samoan belief is that in need, we look to each other. You cannot

prosper on your own, by yourself . . . The Self is identity and tofi [responsibilities, heritage and duties]. The Samoan Self was described as having meaning only in relation-ship with other people, not as an individual. This Self could not be separated from the 'va' or relational space that occurs between an individual and parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other extended family and community members (Tamesese et al, 2005)."

The above comments, and those provided by Kosovar and Acehnese refugees can be considered as a language practice that describes, constructs, and re-constructs a group's experience in historical and local contexts (Hosking, 2004). Wittgenstein refers to these as "language games", which construct a form of life. When working with different cultures in inter-group relations, I often consult the writings of Wittgenstein, to acquire insight into the relation between forms of life and language performance. Wittgenstein invites us to reflect on what our language performances construct in the social and organizational world.

Wittgenstein provides us with an example of language games at work:

"Let us imagine a language ... The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder, A, and an assistant, B. A is building with building-stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. Conceive of this as a complete primitive language (Wittgenstein, 1953: aphorism #2)."

The above informs us of certain practices of stone builders. Those practices are interwoven in the language game employed to 'go on' together in their work. Wittgenstein argues that "to imagine a language game is to imagine a form of life" (1953: aphorism #19). Likewise, practitioners employ their own distinct language games to carry out their work and to talk about their work (see Kavanagh, 2008, 2010). For both clients and practitioners these language games encode what Korzybski refers to as a map of the territory (1958). Wittgenstein argues that it is less important to understand each other, but more important to follow each other or be response-able to each other (1953: #'s 146-155), or to "go on" with each other.

We are now acquiring a discourse of a relational Self in the fields of social change. Referring to organizations, Bushe describes tribes as having a greater sense of the 'we' than teams, and that managers now prefer tribes rather than teams. Bushe (2008) describes tribes, in part, as "a collection of individuals who share a strong sense of identity", and "a tendency to think of each other as we". Bushe and Marshak (2009), referring to postmodern forms of organization development (OD), state that "in any large group there are multiple realities so any data collected is used not to identify the problem, or the truth, but to raise collective awareness of the multitude of perspectives at



play ... and/or the meaning-making process itself". This focus has been prevalent in critical approaches to family therapy since the early 1980s. Those practitioners realized through trial and error that each family was a unique form of life with its own methods of making meaning, and could be consulted as expert co-consultants in their own lived experience (Boscolo et al, 1987). This realization required the practitioners to let go of preconceived assumptions, what Anderson (1997) calls "pre-knowledge", and to employ the clients' own language game as much as possible. The idea that we carry knowledge from a myriad of relations empowers both clients and practitioners who are skilled in working this way. Associated approaches, such as narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), solution-focused therapy and coaching (deShazer et al, 1986) and appreciative inquiry (Hosking & McNamee, 2007), also elicit local, relationally-based knowledge from clients to generate increased awareness of Self/Other resources and new possibilities for social action.

### **Practitioner Language Games that Mobilize *Power To Others***

The language games of social change practitioners operate within a domain of politics and, therefore, power. Referral sources often construct clients as lacking, and needing their services to "become whole" or "heal", "develop leadership skills" or "deal with their communication problem". Relational constructionists would refer to this construction as a subject-object relation, a relation of power and knowledge in which the client is known from the subject's (ie, manager, coach, therapist, consultant) singular point of view and is thus "treated as available to be influenced, mobilized, motivated, directed... by the subject" (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Foucault (1980), a historian of knowledge and power, taught that, in democratic systems, power is mobilized rather than possessed by a sovereign. Three basic forms of mobilization are *power over others*, *power to others*, and *resistance*. The subject-object relation can be considered as a mobilization of *power over* based on knowledge. When the client accepts the practitioner's constructions, s/he gains some access to the practitioner's language game, and her own constructions become subjugated to those of the practitioner. Local client knowledge might not be mobilized.

With *power to* relations the practitioner can be influenced by the local-lived knowledge of clients. This signifies a subject-subject relationship in which power, in the form of knowledge, is shared. The practitioner arrives with practice knowledge and the client arrives with local knowledge. The relationship is a meeting ground of different knowledges, which create the space for generative "news of difference" (Bateson, 1979), or the possibility of how things could become (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996).

Since much of social change-work involves consultation processes, we need what Anderson (1999) refers to as "dynamic generative kind[s] of conversation[s] in which there is room for all voices, in which each person is wholly present, and in which there is a two-way exchange and crisscrossing of ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings".

Penn and Frankfurt (1994) write that such generative consultations, unlike monologues, are many-voiced. These consultations are future oriented, open, inviting and relative. They await an answer. They make space for relationally-informed knowledge. They presuppose a relationship between conversationalists in which "each tries to maintain herself and the other as a subject". This seems to be a subject-subject undertaking of equality, rather than a subject-object relation of knowledge.

What happens in the above kinds of conversations is that the construct of Self shifts from individual, separate and static, to the experiential "we". This involves a listening to follow, to become with, rather than to attempt to understand from a position of difference. Participants are available to influence and to be influenced. The language game also shifts to one of possibility. Human biology, and now brain science, supports these ideas. Daniel Goleman, writing on emotional intelligence and leadership, employs brain science to speak to this notion of a relational Self. Goleman describes the limbic system as that part of the brain that deals with emotions and nurturing relations; he says it has an open-loop quality. The open loop functions as "an interpersonal limbic regulation where one person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms, and even immune function inside the body of another" (Goleman, Boyatziz, & McKee, 2002). The sense of connection that occurs in loving relationships, therapy, high functioning teams, and interesting conversations gives special significance to "the open-loop design of the limbic system and means that other people can change our very physiology, and so our emotions".

### **Integrating Critical Approaches with Social Change Practice**

Collective societies, the relational Self, and language games have been around for a long time. Applications of these have been mobilized in post-modern ideas, in critical social psychology, social action theory, Marxism, feminism, and related theories. These 'critical approaches' to persons and organizations center upon three areas (Thompson & McHugh, 1995; Hosking, 2004).

- Persons are viewed as an evolving relational, embedded and distributed Self
- Language creates social realities rather than describing reality
- Knowledge shifts from a knowable world 'out there' to a focus on social realities

The meaning of what it is to be a person or group shifts when we consider persons and peoples as co-constructed, or emerging in co-evolving relations. The question of how the context creates the person (at this moment) becomes important. Once we let go of the need for a static identity or condition, new possibilities emerge. As Holvino implies, the person is much more than one who grew up in poverty, or a static sexual creature, or an otherwise-described Other. Utilizing the notion of a relational Self, past and present relationships, and related internalized knowledge, can thus be elicited by social change practitioners. Aboriginals, for example, are known to refer to "all my relations" as sources of wisdom.



Language, as we see above, is considered a form of action. The job of a practitioner, in part, is to coordinate one's own responses with client language acts. The unit of analysis thus becomes the combination of act/response, which of course creates a social reality (Gergen, 1995); as practitioners, this includes our own participation and what it produces with the Other. Adopting client language is a starting place of response, to try on the client map and the knowledge contained therein. We follow the Other. The limbic system open loop begins to unfold community. Our representational language games function as maps of the territory (Korzybski, 1958), and the practitioner's work is to help expand the client map so that it becomes more functional in current situations. The practitioner can help only to the degree that his/her own map allows. Thus the process of change also includes the practitioner changing with the client.

The focus is on social realities rather than pre-conceived knowledge. Letting go of what we think we know about persons and peoples may be a way of honoring that we are in a global society, and that our pre-conceived assumptions may no longer work on their own. The focus shifts to social realities that are considered to be multiple, local-historical, and made in action. This includes the social realities that we create in act/response (joint action) with clients. We now live in more culturally and ethnically integrated communities and workplaces. Members of collective societies now co-exist with cultural backgrounds that celebrate the individual Self. These language games are clearly different from each other. How do we make space for these language games to co-exist and be honored? Client wisdom or local knowledge may be more relevant nowadays than practitioner knowledge of a world 'out there' and the way(s) it functions. The opportunity now exists to mobilize both forms of knowledge, and the possibilities they both provide when in collaboration.

#### **Concluding Thoughts and Future Possibilities**

The Kosovars and Acehnese spoke of connectedness in which their version of 'we' was greater than the Self. This allowed them to lend power to each other and to resist in order to survive terrifying ordeals, and to keep going forward with God and Family. In this article I have drawn from Kosovar and Acehnese wisdom resources around the relational Self, and provided an overview of related critical and emerging approaches to persons, people and organizations. I have also introduced some initial thinking-tools for practitioners of social change.

In writing this article I have been able to revisit and reflect on my own map of the practice territory, and mobilize my related language game. In doing so I realize that this is only an introduction to critical approaches to social change. Future endeavors include revisioning early human relations models such as the Johari Window, Schein's application of Lewin's theories for education, and Goleman's approach to emotional intelligence. Such reflection and revision can expand such practice tools and make them more relevant to the relational Self, and to societies and workplaces undergoing cultural and ethnic integration.

#### **BIOGRAPHY:**

Earon is a therapist, coach and consultant who has worked in organizational development, leadership development, personal growth coaching in community groups, and was a founding member of the British Columbia Organization Development Network. Earon completed his reflective practitioner PhD at Tilburg University, under the guidance of social/organizational psychologists and practitioners Prof. Dr. Dian Marie Hosking and Prof. Dr. John Rijsman.

Drawing upon several organizing theories and his own practice, he focused on leadership, power relations, and situated learning processes in professional communities of practice. He is a certified OD consultant, a certified executive coach, and a registered clinical counselor. He is a member of the NTL Institute and the Canadian Society for Organizational and Industrial Psychology. He maintains a private practice and currently teaches psychology to graduate practitioners at City University of Seattle (in Vancouver, Canada).

Earon is passionate about helping practitioners develop skills and insights in reflective practice. To that end, he is developing models to assist social change practitioners present their practice-based experiences, insights, and wisdom in Practicing Social Change.

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