

## MIDNIGHT THOUGHTS ON CONSTRUCTIVIST THINKING

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### **To begin.....**

A few short days ago I flew from Canada to Finland, a distance of many thousands of kilometres and a difference of nine time zones.

Perhaps it is due to my being seventy years of age and in the autumn of my life, but it is rather difficult now for me to re-orient myself after such a nomadic event. Often I have many sleepless nights which render me tired and anxious. I have tried many formulas for avoiding or overcoming this malaise, but only one seems to help.

That is the act of writing. As I write, my gloominess, insecurity, and tiredness retreat and leave me to be absorbed in making sense with words and sentences. For this I am extremely grateful.

I suppose that what I am writing can be named a reflective standpoint about counselling practice and the value constructivist thinking holds for the practice of counselling. I will add that what I write, in my opinion, has import for pedagogical practices as well. While counselling and pedagogy are different practices, when they are in a good form they have many common points.

### **Turning to constructivist thinking**

I have been asked many times why I have taken up a constructivist way of thinking. There are, for me, two principal answers. One comes from the reflective distillation of my own life experience. The second answer comes from my own growing dissatisfaction with the conceptual tools which I acquired in the earlier era of my life. I will comment on the latter answer first.

As I passed through University studies and on into professional-academic life, I was imbued with a positivistic, behaviouristic, reductionistic, and rather mechanistic set of perspectives from which to do my work as academic, psychologist, counsellor and teacher. In retrospect I realize that I never fully accepted these teachings since they seemed to negate much of my

own life experience. Further, I was by upbringing and by self-study strongly existential in my general outlook. However, in response to considerable pressure from the positivist environment in which I lived, I adhered to the call for instrumental rationality and mathematization of data. I wanted to survive!

However, by 1980 a dissident voice was forming in me. A decade and a half later, this dissident voice would have emerged and replaced the “muted” voice which I had lived with for many years.

I first studied phenomenology, critical theory, and experience-based anthropology and then began to learn interpretive research methods. I started to claim my status as an author and experiment with writing in the first person, and to find ways to legitimate the life experience of people, including my own. As postmodern literature appeared, I studied carefully, trying to find those refrains which would be helpful to me in my advancement of counselling practice and pedagogy. I began to find ways of bringing the concepts of *dialogue, voice, life space, positioning, mapping, co-researching, participative reality, patterns of reciprocal influence, language tools (metaphors, narrative, images, dialogical listening), relational being,*

and *personal activity projects* into my discussions about, and practice of, counselling and pedagogy. I now believe that a generally constructivist perspective is a good thinking tool for researching and guiding the work of counsellors, teachers, and those who mentor and supervise these social practices.

Of course I am often asked what I mean by constructivist thinking. While I have no final answer to this question, what I say is:

Constructivist thinking is

believing that human beings, by using linguistic tools, by generating meaning, and by interactively achieving agreements about how social life and society does and should function, *construct, produce, maintain, revise, or, conversely, degrade and destroy* personal and social realities(selves, relationships, social life, societies, cultures, civilizations).

I believe that we humans are simultaneously: a node point in a web of relationships which affords us opportunities and restraints for emergence and expansion as a human self – this is our relational beingness; at the same time we maintain the fiction(?) that we are an

agent, a self which is responsible for own actions and destiny – an atomistic being which can and does functions at times without relatedness to social life. From this latter view, the only world there is, is the one constructed by mind.

The claim of relational beingness is made by the social constructionists; the second claim is that of the so-called radical constructivists. I cannot accept either claim in its entirety. I believe that we are both. A subjective sense of self – or self-identity-- is extremely important and the problematization of identity is one of the crucial issues of our era. Most counsellors surely must recognize the “identity-crisis” of many people who seek counselling.

At the same time it seems virtually self-evident to me that each of us emerges from a web of relationships; we do our daily work in a nexus of relationships, and our efforts to maintain our course in life and to become that which we are not yet, is relationally mediated .

In this reflective essay I am writing down constructivist ideas which I am developing and using in my own research projects – namely, *SocioDynamic Counselling* and *Transformational Learning*.

In what follows I offer pieces of a conceptual scaffold, which I find inspiring, and of practical use in my own research and practice. I use the word *scaffold* to name ideas which are under development and which, at the same time, afford me a perspective and conceptual tools with which to construct my life projects. I think that it is very important to keep in mind the *unfinalizability* of our working concepts and allow them to change as existential and contextual conditions change.

I am rather taken by Richard Rorty's observation that it is pointless to spend very much time trying to prove that a newly developing set of ideas or practices is better than other sets, especially those sets which have already gained ascendancy in a discipline. Rorty's contention is that a fruitful way to develop new ways of construing and doing is by using new words and using old words in new ways to describe practices and thus develop new vocabularies for thinking and practice. For nearly two decades, I have been developing generally constructivist ideas to use as tools for generating new counselling and pedagogical practices, which I believe, are called for by postmodern conditions of social life.

## The dialogical

I like to say that my ideas are not only “developing” but that they also *dialogical*. By this I mean that they have an emergent quality and have been constructed from my “conversations” with many others—both authorial-readerly conversations and direct, face-to-face conversations. I strongly believe that our own words also always contain the words of others—either through anticipation or as responsiveness. By our words and other avenues of communication, we are surely bound together as relational beings. Moreover, it is through our dialogical, multi-voiced communication that we co-construct who we are, how we are, and where we are.

I first became fascinated with the potential of dialogue when I read some books written by Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher who has been called the “philosopher of dialogue”. Subsequently I encountered H. Gadamer’s discussions of the interpretive act. More recently the writings of M. Bakhtin have enabled me to grasp the reasons why we should try to bring dialogical communication into the education of counsellors and pedagogues.

Nearly everyone who is interested in counselling practice agrees that listening is of paramount importance in the counselling conversation. I will use the term dialogical listening and point out what I regard as its main features. Listening and speaking are enjoined parts of a process of intermental communication. Within this process:

1. The listener is present and respectful toward the speaker, but listens to the story.
2. The listener must remain intramentally open to being changed by what he or she hears.
3. The listener must be self-observing for invariably there will arise in consciousness *counter* words and meanings to the words and meanings coming from the speaker.
4. The listener must desire to gain an understanding of the other's meanings, yet accept that any particular understanding will most likely be interpretive[by interpretation I mean sense-making and I do not mean "interpreting" by reference to some model or theory as might be done, for example in psychoanalysis or behavior

diagnosis] and result from some degree of fusion of the two communicants' respective interpretive horizons.

5. The purpose of dialogical listening goes beyond just listening. It serves to generate and articulate meaning and is one of the requisites for negotiated interment agreements and understandings of personal and social realities.
6. Dialogical listening is an active process and is directly linked, not only to self-observation, but also to the asking of questions which generate meaning and to reiteration.
7. The role of self-observation in the listening process is to reduce the unwanted intrusion and distorting influence of listener bias, indifference, and authoritative interpretation. "Authoritative" interpretation refers to a listener rendering an interpretation of the other's utterances based on ideas which the listener already comes with more-or-less regardless of what the speaker has said.
8. From a dialogical point of view, human voice is polyphonic. So too is listening a process of multiple hearings. As a counsellor I must ask, as I listen, "Just who is being

addressed here? Is it me, or the speaker's parent, or spouse, or some other addressee in the speaker's life? Or is the speaker self-addressing or perhaps addressing a favored theory? Am I being addressed as the person I am, or as a "counsellor", or as a stranger, or an official, etc.

From a dialogical point of view, intermental and intramental communication are both reality constructing activities. Both speaking and listening are multi-dimensional and serve as complex reality constructing tools. Of course, many of these complexities are eliminated if one switches to "authoritative" communication.

### **Enter the self**

One of the most perplexing issues in constructivism is: Is there, or is there not, a "self". At one end of this issue are the modernists who claim that indeed there is a self—it is real, authentic, core and can even be measured. At the other end of the issue are Foucault, Lacan, Gergen, and many other post-modern, post-structuralist scholars who write of emptying, decentering, and deconstructing the self—or

at least concepts of self. My thinking on this issue goes along these lines:

There is not an essence or entity called self – any idea of a material self is fictive. However this is a useful fiction and one which we all use – especially in matters of identity.

From neuroscience studies of brain function we can assume that the brain arrives at birth already prepared with the necessary neural wiring for language learning. Any language will do. We begin to learn and use language as we engage in fields of reciprocal influence with others, most notably our family members.

We can also assume that the brain is a self-organizing system.

As we make our way through the paths of culture, we experience in many modes: perceiving, sensing, moving, imagining, languaging. Our many streams of experience are received and organized by the brain as configurations of meaning. Experiences which are in some way related to each other are sited into meaning clusters in our neural network. We might say, then, that the portions of our brain that is symbol sensitive is organized into many configurations or sub-

systems of meaning. Our brain is both localized and wholistic, or “holonic”.

Each of these configurations is composed of coherent meanings derived from experience streams. We reach a point where the particular configuration or sub-system is elaborated and rich enough in meaning that we can “give voice” to that stream of experience. So we can speak with some personal authority about our experience as a father, a student, an unemployed person, a victim of of harsh treatment, a lover, a survivor of a serious illness, and so on. Bakhtin wrote of the “speaking personality”. I have in mind the same phenomenon except that I choose to say “voice of self”. I believe that each human being is able to voice many selves or streams of experience. We are multi-vocal. This has enormous implications for both counselling and pedagogy.

The pronoun “I” (whether uttered or simply assumed) indexes the site/process and experience context from which the voice emanates. This the “I” positions or locates us in in the multiplicity of our self.

It is with this pronoun that our utterances begin. Perhaps it is not to extravagant to say that human life is linguistic life. The form

of communication which is great interest to us from a constructivist view is what has been labelled “dialogue” by Bakhtin and others.

When we become seriously interested in dialogical utterances and how they are, in fact, constructive of personal and social realities, we should ask two questions:

Who is doing the speaking – who is the author of this address?

Who is being addressed – who is the audience-respondent?

It is helpful to think of two varieties of dialogue. First is inner dialogue – the speech of “I” and “me” in individual consciousness.

This is an extraordinarily type of communication which indicates an ability for imaginative “taking the role of the other” -- the basis of empathy, for acts of “reflection” and for creative expression.

Second is intermental dialogue or face to face communication with another person. This type of dialogue implies an openness to both one’s own experience-meanings and an openness to the utterances and meanings of the other.

The principal feature of dialogue, and that which marks it off from monological speech, is the requirement that the person be willing to change based on hearing or reading what the other says

and means. Dialogical voice is open to change – an authoritative voice is not. The voice of authority as embodied in the roles of priest, teacher, parent, and expert is authoritative and monological it is not particularly open to change through hearing what the other has to say.

In thinking about the self, from my point of view includes the considerations:

1. References to the self are metaphorical or fictive but very important.
2. In the configured language-meaning systems of our consciousness, “I” describes a “position” from which experience is being voiced. We each have a great range of positioning which we have developed as we have lived through various influence patterns in social life.
3. I am often asked if I think there is no core self. I used to think so, now I don't. I believe that each of us has grounding experiences and meanings derived from those experiences. These meanings are can be given voice so we can make such statements as “I strongly believe in

democracy”, or “One of my basic values is compassion”, or I hold the existential values of hope, courage, care, freedom and responsibility”. I do not see why, in principle, we have to invoke the concept “self” when we make such statements.

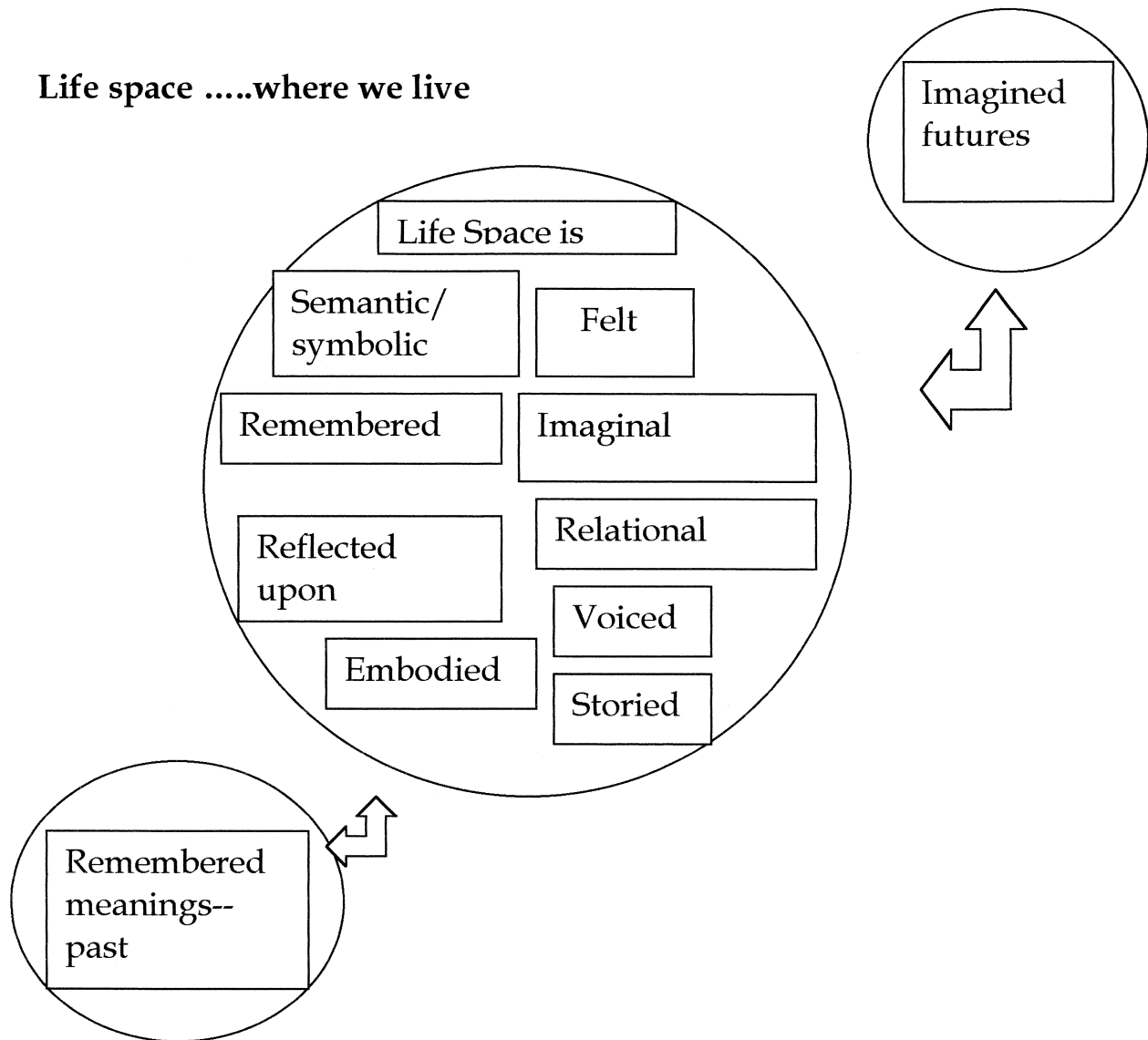
I will stop this line of discussion by saying that like everyone else I know, I frequently use the term self and for good, practical reasons. However, I am undergoing a revisionary struggle in an attempt to increase my use of the terms “life-space”, “voice”, position(or standpoint) “multiplicity” – by referring to myriad’s of streams of experience and meaning configurations.

In practical terms, this change of vocabulary affords an opening for counselors and educators to reflect on the importance of:

1. multiplicity in human life – the many “Is” in the holing mind
2. taking an emergent rather than an essentialist view of people
3. taking listening and speaking to be forms of social mediation
4. adopting a view of people as narrators of small and large life stories

5. considering that language functions as a set of tools for creating personal and social realities.

**Life space ....where we live**



In the figure above, I have tried to show that a life space

(metaphorical expression) is one way to speak of *being-in-the-world*.

A life space marks the coordinated meanings, intentions, habits, and modes of constructing personal existence. The concept "life space"

describes all those facets of experience and experiencing, past, present, and imagined future which are present to the individual and which carry personal meaning. It is a flexible, evolving, imaginal space, which is home to the multiplicity of I(s), positions, and voices, which constitute each of us as a human being

Some practical values to counsellors and pedagogues of applying the concept of life space in their practices are:

1. It can be articulated, especially by “mapping”
2. It invokes contextual thinking and reveals patterns of meaning and reciprocal influence
3. It reduces essentialist thinking
4. It articulates that living is in the present – which is linked to past and future.
5. It invites a storied and meaning approach to the counselling encounter
6. It places counselling in the frame of on-going social life.
7. The counselling activities of dialogical conversation and mapping around the investigation of life-space are meaning-negotiating processes which contribute in a cooperative and constructing way

to both the counselling relationship and to the understandings which can form a basis for developing repairs for the help-seeker's troubles.

8. Finally, it provides a context for the four great questions(stories) required for life planning:

- What is your present(existential)situation?
- In what ways, if at all, is your present connected to what has gone before?
- What are your preferred futures?
- What social life paths can be decided upon and traveled from here to there?