

Review

What can we do with our stories? Reflections from the Faroes

Cathy Sharp, *Research for Real*, Edinburgh, April 2018

In my efforts to refresh my social theory and develop new perspectives on evaluation I recently attended a social constructivism conference on Communication, Collaboration and Relationships in the Faroe Islands¹. I'd been alerted to this opportunity by one of the organisers, Gro Emmertsen Lund, a Danish organisational consultant and author with a shared interest in reshaping evaluation (Lund, 2011).

As a freelance action researcher, this was my annual dose of CPD. Like many people from the UK, this was new territory for me and I couldn't resist the location and the conference aims to 'increase the motivation and the joy of learning, teaching, leading and serving' and 'bring public services into synchrony with emerging world conditions'. One of the keynote speakers was Ken Gergen who, amongst his many writings, articulates a vision of the researcher as an active agent in fashioning the future and research as a form of social action (Gergen, 2014).

There were about 170 delegates and, somewhat to my surprise, the vast majority of them were from the Faroes. People came from schools and local and national government, but in the mix, there was also an airline pilot, a publisher, an actor and a few consultants. The international delegates were from other Nordic countries, Switzerland, Nepal, Canada and the USA.

I imagine the agenda would appeal to readers of *Concept*. Ken and Mary Gergen did a very impressive double act with joint keynotes on 'Social Construction and Narrative Practices' and 'A Relational Perspective on Practice' and workshops on 'Relational

¹ <https://www.faroeconference.com/>

leading and the challenge of changing times’ and ‘The Challenge of Positive Aging’. A highlight was the relational keynote where they managed to convey the ideas of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) through role-play (Pearce, 2007). Imagine the scene as two colleagues meet in the corridor:

Take 1

Ken: “That’s a lovely, colourful outfit you’re wearing today Mary!”

Mary: “And I thought you were colour blind.” (said with obvious amusement)

Take 2

Ken: “That’s a lovely, colourful outfit you’re wearing today Mary!”

Mary: “You do that one more time, and I’m reporting you!” (waging her finger angrily at him)



Take 3

Ken: “That’s a lovely, colourful outfit you’re wearing today Mary!”

Mary: “Ah thanks, that’s nice.....you’re quite well turned out yourself today.” (strokes his lapel)

Her response in Take 3 elicits a further turn, that takes the form of an invitation to dinner and much laughter. They made the point beautifully. How we make meaning is embedded in the relational process, which has a context and a history, as well as choices we make about language, tone of voice, gestures and so on.

I also attended a workshop on *Ethics and Leadership*, hosted by Gitte Haslebo from Denmark, which led us through some case examples featured in her book, which I had recently read (Haslebo and Haslebo, 2012). This reinforced the themes of all the presentations and workshops over the two days. There was a profoundly optimistic thread through it all – in essence, that as we have created what we have, so we can change it. The central ideas of social constructionism were reinforced in all the sessions - that what we focus on becomes our reality; that ‘words create worlds’ and the essentialness of multiple perspectives. And echoing too, the idea that “*the point of research should be to talk to each other about what we ought to be doing.*”²

As narrative is indispensable, we need to ask, ‘what can we *do* with our stories?’ When we share them, we can create a dialogue and a focus on what kind of future we want to create. In the way we approach our work together, whether it is research, leadership, practice development, or community development, we need to shift from investigations of deficits, to be future-focused by creating a dialogue about contributions. With me, they were preaching to the converted; I have come to a view of the essential and powerful part that appreciative inquiry can play (Sharp, Dewar and Barrie, 2016; Sharp et al, 2017). Most of the conference contributions at least alluded to this and there was one session billed as an *Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*, led by Larry Espe a former school superintendent and great story teller from Canada³.

More generally, I felt the implied part of Appreciative Inquiry was not as well-developed as I would have liked. If ‘the problem is the problem’ then people need more help to think differently and reframe thinking and practice about those issues that we decide are ‘problems’. In workshop exercises where we discussed scenarios, I found that people couldn’t develop fuller, alternative approaches that might create dialogue, because they weren’t sufficiently familiar with the theory and practices of appreciative inquiry. My writing with colleagues at home has attempted to develop the tools and more mature understandings of appreciative inquiry, beyond a simplistic focus on

² This is a paraphrase by Peter Reason of Richard Rorty, (1999) *Philosophy and social hope*. London: Penguin Books

³ <https://www.taosinstitute.net/co-creating-schools-of-the-future-through-appreciative-inquiry>

positivity, to help to us to see old issues in new ways and offer fresh ways to challenge the status quo. It's work in progress.

There also more work to do around the implications of social constructionism for our approaches to evaluation. There was a sense for me that, when we think about measurement or evaluation, we often seem stuck in the realist paradigm and the concepts and tools we have don't aid us, they don't recognise the messiness and complexity of relational practices, but too often are a *'barrier to transformation'* (Quinn Patton, 2017). If what we focus on becomes our reality, perhaps we should reframe evaluation to be more curious about what is working, so we can create more of it. Evaluation as a dialogue, not a diagnosis. I often hear that *'it's all about relationships'* – it is clearly time to change and shift our focus to relationships; not relationships as 'things' but as co-created and dynamic relational processes in which we are embedded. In this way we can bring new qualities to our talking to each other about our various and shared visions of a better future.

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