

ARTFUL INQUIRY: A SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This article introduces symbolic constructivism, a qualitative research approach which uses artlike, non-routine portrayal (e.g., sculpture, photographs, drawing, dramatization, etc.) to elicit, challenge, and shift existing sensemaking frameworks. Unlike art-based methods which rely on expert interpretation, symbolic constructivism stresses the development of intersubjective understanding; researcher and respondent interpretations interact to create multiple forms of meaning. After introducing the approach and discussing its connections to other informing frameworks (notably symbolist thought, constructivism, hermeneutics, art therapy, and visual sociology), some methodological guidelines are developed which revolve around the kinds and degrees of change sought by inquiring parties.

“The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, this de-concealing, i.e. the truth of beings, happens in the work” (Heidegger, 1971: 39).

Overview

In this article, I discuss symbolic constructivism (hereafter abbreviated SC), a research framework which uses nonroutine artlike portrayal (e.g., drawings, sculpture, photographs, dramatization) to catalyze alternative knowings of conscious, tacit, and nonconscious¹ beliefs and feelings. An elicitive approach, SC “issues not in laws like Boyle’s, or forces like Volta’s, or mechanisms like Darwin’s, but in constructions like Burckhardt’s, Weber’s, or Freud’s: systematic unpackings of the conceptual world in which condottiere, Calvinists, or paranoids live” (Geertz, 1980: 167). Its goal is the creation of bounded “crises of representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994a: 9-11) that lead to richer, less reductive understandings of human beingness.

Art-based symbolization tends to naturally upend more logocentric, “reasoned” forms of knowing. Whereas we often take our words to “mean what they mean,” drawings, sculpture, poems, and even photographs seldom allow unambiguous interpretation; their polysemic nature invites multiple interpretive passes. To paint one’s world is to express and experience it very differently than talking about it—talking through the painting beseeches us to alter our story. Consequently, participants end up conveying their world in ways they may have purposefully avoided or never thought to do. As art therapists and depth psychologists have long known (and other social scientists are discovering), art-as-inquiry *does* things (cf. Finley & Knowles, 1995). When we create artistically to learn more about ourselves, we open to laughter, tears, anger, fear, excitement, and wonderment. Rarely are we left empty handed or untouched.

An Introductory Example

A sample application might involve asking an informant to take and explain photographs of his work. The inquirer would solicit multiple interpretations of the photos, reflecting Gioia et. al.’s (1994) request to

take seriously our responsibilities as researchers to articulate how the informants’ views are informative. In that vein, we give uncommon attention to the insiders’ “common sense” representations of their experience and interpretive world view (p. 367).

In this way, SC differs sharply from other art-based methods which privilege the interviewer’s interpretations at the expense of the respondent’s (e.g., when researchers use standardized interpretive manuals to independently “decode” a respondent’s artwork). Instead, meaning is seen as being intersubjectively constructed, as arising from the interplay between inquiring parties.

The interpretive effort would follow a dialectic, hermeneutic spiral: parts (e.g., photo objects, narrative bits, labels, specific feelings) would be used to inform and challenge wholes (e.g., photo groupings, narrative themes, key words, general affects) and vice versa.² Literal, primary meanings would be solicited along with subliterate, secondary ones (Haskell, 1991; Hatch, 1993; Ricoeur, 1976: 55, Turner, 1992: 49). Tacit and/or nonconscious meanings might be accessed through an oppositional or affective discussion of the photos, examining what was *not* photographed, or how the informant-as-photographer *felt* when composing

different pictures (cf. Weiser, 1993). Aesthetic referents might be used in a Gadamerian sense (Gadamer, 1975: 102) to further understanding (e.g., asking “What parts of this photo are most attractive and unattractive?” followed by “What does this attractive/unattractive part suggest?”). As with many other qualitative approaches, SC requires the researcher to act as bricoleur (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994a: 2-3), choosing questions, materials, creational sequences, and methods of portrayal that make sense locally—before, during, and after the interview.

Throughout the process, the researcher would strive for reflexivity, attempting to become aware of her own interpretations of the photos, her feelings about them, and her reactions to the respondent’s interpretations; typically (but not necessarily as I will explain later) these would be shared with the informant in an effort to construct more extensive, nonreductive understandings. Ideally, the interpretive interchange would respect both sets of opinions, allowing the emergence and coexistence of opposing and consensus viewpoints. In the hermeneutic tradition of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and others (cf. Palmer, 1969), an effort would be made to reach a “good enough” level of understanding, one that was intellectually and emotionally satisfying, at least for the time being. Reaching this level might require multiple interpretive passes through the photos, launching another photo shoot, spending time observing the respondent at work, and perhaps reversing the process by having the researcher take photos and discussing them with the respondent (see Harper’s work on photo elicitation, 1986).

Symbolic Constructivist Beginnings

Although Clifford Geertz was seemingly the first to use the term “symbolic constructivism” (1980: 177), the use of in-vivo, respondent generated symbol creation as a research method has seen comparatively little application in sociology or anthropology, being confined instead to more psychologically oriented fields: art therapy, Jungian and Gestalt psychology, family therapy, and consumer perception research. Reasons for SC’s scarcity are not hard to find: art-based methods tend to be intrusive, time consuming, resistance prone, confusing, frustrating, and dependent on the clinical skills of the researcher. The researcher may end up acting as interviewer, interviewee, theorist, creative director, materials expert, aesthete, hand-holding confidence booster, empathetic listener, and occasionally therapist—a combination which can understandably land SC in the “too hard” pile.

Even so, the approach has its attractions. It tends to generate holistic, non-sterile descriptions, ones which can simultaneously complement and challenge understandings formed through more conventional means. It invites the projection of nonconscious material, helping us move beyond the regression equation and into the mysterious land of the error term. And it provides a way of expressing the emotions, of highlighting truths that are more felt than thought (Edwards, 1986).

Since most of what I have discovered about SC has occurred within organizational contexts, my examples and references tend to have an organizational slant. However, I believe this approach can be fruitfully applied to other social science areas as well. In the following sections, I present some ways of locating this form of art-based study, and provide some guidelines for its use.

Some Informing Voices

SC can be linked to a number of traditions and approaches, notably symbolist thought, constructivism, hermeneutics, visual sociology & anthropology, and art therapy. Each offers complementary threads of thought which I have twisted together to form theoretical and methodological rope.

Symbolist Connections

That symbolism is central to SC is obvious. Considerably less evident is what the term “symbol” means; rarely have I chased a more elusive concept. Reflecting its semantic origin as that which is “thrown together” (see Morgan et. al., 1983: 4-7), it has come to mean different things to different theorists, not all of whom have been content to “live and let live.” Though lexicographers often define symbol as something which stands for something else, the particulars of how much “else,” what “something” is, and whether we should stand for “stands for” have been hotly contested (cf. Clifford, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1983; Hiley et. al., 1991; Ricour, 1976; Rosaldo, 1989). Not surprisingly, the various schemes developed for describing and classifying symbolic use (e.g., de Saussure, 1974; Ortner, 1973 Peirce, 1940), have also been roundly critiqued.

Much of this debate has centered on whether symbols can be interpreted with any certainty, either by their authors or readers (Rosenau, 1992 provides a good historical review of this issue. See also Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b: chaps. 1, 2, 31, & 36). Historically, some have regarded symbols, particularly linguistic ones, as signifiers that exist in diacritically fixed relationship to signified objects (e.g. de Saussure). They have form, meaning, and utility relative to other symbols in a social system. Within this view, symbols *represent*; that is, they form proxies for the things they symbolize. By extension, “true” meaning exists if one is willing to dig for it.

Others (e.g., Derrida and Lyotard) have convincingly disputed this structuralist position, arguing that fixed relationships between signifying symbols and signified objects are chimerical. They maintain that the assignment of meaning to a signifier requires the forceful silencing (deferring, differencing ... differal) of other alternatives. Though signification is a fixed-sum game where one meaning wins at the others’ expense, alternate interpretations do not simply disappear when uninvoked. They remain in the background as definitional shadows, petulantly whispering “how about me?” Symbol systems consequently exist in a perpetual state of tension, forever threatening towards Lacanian “glissement” (see Lemaire, 1977), a continuous slip down the signifier slide where interpretive attempts lead to “infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier” (Derrida, 1978: 25) . Within this framework, the more one digs for truth, the less it is found.

Relative to SC, I believe the concept of symbol is best located between these two views, designating something which *seemingly* has determinable, sign-like form(s), meaning(s) and use (s) *and* which acts as a gateway to other understandings. For me, symbolic constructions are (to borrow from physics) both fixed particles and fluid waves, stationary and processual, objectified tangibles joined to subjective acts of sense making. Form, meaning, and use restlessly coexist in quantum-like fashion: change or eliminate any of these and a symbol shifts or evaporates.

Useful symbols in this work are those which dynamically “suggest” rather than passively “stand for,” *telling* ones which, in Glaser’s words, have lots of “grab”(1978: 4) and in Richardson’s (1994: 517), are “vital”. Telling symbols have important things to say: the

telling picture is not only worth a thousand words, but moves us to speak them. The telling symbol may suggest forgotten details, reveal tacit and nonconscious understandings, or convincingly point to inadequate and perhaps harmful understandings while simultaneously suggesting new ways of knowing and being.

What and how many suggestions are told, the extent to which a suggestion is regarded as “true”, and whether we adopt a given telling depends fundamentally on the cultural “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973: 5) we find ourselves enmeshed in. It is these webs we refer to when trying to encode and decipher the symbols we create. It is these webs which become mirrored, questioned, and sometimes re-spun during the SC encounter. And it is these webs which determine how the encounter is to be orchestrated in terms of collaboration and power (which I take up in a separate section).

The Liminal in Symbolic Constructivism. As beings who rely heavily on symbols to conduct our lives, we are strongly disposed towards keeping our symbolic webs in an agreed upon and dependable state, from the intrapersonal level to the societal (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 70-84, 110-146). A certain amount of symbolic fixity is needed for most things we do, from deciding when “Oh baby” means a change of diapers or more foreplay, to knowing that lit brake lights symbolize someone stopping and not a festive moment in traffic. Legal systems, dictionaries, and information technology all testify to our enormous need for symbolic stability. In short, the representational (pre)dominates. The representational stance dominates not only through its ubiquitous presence, but its restrictive interpretive gaze. As Kallinikos (1995) states:

Following Heidegger (1977), representation is considered as coinciding with modernity and the emergence of the industrial world. It differs from any other prior mode of knowing in that it is not simply concerned with the duplication or symbolic coding of the world in all its detail and diversity, but rather with the *selective objectification* of things, states and processes. Representation is selective in the sense of objectifying properties or facets of the world . . . It abstracts from the totality of things and events which it reduces in order to survey and master them. (p. 118, italics in original).

Ironically, though we need a certain level of symbolic representativeness to conduct our lives, we must also become open to interpretive alternatives if we are to change and grow. As the poststructuralists have shown, it is through the loosening of our symbols—inviting representational crises—that we discover how we constitute ourselves and others. A state of symbolic looseness can be equated with what Victor Turner (1982: 20-60) has termed “liminality” (derived from the Latin term “limen”, meaning “threshold”), a transitional period where “the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance (p. 44).” Culturally, a liminal phase is evident in most rites of passage—initiates move to unfamiliar spaces and “undergo a ‘leveling’ process, in which signs of their preliminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal status applied (p. 26).” Saying that liminal, symbolically fluid space is a troublesome place is an understatement: “Liminality may be the scene of disease, despair, death, suicide, the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well-defined social ties and bonds. It may be anomie, alienation, angst, the three fatal alpha sisters of many modern myths (p. 46).”

Because symbolic liminality can exact substantial effort and cost, we need to engage it in delimited ways; ideally, the liminal is approached with care and consent. In my work, I have

found that people are willing to be more symbolically adventurous if 1) the area being questioned is somehow bounded and 2) a requisite amount of symbolic fixity exists. To return for a moment to Geertz's web, as spinners, we are better able to test, unravel, and shift our webs when we work on one portion at a time and have secure footholds. Moving to a symbolically liminal state often means that other symbols must assume greater fixity; it is as if increased certainty in one area gives us the security needed to let go of certainty in another (as an example, in corporate restructuring efforts it is common to see people clutching tightly to those symbols that remain uncontested—symbols of friendship, trust, and belonging all become critical at such times).

A Place for Metaphor. A key means of maintaining requisite symbolic stability while simultaneously encouraging fluidity is through grafting a relatively well understood phenomena to one we wish to loosen; i.e., the use of metaphors. More than any other device or strategy, metaphors allow us to forgo symbolic certainty in one domain while remaining comfortably ensconced in another (cf. Gentner, 1983; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1986, 1993; Richardson, 1994; Tsoukas, 1993). For instance, symbolizing organizations with the term "machine-like system" lets us temporarily release what we hold true about organizations while stepping onto our understanding of machines (Morgan, 1986).

While it might be argued that all symbols are metaphors (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 3-34), I find it more helpful to regard metaphors as particular types of symbols, ones used to transfer knowledge from a "source domain" to a "target domain" (Tsoukas, 1993: 336). Compared to more sign-like symbolization, metaphors are often used to explain a target area through attributes and attribute relationships found in the source (especially via analogical reasoning—see Gentner, 1983; Haskell, 1991). And, as Morgan's (1993) work demonstrates, they can be very useful for eliciting mental images and heightening creativity levels.

Within SC, metaphors can provide helpful conceptual structures for framing and guiding physical creational processes. To explore notions of leadership for example, inquirers might begin with a discussion of what leadership is *like*, paying close attention to the mental images that arise (e.g., leadership is like sheep herding, being on parade, parenting, etc.). Each image might then be further "liminalized" using nonroutine media and forms (e.g., having a respondent draw a leader as a sheep herder). Metaphoric portrayal and discussion can allow otherwise hard-to-discuss subjects to be broached as well as being powerful devices for facilitating transformation.

Constructivist Connections

As the second half of symbolic constructivism, the constructivist orientation (cf. Lincoln, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994) represents a primary ontological and epistemological anchor.³ Eschewing notions of an absolute reality, constructivists are:

deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind. They emphasize the pluralistic and plastic character of reality—pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems; plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents. (Schwandt, 1994: 125)

Among constructivism's many facets are an emphasis on intersubjectively created understanding (*Verstehen*), the inquirer as an instrument, purposive sampling, value-bound

inquiry, contextualized description versus prediction or control, and legitimization of multiple ways of knowing (including the affective and intuitive). These orientations have a number of ramifications for conducting and portraying SC studies.

Entrée and Naivete. Given that it is the well-inscribed, socially constituted researcher who forms the major data collection instrument during SC work, it follows that she or he must dispense with notions of naive, tabula rasa entrée (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and unbiased representation (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 250-251). Within an SC context, assuming a neutral stance is impossible; the inquirer enters the research scene full of hopes, aesthetic leanings, preconceptions, stereotypes, and media preferences, all of which strongly influence the research endeavor. For instance, I like drawing and painting, only sometimes enjoy psychodramatic portrayal, and flee from operatic hopefuls. My experience with symbolist thought makes me aware of many interpretive frames: when a respondent likens their career to a house, I begin thinking of Freud's church spires, Jung's basement, and Baba Yaga's chicken-legged mobile home. If my informant portrays himself as much larger or smaller than those around him, I cannot help but remember interpretations made by art therapists I have known and read.

These beliefs and sensitivities necessarily affect everything I-as-researcher see, hear, and touch, inevitably compromising attempts at representational accuracy: verbatim quotes, actual-sized drawings, and uncropped photos, regardless of their length and profusion, are still selected and placed according to rhetorical and aesthetic sensibilities. Reflecting my tastes and range of experience, my re-presentations become acts of "connoisseurship" (Eisner, 1991; Schwandt, 1994: 129-130).

The most the SC researcher can hope to do is become progressively aware of these influences, perhaps bracketing them temporarily, confronting and reporting them when they seem in the way, but also recognizing that such attempts can only touch the tip of an intractable, largely invisible iceberg (cf. Lincoln & Denzin, 1994: 577-580). As Geertz reminds us, we cannot "get round the un-get-roundable fact that all ethnographical descriptions are homemade, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described." (Geertz, 1988: 144-145). I believe any understandings the researcher presents must ultimately be construed as self constructions, factive fictions crafted from numerous sources and methods, influenced by the availability and quality of different materials, and designed at the end of the day to please both the researcher and the researcher's audiences. Attempts at "providing our readers with some powerful propositional, tacit, intuitive, emotional, historical, poetic, and empathic experience of the Other via the texts we write" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994a: 582) must "coexist with an awareness that we are performing a ventriloquist's act." (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995: 27).

Believability, Utility, and Persuasiveness. All the above is not to argue for ungrounded, nonrepresentative portrayal of the Other. After all, the goal is still *factive*, not imaginary fiction. A number of authors have developed ways of working with subjectivity(ies) that can help increase the believability, utility, and persuasiveness of SC accounts. For example, constructivist researchers Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln provide detailed strategies for heightening research trustworthiness (using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as replacements for positivist notions of validity, reliability, and objectivity; see Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 280-331), and authenticity (ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical; see Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Similarly, Laurel Richardson (1994) invites us away from triangulation and towards crystallization:

I propose that the central image for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed two-dimensional object. Rather, the central image is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous . . . What we see depends upon our angle of repose. Not triangulation, crystallization (p. 522).

And Michelle Fine (1994) calls for “working the hyphens” between Self and Other, an exploration of “how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations.” (p. 72). Her pointed essay urges us to move beyond separatist inscriptions of Other and Self, and towards reflexive considerations of power (Self-over-Other, Other-over-Self), projection (Self-as-Other, Other-as-Self), and relationship (SelfOther).

These approaches suggest a number of research strategies for SC work. One is to collect multiple symbolic readings and portrayals within and across settings and/or around a given phenomenon. One interpretive pass can only tell us a little about a symbolizing form, especially if we conceptualize symbols as having many possible meanings. Growing crystallized understandings figuratively and literally requires looking at creations right-side up and upside down, backwards and forwards, now and later, becoming sensitive to how these views might coalesce to form a thematized *optique*. Similarly, one poem, skit, or picture is seldom enough, regardless of its tellingness, grab, or vitality. By collecting multiple constructions, an *imaged narrative* can be fashioned where various chapters respond to one another and to a general theme(s). A “not so fast” attitude is helpful here—worthwhile crystals take time to grow.

Inquirers might orchestrate specific “Self-Other” discussions, either within the research setting or with outside others (see Lincoln & Guba’s discussion of peer debriefing, 1985: 308-309). Such sessions could revolve around ways the researcher and respondent turn themselves “inside out”, nonconsciously structuring the interview in their own image. The researcher might ask “How are my issues reflected in what I ask and attend to? Am I studying workaholism and organizational dislocation because I feel addicted or dislocated? Do I ‘exoticize’ others, hoping their exotic otherness will somehow rub off on me?” Respondents might ask “Am I expecting the researcher to be some kind of expert, one who holds all the answers?”

A different tact might examine the extent to which the researcher is dichotomizing Self and Other—is a well identified, homogeneous, bounded Other being fashioned, one which allows the researching Self to remain intact by contrast?

Finally, relational “SelfOther” discussions can help illuminate where the inquiry is going and where it seems blocked: “How are you and I feeling about the *we* that’s being formed?” Such discussion can also focus on ways in which the research relation might be hindering expression: “Is this *we* tripping up what you or I want to create and express?”

Who Constructs What? Questions of Power and Collaboration. The above questions highlight issues of power and collaboration, ones especially salient in SC work. While naturalistic in the sense that inquiry is directed towards people's contextualized, socially situated perspectives, SC can feel quite *unnaturalistic* when non-preferred media and dialectical interpretation are used. No one has ever stopped me and said "Here, let me draw a picture of what I mean." More often, I hear "Me draw? You must be kidding!" Consequently, I may find myself pleading, cajoling, and sighing in resignation when would be informants tell me they have had enough (or the reverse happens, where I want to stop just as an informant, charmed by his or her handiwork, wants to continue). Further, challenges made to existing representational systems can result in considerable discomfort for both respondent and researcher. Sometimes I have to look away from someone's creation—like Munch's "The Cry", the work may hurt too much, bringing forth feelings which I cannot, do not want to find words for. Or I fall in love with an expression and have to resist trying to make it the ONE—a definitive magnum opus which slows the inquiry to a standstill.

Because this approach is inherently power laden and can lead to various behavioral and cognitive changes, it requires heightened sensitivity to respondents' and researcher's needs, purposes, and abilities. Many variations in structure, collaboration level, and relational quality are possible. Yet any chosen mix must be held provisionally: the nature of the SC endeavor is that it cannot be foretold with much confidence. Sometimes it begins as a tightly directed baroque canon only to become a playfully emergent, improvisational jazz session. I may leap from podium to orchestra, seizing symbols, sax, or piccolo in a wish to be heard, leaping back again in a need to be seen. Sometimes the players throw down their instruments in protest; other times the stage cannot hold all who wish to participate.

Regarding structure, high levels of organized yet respectful questioning can help create a sense of safety during the beginning of an interview ("This researcher seems to know what she's about, so I'll relax a bit"); later, the researcher may opt for an unstructured, "elite" (Dexter, 1970: 3) interview, one in which the researcher says "Tell me the questions I ought to be asking and then answer them for me." (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 269). Conversely, the researcher might want to minimize structure at a project's onset, trying to stay open to as many creative and interpretive possibilities as possible. As the project matures, interviews with successive respondents might become proportionately more structured and brief as the researcher seeks to confirm and refine his or her understandings.

Collaboration levels might be varied according to who creates symbolic forms and who interprets them. Some possibilities, arranged from the more soloist to the more co-produced, are:

- The researcher creates symbols for the informant to interpret (e.g., the photo elicitation techniques described by Harper, 1986 & 1994).
- The informant creates symbols which the researcher interprets (an approach common to many artifactual studies. See Gagliardi, 1990).
- The informant creates and interprets (see Clifford's, 1988: 53, description of James Walker's work with the Pine Ridge Sioux)
- The informant creates and interpretation is co-produced (interpretations might occur separately, together, or be joined through negotiation).
- Both informant and researcher create, but interpretation is done by the researcher (e.g. in Van Maanen's work *Tales of the Field*, both respondent and researcher tales are crafted, yet most of the interpretation is done by the author; see Van Maanen, 1988).
- Both informant and researcher create and interpret (creation and interpretation might be done separately or blended in one work).

As with structure, collaboration levels can shift depending on the stage of a research project, overarching and localized values, epistemological beliefs, and the trust levels that are established. In some instances, high collaboration levels can be off-putting (e.g., where there are wide gulfs between the researcher's and respondent's artistic abilities). At other times, extensive collaboration can increase trust and respect, lead to better information, and foster a more satisfying research experience.

Relationally, project interviews might, using Masserick's (1981) categories (discussed in Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 269) span a wide range, from the "limited survey" mode (in which the researcher acts as a relatively nonaffectual data recorder) to the "phenomenal" mode (where researcher and respondent become "caring companions" on the inquiry path). Relational quality is also likely to be caught up with structure, collaboration and the researcher's ability to locate interesting/interested informants.

Though it is certainly important to consider these dimensions, I feel it is equally important not to become paralyzed with worry. Paradoxically, much of the "in-the-bones" knowledge needed to make choices about structure, collaboration, and relational development can only be acquired through immersion in the field. It is *through* the SC encounter that the researcher comes to appreciate the impact that art-based inquiry can have, learns what people can and cannot do artwise, develops clinical skills, and copes with presentational issues.⁴ As Maurice Punch (1994), discussing the politics and ethics of qualitative research, concludes:

Each individual will have to trace his or her own path. This is because there is no consensus or unanimity on what is public and private, what constitutes harm, and what the benefits of knowledge are. . . . But I would add that before you go you should stop and reflect on the political and ethical dimensions of what you are about to experience. Just do it by all means, but think a bit first. (pp. 94-95)

Constructivist Hermeneutics. The last constructivist voice I wish to note is, properly speaking, not constructivist at all, but more a close relative whom constructivists visit from time to time (cf. Schwandt, 1994). Hermeneutics has many things to offer symbolic constructivism, but here I only discuss two: the hermeneutic circle and some ideas about stopping points.

The hermeneutic circle, originally discussed by Schleiermacher and further developed by Dilthey (cf. Palmer, 1969), reflects a parts-to-whole-to-parts orientation, one characterized by "a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously" (Geertz, 1973: 239). Within SC, each tack builds on the previous one, hopefully leading to understandings that spiral rather than encircle. When a respondent begins creating a symbolic form, a parts-to-whole emphasis arises: he (re)collects various parts (e.g., memories, impressions, beliefs) and fashions them into a representational whole. At some point, the creation appears complete—it seems to represent all the important parts. Later, a whole-to-parts direction takes over as researcher and respondent ask "What else might this suggest?" And as representation turns to re-presentation, another parts-to-whole cycle begins.

The question then becomes where and when to stop. Some would say there is no stopping, and, from one perspective—one rather high up—they would be correct. Yet for most of us ground dwellers, ad infinitum inquiry is simply too big a task.⁵ We need our breaks, diversions, and dinner. A major resting point in SC comes when symbolic form, meaning,

and use stand robustly counterbalanced, when a push here or a pull there no longer topples things. A moment of, as Nelson Goodman would say, *fit*, or *rightness* (cf. Goodman & Elgin, 1988). Reflecting the quantum notion of symbol described earlier, the completed symbolic construction temporarily embodies a set of preferred forms, meanings, and uses—one where other considered possibilities lie close at hand. In this moment, our assemblage *feels* finished, not because we have tired of the process, but because the work satisfyingly resonates with other understandings in important, enticing, persuasive, and helpful ways. Our symbolic web, repositioned and re-spun, works better now.

Three Kinds of Inquiry

Having touched on SC in a general way, I would like to consider some possible applications. Three stand out for me: *Eliciting*, *Revealing*, and *Transforming*. Each is increasingly *morphogenic*, necessitating constructions which not only focus on describing the known, but suggestively point to more upending understandings. Each requires a somewhat different set of creational and interpretive strategies. Yet, because they tend to build on one another, their boundaries often become blurred.

Eliciting

Using SC in an elicitive way means creating symbols that evoke, draw us out, get us to say more than we would otherwise. As with all forms of symbolic construction, elicitation involves moving back and forth between representation and symbolic possibility in an attempt to gain more understanding. It requires playing with foreground and background, experimenting with borders and direction, repositioning core and peripheral elements, searching for engaging, telling portrayals which *enhance* rather than disrupt or replace other presentational schemes. Compared to a revelatory or transformative approach, it tends to have a somewhat denotational character.

If inquirers are mostly interested in evoking existing schemas and narratives, triggering forgotten memories, finding more compelling ways to frame current understandings, or wish to gently rock but not capsize the boat, an elicitive approach is probably appropriate. Artlike creation can be especially helpful for locating situationally important features. When creating a piece of artwork, an effort must be made to choose from many display possibilities; those forms which best convey central categories are normally selected. For instance, when creating “free” (relatively undirected) drawings, respondents tend to be economical, only portraying phenomena they consider especially salient (Oster & Gould, 1987: 8). Similarly, with photos, respondents tend to be selective about what they photograph, often placing items of known importance towards the middle of the picture (cf., Weiser, 1993).

When visual media such as drawings, photos, or videos are used to evoke descriptive tellings, SC forms a kind of elicitive visual sociology or anthropology (cf. Harper, 1994). The photographic techniques used in these fields often suit the purposes described above: because photographs so *seemingly* replicate our viewpoint, they can provide a nonthreatening yet stimulating vehicle for discussion (cf. Collier & Collier, 1986: 99-115). As Ball and Smith (1992) suggest:

Photographs are made in an instant and represent that instant. They possess a credibility that artistic representations lack, arising from the mechanical and

chemical basis of the photographic process; the camera as a “mirror with a memory.” (p. 16)

But unless steps are taken to offset our tendency to see photos as *just* “quotes of appearances” (Berger & Mohr, 1989: 96), interpretive discussions may become overly terse. Seeing a photograph of their home or workplace, respondents may consider it self-explanatory: “Yeah, that’s my house all right...What of it?” Ways to make photos more evocative (e.g., using dramatic lighting, adopting unconventional angles, juxtaposing taken-for-granted objects with peculiar ones, purposeful removal of key figures, etc.) are suggested by Ball & Smith (1992), Berger & Mohr (1989), Collier & Collier (1986), and Landgarten (1993). How we value the photo is also important. An ordinary snapshot, given lots of attention, can be just as elicitive as one more unusually rendered (cf. Weiser, 1993).

Encouraging respondents to use an aesthetic orientation while taking photos (“Try to take pictures that deeply move you”) can result in very telling constructions: such photos are more likely to have feelings attached to them and promote discussion about why they were taken as they were. They may also elicit notions about beauty and goodness (cf. Becker, 1982; Strati, 1992). Magazine photo collage (where respondents create collages from a large bank of magazine photos—cf. Landgarten, 1993), can be a fast and economical way of evoking descriptive accounts. And researcher-created, respondent-interpreted photos can increase reflexiveness. As Douglas Harper states, “A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker (often having slaved over its creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that he or she knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image” (1994: 410).

A possible drawback to photographic construction is that it promotes an “outward” gaze, one which makes self-portraiture difficult. Respondents wanting to take pictures of themselves must direct other photographers or work with tripods. Drawings can get around this problem somewhat (though they have attendant problems as well—see Oster & Gould, 1987). Asked to “draw yourself at work” respondents frequently convey how they feel about and perceive themselves. For instance, in an ethnographic study of new information technology, Shoshana Zuboff (1988: 141-153) supplemented participant observation data with self-drawings made by office workers before and after new technologies were installed. She found her respondents were better able to convey their feelings in pictures than words; dramatic differences in bodily portrayals were evident, with “after” pictures depicting skeletonized figures. The drawings enabled her to better direct subsequent interviews and observations, suggesting that elicitive SC may be especially valuable when researchers are interested in identifying possible lines of inquiry.

Though visual methods predominate in the relevant literature, methods using other senses can also evoke in-depth accounts. For instance, I have taped executives as they used well known fairy tales to metaphorically symbolize their organizations. In subsequent interviews, I played back portions of their tales to elicit organizational stories. Along similar lines, Reason and Hawkins (1988: 79-101) have developed a remarkably rich system for using storytelling to not only elicit, but reveal and transform as well. In a more tactile vein, a common exercise in career counseling is having a client use a piece of wire to symbolize their life history. The various bends, spirals, and backtracks are then used as discussion triggers. Lozanov (1978) has promoted the use of participant-selected orchestral music to elicit self-descriptions. And of course visual methods can be

combined with non-visual ones (e.g. discussing videotaped psychodramatic portrayals). While the variety of potential elicitive formats is probably endless, a common interpretive thread is the directing of attention towards denotative translation. What tends to result are descriptive narratives of inquirers' meanings-in-use, of the "persona"—those self aspects which we habitually and confidently present to the world (cf. Jung, 1993/1959: 173-183).

Revealing

Sometimes we are more interested in what is *not* being said; that is, we wish to explore the tacit or nonconscious aspects of the situation (cf. Altheide & Johnson, 1994: 492-493; Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 195-198). For instance, Barry (1994), Diamond (1993), Hazen (1993), Kets de Vries (1991), and Schaef & Fassel (1988) have all argued that uncovering repressed meaning is critical for creating and maintaining organizational functionality. This calls for taking a revelatory approach, using SC methods that move inquiry towards the liminal. The SC encounter becomes a form of projective interviewing (Gherardi, 1995) where sensitivity to hidden meaning is encouraged. Here, existing understandings are challenged but not necessarily changed. Such an approach involves iteratively shifting from denotative description to connotative association to provocative understanding. Telling constructions are still sought out, but the telling is of a different order. Instead of "Tell me more," the artwork says "I'm telling."

As discussed earlier, moving towards the symbolically liminal can be quite uncomfortable, sometimes engendering a sense of existential despair and confusion. Consequently, some effort needs to be taken to insure inquirers have the necessary resources for dealing with what comes up. Trust levels are important here, as are the researcher's clinical skills (Kets de Vries, 1991: 3-6). Time spent in an elicitive mode can help build the rapport, curiosity, and receptivity needed to move into the revelatory. Does forewarning respondents of possible difficulties and discomforts help the process? My experience says yes and no—though it can help prepare people for what might come, it may also may create undue anxiety and self-fulfilling prophecies. In some ways, the SC experience seems at odds with extended verbal protocols—I often hear things like "I know you said this might be unsettling, but it didn't matter—I had to experience it for myself."

Having mentioned these caveats, I should add that people usually reveal what they are ready to hear, see, and own; that is, they find interpretive levels that are close to their comfort zones. As Judith Weiser has said, "People seem to have a naturally protective process inside them wherein they take the meaning they need at a particular time (and need the meaning they are taking) and yet somehow naturally remain protected from getting in any deeper than they can understand or cope with (1993: 74)."

To move into a revelatory mode, creation and inquiry should focus on the unusual and different (Furth, 1988: 39). In general, I have found the less logocentric and unfamiliar the medium used, the more likely it is that tacit, nonconscious, and possibly suppressed material will surface. For instance, visually centered methods tend to access pre-verbal material (Arnheim, 1986: 135-152; Obeyesekere, 1990: 52; Oster & Gould, 1987: 6), images that form the basis for language. Similarly, work that incorporates highly tactile materials like sand or clay can bring out repressed feelings, emotion, and memories (cf. Kalff, 1980; Mitchell & Friedman, 1994; Ryce-Menuhin, 1992). Jungian active imagination techniques (cf., Hannah, 1981; Weaver, 1973) can foster dynamic, radically different representations of ordinary reality. Working with media familiar in childhood can call up old memories and patterns that might be influencing current behavior (Winnicott, 1965). For instance, I had groups of

military chiefs use wooden blocks, Leggos, and Tinker Toys in order to reveal childhood-based “mine and yours” beliefs that were fueling organizational turf wars (cf. Barry, 1994).

With respect to interpretation, many alternative approaches are possible; however, long time users from related areas provide several rules-of-thumb. One is that the focus of interpretation go from the literal to the figurative, from the denotative to the connotative (cf. Mattoon, 1978: 48-77). As mentioned earlier, liminality is best approached from a place of safety, and denotative discussions help provide a platform from which more threatening interpretations can be hazarded. Thus, the researcher might begin by simply asking the respondent to name and explain the various parts of her creation. Furth (1988: 34-37) further recommends that inquiry move from the general to the specific; that is, the respondent should be directed to study the overall aspects of the representation before looking at its parts. Questions like, “In general, what does this sculpture represent?” should precede questions like, “What does this part signify?” This helps provide an anchor to which more specific lines of inquiry can be connected. From here, symbolic meanings can be amplified, using the question “What else might this mean?” Jung cautions us to stay away from amplification processes that use free association, as they can end up discounting the value and significance of the original symbolic form. Instead, he suggests we rely on direct associations, ones that seem to have a direct correspondence to the symbol (cf. Mattoon, 1978: 54-58). Whereas free association to a photo of a participant’s co-workers might generate images of cameras, direct association would be more confined to the co-workers and the participant’s relationship with them.

]To get at hidden meaning, questions like “What seems unusual or out-of-place in your creation?” or “Is there anything in your creation that seems unusually open or closed, tall or short, large or small” can prove helpful. Most representations have “discomfort zones,” areas the participant finds unsettling in some way. Simply asking “Which parts of this creation are less comfortable than others?” can highlight suppressed meaning. Weiser (1993) has developed a comprehensive co-interpretive system for depth photographic exploration, one that captures many of these interpretive directions. Using her work as a guide, inquirers might ask the questions depicted in Table 1 (these proceed from the less to the more threatening).

Table 1
*Possible Interpretive Questions**

-
- What do you like about this creation?
 - What are the most obvious things about this creation?
 - How would you describe your creation to someone unable to see it?
 - What are three things I wouldn’t know about you from your creation?
 - What title would you give your creation?
 - What is the message of this creation?
 - What feelings does your creation give you?
 - What secrets does your creation hold?
 - What changes would you make in your creation?
 - If your creation (or what it represents) could talk, what might it say?
 - Who might you give your creation to?
 - Who would you definitely not give your creation to?

** (derived from Weiser, 1993: 150-186)*

An important interpretive concern is whether pre-established symbolic interpretations should be used. Many interpretive guides to symbolic forms have been developed (cf. Furth, 1988: 133-147), some of which make strong reliability claims. These are often the product of thousands of investigative hours and decades of cumulative findings. A number of experts in related fields contend that such frameworks can be helpful, provided they are used sparingly, judiciously, and in a suggestive rather than translational manner (e.g., Furth, 1988: 36; Landgarten, 1981: 4). This is the view I subscribe to—I feel to do otherwise puts emergent interpretative efforts at risk and breaks with a number of epistemological tenets outlined earlier.

As examples, “archaic” works—ones which are fragmented, heavy, brooding—might suggest the presence of strong emotions (cf. Simon, 1992: 87-108). Comparatively, respondents who are avoiding contact might create minimalist forms, ones displaying simple lines, quick execution, and little involvement (Oster & Gould, 1987: 8). Consistent size differences can also be suggestive—always drawing oneself as tiny relative to other figures may indicate wanting to hide or feeling unimportant (cf. Furth, 1988: 49-51). Heavily pummeled clay might suggest feelings of frustration or anger (cf. Landgardten, 1981: 310).

Various forms of defensiveness can arise throughout the SC process, especially as threatening material is encountered. These include denying that there is anything of import in the creation, denigration of the task, and assorted forms of flight (e.g., changing a line of inquiry, ignoring questions or suggestions, becoming “helplessly” confused, and/or pressing others for their interpretations). Defensiveness is not necessarily a negative thing—because defense levels tend to rise relative to the importance of that which is suppressed (Davanloo, 1988), they can provide a useful gauge of what is covertly significant for the respondent. Defensiveness during interpretation can be reduced by spending more time on literal meanings, increasing reflective listening, and moving dialogue to a lighter, more playful level.

Transformation

Here, everything is brought into question: existing forms, meanings, and uses are challenged, new constellations suggested, and old ones changed or replaced. If the revelatory mode dabbles in the liminal, the transformative dances in it. This approach is especially appropriate where the inquirer has been brought in as a change agent or where a research program has a liberationist bent (e.g. Participatory Action Research—cf. Reason, 1994).

As suggested earlier, a search should be made for particularly telling constructions. For transformative purposes though, symbols must not only “tell about” and “tell on,” but also “tell how.” In other words, transformation requires not only description and revelation, but the development of imaginative and compelling alternatives. Consequently, a metaphoric approach tends to be very helpful, given that metaphors facilitate the juxtapositioning of problems from one domain with solutions from another. As Gareth Morgan has shown, when participants combine metaphor with artlike creation, powerful vehicles for change tend to result: the images created can serve as both “mirrors and windows,” devices which reflect back who we are while simultaneously suggesting new horizons (cf. Morgan, 1993: 215-233, 288-294).

The use of analogical reasoning, usually along a “real-ideal” axis, can also assist the change process. For example, Parker (1990) had organizational stakeholders depict their company as it currently existed and as they wished it to be, using a garden metaphor. The “real” organizational garden had weeds (unwanted competition), insufficient nutrients (inadequate funds and staffing), and lacked aesthetic value (it was not a particularly appealing place). The

“ideal” organizational garden was, of course, a fine place to live and work in. Participants used hundreds of paintings, stories, and songs over a two year period to symbolize various real and ideal dimensions, a process which ended up markedly humanizing the company. I used a similar approach (cf. Barry, 1994) to facilitate change efforts at a military installation. Participants used structural metaphors such as houses to symbolize their organization, and analogical processes to identify key problems and develop solutions. Among other things, I noticed that while representations of the “real” were spread out and asymmetric, “ideal” representations often evidenced greater compaction and symmetry, as if representing desires for order and control. And like Parker, I found the changes made were extensive and long lived (attitudinal changes were evident years after the termination of each project), again suggesting the considerable influence this process can have on behavior.

As the narrative therapy community (cf. Freedman & Combs, 1996; Gilligan & Price, 1993; White & Epston, 1990), has repeatedly shown, *where* the interpretive gaze is directed can greatly influence whether and how change occurs. If inquiry is directed at finding lived exceptions to a dominant representation, alternative behavioral scripts become available and often end up being acted on (particularly if respondents have experienced the alternate way of doing things as preferable). Thus, the change-oriented researcher might ask “Has there ever been a time where you might represent yourself (or this situation) differently?” As alternative portrayals are created, questions can be directed at what might be needed to support one alternative over another; e.g., “How is the dominant portrayal supported—what must occur for this representation to continue figuring prominently in your life? And what was going on when these exceptions arose? Is one portrayal preferable to the others?”

Another important element is involvement—participants need to feel deeply connected to their creations if substantive change is to occur. The greater a respondent’s involvement with a creation, the more likely it is that transference will occur (where the representation becomes a temporary substitute for the original object). And once high transference levels exist, changes made to the creation tend to result in self change. Joy Schaverien (1992), an art therapist who has studied art-based transference at length, notes how creational work usually moves from a low transference *diagrammatic* state, in which the creation reflects a respondent’s superficial feelings and thoughts, to an *embodied* state, characterized by the presence of deeper and stronger emotion, to a high transference *talismanic* state, where the creation seems to have powers of its own, similar to the way a favorite toy assumes lifelike properties in a child’s eyes. She finds it is in the latter stages that transformation occurs. Once the transference process is complete, the creation enters the *disposal* phase; the creation loses much of its significance and attention-grabbing power. Schaverien’s observations suggest that transformational SC efforts should proceed serially, with each creation being completely processed before new symbolic forms are developed and discussed.

Lastly, it is worth noting the energetic shifts that take place during transformational efforts (cf. Ehrenzweig, 1967). Within this mode, the work often takes on a kind of manic-depressive character, with a manic phase occurring during creation and a depressive one afterwards. Where participants manage to acknowledge and integrate the issues being brought up, a sense of resolute calmness tends to emerge. For example, in the military case described above, I found that the officers talked loudly, laughed a lot, and moved in a frenzied fashion while sculpting their creations. Once done, a lackluster, silent pall enveloped the group, one which took quite a while to dissipate. Later, their discussions took on a composed and purposeful character. The initial hyperactivity in these situations appears related to the anxiety participants are feeling, while the depressive phase may stem from the realization that whatever has been suppressed is now unavoidably visible.

Symbolic Constructivism At Work: A Concluding Example

To tie together some of the above points, I have provided an example (not an especially exemplary one, I might add) of an SC interview based on Burn's pioneering work with Kinetic Family Drawing (cf. Burns, 1982). Taking something of a realist-cum-confessionalist approach (Van Maanen, 1988), I have tried to give samples of the kinds of questions one might ask, a sense of the uncertainty and confusion that can occur, and an indication of just how subjective this process can be.

Kinetic Family Drawing, as with most forms of projective drawing, is deceptively simple: participants are asked to "Draw a picture of everyone in your family, including you, **DOING** something. Try to draw whole people, not cartoons, or stick people. Remember, make everyone **DOING** something—some kind of action." In this example, I modified the instructions by asking the respondent to "draw yourself and the other members of your work group, doing something."



The drawing in Figure 1 (above) was developed over a fifteen minute period by Mary, a recruiter for a prestigious university. She chose to draw her boss (Judy, sitting and facing us), and two employees (Sally, standing, and Ruth, sitting to Mary's right). When I first asked

about her work, Mary said, “It’s a good place to work—I like my job and we all seem to get on pretty well. Sure we have some minor problems, but what place doesn’t?”

The drawing was made during my second interview with Mary. Given that I still knew little about her situation, I decided to use a non-collaborative elicitive approach, one I thought would leave me relatively free to observe and attend to her descriptions. Plus, having recently read Burn’s work and been quite taken with it, I found myself trying to emulate the clinical approach he described, one which promotes a degree of interviewer distance and reserve.

She drew her picture easily and with little self-consciousness. I became mesmerized by the drawing—so much so I had trouble thinking what to ask. I wondered about the heavy, repetitive linework [Is this a sign of anxiety? I wish I could look at Burn’s book right now. Maybe I’m the one who’s anxious], the differences in dress styles [Why is the standing woman’s dress so suitlike and the sitting woman’s more filled out?], and Mary’s “facelessness” [All I see is the back of her head, covered in a cloud of curls. What’s under those curls?].

Managing to temporarily dehypnotize myself, I asked her who was who in the drawing and why she drew things as she did. Suddenly recalling Furth’s (1988) recommended probes, I also threw in a question about her feelings around the drawing.

- M: I drew us in a meeting . . . we have a lot of meetings here. I’m not sure why I chose to draw Ruth and Sally. The drawing just came out that way. Maybe because I like Ruth a lot. I drew Sally standing because she sometimes comes late to meetings.
- D: What’s the general feeling you get from this picture? If you didn’t work here, is this a group you would want to be part of?
- M: Well, it seems kind of dark, doesn’t it? Almost spooky. No, no, I’m not sure if I’d want to work with this group if I just saw this picture.

I found myself thinking about Mary’s comment, “The drawing just came out that way.” I remembered Burns mentioning something about these drawings developing “a life of their own” and wondered whether this interview was going that way as well.

Next, I asked Mary about the different relationships portrayed in her drawing. I recall feeling worried about my own relationship with her, wondering what she would do if she knew how uncertain I was over what to ask. She described how she found herself trying to stay away from Sally, and how, in the drawing, she was trying to get Judy’s attention.

- M: I think I drew Judy that way because she looks but doesn’t always see. I mean, she goes through the motions at meetings, but I don’t think she really knows what’s going on. She’s not a very good manager in my opinion . . . I guess I’m trying to get Judy’s attention, to get her to focus more on what I’m saying and doing. It doesn’t look like I’m very successful, does it?

I found myself focusing on Mary’s portrayal of herself and her boss, given that they occupied a central place in the drawing.

- D: Your boss looks like an elderly woman. Any thoughts on this?
- M: Actually, Judy and I are about the same age. But you wouldn’t know it. She acts a lot older—very conservative. You know, something just struck me—she looks exactly

like my mother! I can't believe this. I think I might have drawn my mother, not my boss! That's just the way my mother looks—the same hairstyle, the same eyes, the same expression.

This turned out to be a major revelation for Mary. And for me—till that point, I had not given much thought to how we parentalize our bosses. I felt torn between wanting to listen and wanting to think through the implications of this startling interpretation. As my attention zigzagged about, Mary went on to say how much Judy reminded her of her mother, who was now senile and unable to communicate. Many of the issues Mary had with her mother were reflected in her relationship with Judy. In particular, she felt anger at not being heard or recognized, and experienced a sense of not living up to her mother's/Judy's standards. She also perceived that Judy, like Mary's mother, was cut off from her feelings—this corresponds to a tendency for people to block off (or exaggerate) areas of the body that represent dysfunction in their drawings. Here, Mary drew Judy cut off at the waist, without legs or feet.

I was also struck by the extent to which Mary had blocked herself out of the picture. Wondering whether she might be trying to minimize her presence somehow, I asked her what she thought:

- D: You've drawn yourself as a mass of curls, two arms, and two legs. The middle part of you is blocked by the chair, as though you were half present. What do you think?
- M: Well, I'd have to say that's accurate. I know I told you I liked the job, but lately, I've had a lot of questions about whether this was a good career move. When I first got here, I had no doubts at all. I guess I haven't wanted to face the fact that I'm having problems with work, that I might have made the wrong choice. I see now that some of my issues come from baggage that I've brought with me. I wonder how I'd feel if my relationship with Judy was better?

We went on in this fashion for a couple of hours. Directly afterwards, I remember feeling exhausted but quite pleased with the outcome—at the time, I felt both of us had learned a lot. Looking back however, I see how vicarious the effort was. I imposed my fascinations, hunches, and schemas on her, while managing to stay safely “out of the picture.” Mary was definitely “Othered.” At the same time, some good things came out of the process. I ended up thinking a lot more about how families-of-origin guide our work choices and began asking how my own work was tied to family dynamics. Mary made a number of job changes. She shared her new understandings with Judy and was able to come up with a set of job expectations that were more personally satisfying. Judy and Mary continued to discuss their differences through a series of lunch get togethers.

Hopefully, this example conveys how emergent and unpredictable the SC process can be—one never knows where the rabbit will pop out next. Despite my original intentions to elicit neutral descriptions of Mary's work group, what actually transpired assumed a revelatory, and ultimately transformational character. We were both shocked. It also shows how inquirer values, beliefs, and nonconscious agendas are inextricably caught up with the inquiry effort.

While this article has tried to bring together a number of views, explanations, and methodologies under the theme of symbolic constructivism, it should also be evident that, relative to traditional research methods, we know little about how art-based approaches might be applied or how to use the information they create. For instance, what role should

aesthetics play in the SC endeavor—should the inquirers avoid making artistic appraisals? When should the researcher get involved in creating artwork? Should either inquiring party attempt to physically change the other’s creation? How can “felt” understandings that arise from this process be turned into “told” ones? When and where are static artforms (e.g., photos or drawings) more helpful than dynamic ones (e.g., storytelling or psychodrama)? Clearly, much more work regarding both technique and theory is needed before answers to these and other questions will be forthcoming. Yet, I believe such work is warranted, given symbolic constructivism’s potential for creating tantalizing, engaging, and more multidimensional understandings of ourselves.

Following Haskell (1991), I use the word “nonconscious” (instead of the more popular term “unconscious”) to refer to beliefs and processes that influence our conscious dealings, yet remain out of awareness. This is intended to separate the concept of what we do not know from the idea of an autonomous, parallel form of mentation—*the* unconscious—as used in psychoanalytic thought. Nevertheless, I believe nonconsciousness around a given area can happen for numerous reasons, through active suppression as well as naive forgetfulness.

Tacit here refers to that which is consciously known but not spoken, either because one cannot find the words (as with an “intuition” or “gut feel”) or because one feels speaking on the matter is uncomfortable or inappropriate—see Lincoln (1985) and Polanyi (1966).

² The hermeneutic spiral here is used in Gadamer’s (1975: 241-253) sense of the term, as a means of confronting symbolic text with an antecedent domain of meaning, and expanding this meaning through a dialectical juxtapositioning of parts and wholes, texts and contexts. For a comprehensive comparison of different hermeneutic approaches, see Bleicher (1980).

³ Though I have adopted a constructivist position (e.g. Guba & Lincoln, 1989), one which emphasizes subjectivity and multiple ways of representing reality, I also draw heavily upon social constructionism (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966, and Gergen, 1985), which attends more to the social positioning and determination of interpretation. I believe both orientations are needed for the creation of useful, nonreductive understanding and have consequently brought aspects of each into my discussion. For an informative comparison of these two positions, see Schwandt (1994).

⁴ Having taken this position, I feel it is also helpful to read in the symbolist, art therapy, and even the fine arts literature as one makes the research journey. As one reviewer kindly pointed out, studying Picasso’s art relative to his life experience can tell us much about symbolic processes, aesthetics, and how the two intertwine.

⁵ While starting has rarely been a problem for hermeneutics, stopping has. For an informative discussion, see Madison’s (1990: 106-119) positioning of Dilthey and Gadamer relative to Derrida and Rorty. The collected essays in parts two and three of Hiley et. al. (1991) also address this issue.

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