

## Toward A Vocabulary of Transformative Dialogue

*Kenneth J. Gergen*  
*Sheila McNamee*  
*Frank Barrett*

"You see it your way,  
I see it my way...  
We can work it out,  
We can work it out..."  
*The Beatles*

Most of us feel more comfortable in certain groups than others, and indeed find certain people just plain wrong headed or evil - perhaps neo-Nazis, the KKK, the Mafia, terrorist groups. This sense of *alterity* - distance or separation from particular others - is virtually an inevitable outcome of social life. As we come to generate realities and moralities within specific groups - families, friendships, the workplace, the religious setting - so do our interlocutors become invaluable resources. With their support - either explicit or implicit - we gain the sense of who we are, what is real, and what is right. At the same time, all world constructions and their associated forms of relational life create a devalued exterior - a realm that is *not us*, not what we believe, not true, not good. In important degree this devaluation derives from the structure of language out of which we construct our realities. Language is essentially a differentiating medium, with every word separating that which is named or indicated from that which *is not* (absent, contrary). Thus, whenever we declare what is the case or what is good, we use words that privilege certain existents while thrusting the absent and the contrary to the margins. An emphasis on the material basis of reality suppresses or devalues the spiritual; an emphasis on the world as observed subtly undermines beliefs in the unseen and intuitive, and so on. In effect, for every reality there is alterity. These proposals are all congenial to a view of reality as socially constructed (see Gergen, 1994).

The problem of difference is intensified by several ancillary tendencies. First, there is a *tendency to avoid* those who are different, and particularly when they seem antagonistic to one's way of life. We avoid meetings, conversations, and social gatherings. With less opportunity for interchange, there is secondly a tendency for *accounts of the other to become simplified*. There are few challenges to one's descriptions and explanations; fewer exceptions are made. Third, with the continuing tendency to explain others' actions in a negative way, there is a movement *toward extremity*. As we continue to locate "the evil" in the other's actions, there is an accumulation; slowly the other takes on the shape of the inferior, the stupid or the villainous. Social psychologists often speak in this context of "negative stereotyping,"

that is, rigid and simplified conceptions of the other. All such tendencies lead to social atomization, with the same processes that separate cliques and gangs in adolescence reflected organizationally as tensions between management and workers or line and staff; and at the societal level as conflicts between the political left and right, fundamentalists vs. liberals, gay rights and anti-gays, and pro-choice vs. pro-life. And more globally we find similar tendencies separating Jews and Palestinians, Irish Catholics vs. Protestants, Muslims vs. Christians, and so on.

On this account tendencies toward division and conflict are normal outgrowths of social interchange. Prejudice is not, then, a manifestation of flawed character - inner rigidities, decomposed cognition, emotional biases, and the like. Rather, so long as we continue the normal process of creating consensus around what is real and good, classes of the undesirable are under production. Wherever there are tendencies toward unity, cohesion, brotherhood, commitment, solidarity, or community, so are the seeds of alterity and conflict sewn. In the present condition, virtually none of us escape from being undesirable to at least one (and probably many) other groups. The major challenge that confronts us, then, is not that of generating warm and cozy communities, conflict-free societies, or a harmonious world order. Rather, given the endemic character of conflict, how do we proceed in such a way that ever emerging antagonism does not yield aggression, oppression, or genocide - in effect, the end of meaning altogether. This challenge is all the more daunting in a world where communication technology allows increasing numbers of groups to organize, mold common identities, set agendas and take action (1). Perhaps the major challenge for the 21st century is how we shall manage to *live together* on the globe.

What resources are available to us in confronting this challenge? At least one important possibility is suggested by the social constructionist posture that frames the above account: if it is through dialogue that the grounds for conflict emerge, then dialogue may be our best option for treating contentious realities. Yet, in spite of the broad significance attached to the term, "dialogue," little is gained by invoking its power. More formally, dialogue is simply "a conversation between two or more persons." And indeed, it is ultimately impossible to distinguish between dialogue and its other, namely monologue. For even monologue is addressed to someone - either present or implied. And even should the recipient remain silent, responses do occur - privately to one's interlocutor or more publicly to concerned others. Thus, to make headway here it is essential to distinguish among specific forms of dialogue. Not all dialogic processes may be useful in reducing the potential for hostility, conflict, and aggression. Indeed conversations dominated by critical exchanges, saber rattling, and contentious demands may only exacerbate the conflict. It is in this context that I wish to put forth the concept and practice of *transformative dialogue*. Transformative dialogue may be viewed as any form of interchange that succeeds in transforming a relationship between those committed to otherwise separate and antagonistic realities (and their related practices) to one in which common and solidifying realities are under construction.

## Steps Toward Transformative Dialogue

It would be convenient if there were a set of principles or practices for transformative dialogue that derive from social constructionist accounts of knowledge or relationships. Unfortunately, however, abstract accounts of meaning do not in themselves necessitate or dictate any course of action. Nor does constructionism attempt to abandon and replace the existing orientations. Rather, from a constructionist standpoint all forms of discourse and practice may be intelligible and functional within particular socio-historical circumstances. And, if we do recognize world conditions in which multiple realities and rationalities are ever increasingly articulated and disseminated, we also become sensitized to the limits of any particular tradition.

With these considerations at hand, in the present offering I propose the following: Rather than working "top down" - with high level authorities or abstract systems laying out the rules, ethics or practices for all - let us proceed "bottom up." That is, let us move to the world of action, and specifically to cases in which people seem to be wrestling successfully with problems of multiple and conflicting realities, and doing so without strong commitment to either rationalist or realist premises. By examining these cases we may be able locate conversational actions or conditions that have broad transformative potential. Further, we may consider these actions and conditions in constructionist theoretical terms. This will enable us not only to glimpse possible reasons for their efficacy, but to envision other forms of action that could function similarly, or other contexts to which these practices could be adapted. In effect, our search is not for a set of overarching rules for transformative dialogue or a set of necessary procedures. Rather, the hope is to foster a *vocabulary of relevant action* along with a *way of deliberating* on its functions and translation into other practices. On any given occasion one might 1) draw from this vocabulary as useful for the conditions at hand, or 2) employ the theoretical resources for generative purposes. This is scarcely to etch this particular vocabulary in stone, for as meanings are transformed over time, and as further voices are added to the conversation, the vocabulary itself will be altered and augmented. There are no universal rules for transformative dialogue, for dialogue itself will alter the character of transformative utility.

### **A Touchstone Resource: The Public Conversations Project**

To begin, let us first consider a single successful case. We can then step back to examine some of its features and ponder their implications. In 1989 Laura and Richard Chasin, Sallyann Roth and their colleagues at the Public Conversations Project in Watertown, Massachusetts, began to apply skills developed in the context of family therapy to stalemated public controversies (see Chasin and Herzig, 1992). Their practice has evolved over the years and with impressive results. Here we may focus on their attempt to bring together committed activists on opposing sides of the abortion conflict. More generally this is a case in which public debate has lead nowhere, largely because the opponents construct reality and morality in entirely different ways. The stakes are high, there is enormous animosity, and the

consequences are lethal.

In the present case, activists who were willing to discuss the issues with their opponents were brought together in small groups. The Project guaranteed that they would not have to participate in any activity which they found uncomfortable. The meeting began with a buffet dinner, in which the participants were asked to share various aspects of their lives other than their stand on the abortion issue. After dinner the facilitator invited the participants into "a different kind of conversation." They were asked to speak as unique individuals - expressing their own experiences and ideas - rather than as representatives of a position, to share their thoughts and feelings, and to ask questions about which they were curious. As the session began, the participants were asked to respond - each in turn and without interruption - to three major questions:

1. How did you get involved with this issue? What's your personal relationship, or personal history with it?
2. Now we'd like to hear a little more about your particular beliefs and perspectives about the issues surrounding abortion. What is at the heart of the matter for you?
3. Many people we've talked to have told us that within their approach to this issue they find some gray areas, some dilemmas about their own beliefs of even some conflicts....Do you experience any pockets of uncertainty or lesser certainty, any concerns, value conflicts, or mixed feelings that you may have and wish to share?

Answers to the first two questions typically yielded a variety of personal experiences, often stories of the participants' lives or the experiences of loved ones. Participants also revealed many doubts, and found themselves surprised to learn that people on the other side have any uncertainties at all.

After addressing the three questions, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions of each other. They were asked not to ask questions that "are challenges in disguise," but to ask questions "about which you are genuinely curious...we'd like to learn about your own personal experiences and individual beliefs..." After discussing a wide range of issues important to the participants, there was a final discussion of what the participants felt they had done to "make the conversation go as it has." Follow-up phone calls a few weeks after each session revealed significant, positive effects. Participants felt they left with a more complex understanding of the struggle, and a significantly rehumanized view of "the other." No, they did not change their fundamental views, but they no longer saw the issues in such black and white terms nor those who disagreed as demons.

### **Toward a Vocabulary of Transformative Dialogue**

The work of the Public Conversations Project is indeed impressive and has led to many additional ventures and variants. However, the question we must now confront

is, what particular features of this kind of dialogue make it so effective? How can we conceptualize these components such that they can be generalized to other contexts? We cannot use precisely these practices in all situations of conflict or difference, but if we can abstract from these practices we have a means of deliberating on how we might proceed elsewhere. And too, we should be sensitive to absences within the practice; what might a constructionist standpoint suggest in terms of augmentation? Let us then focus on five prominent components of special relevance to transformative dialogue:

### **From Blame to Relational Responsibility**

"We have only one person to blame, and that's each other."  
Barry Beck, *New York Ranger hockey player*  
*after a brawl at the championship playoffs*

Many significant hurdles to transformative dialogue reside in our traditions of interchange, for example, presumptions of a single truth, universal logic, winning and losing. There is another daunting problem that grows from individualist view of persons as agents of their own actions, we have a pervasive cultural tendency to hold people morally accountable for their actions. We construct persons as originary sources of their own actions (moral agents), and thus responsible for their misdeeds. There is much about the tradition of individual responsibility that most of us greatly value. Because of a discourse of individual blame, we are able to hold persons accountable for robbery, rape, murder and the like. By the same token we are able to praise individuals for singular achievements, humanitarian and heroic acts etc. Would we have it any other way?

Yet, as we have outlined elsewhere (McNamee and Gergen, 1998) this same discourse of individual blame is divisive. In finding fault with another, we begin to erect a wall between us. In blaming I position myself as all-knowing and all-righteous, and you as a flawed being who is subject to my judgment. You are constructed as an object of scorn, subject to correction, while I remain praiseworthy and powerful. In this way I alienate you, and in the Western tradition, hostility is a normal response. The problem is intensified in the case of antagonistic groups, for each may hold the other responsible - the poor will blame the wealthy for exploitation, while the wealthy will hold the poor responsible for their indolence; the conservative will blame the homosexual for corrupting the society, while the homosexual will blame the conservative for intolerance, and so on. Thus, each finds the guilty other not only denying guilt but, without any justification whatsoever, attempting to reverse the blame. Antagonisms are further polarized, and the tradition of individual blame thus sabotages the process of transformative dialogue.

It is in this context that we may appreciate the potentials of relational responsibility. If all that we take to be true and good has its origin in relationships, and specifically the process of jointly constructing meaning, then there is reason for us all to honor - to be responsible to - relationships of meaning making themselves. The quest, then, is

for means of sustaining processes of communication in which meaning is never frozen or terminated, but remains in a continuous state of becoming. Obviously, mutual blame is an impediment to *relational responsibility*. How, then, can relational responsibility be achieved in practice, and particularly cases of mutual blame? In the case of the Public Conversations Project, the tendency toward blame was simply defined out of bounds. The conversational tasks didn't permit blame talk, not even disguised as questions. Under normal circumstances, however, we scarcely have control over the rules of conversation. How can one shift from individual blame to a more relationally responsible language in daily life? Although there are no definitive answers to such a question, again we can locate in the culture's practices several means of shifting the conversation away from individual blame. Consider:

*Internal Others.* If I talk too much and too loud and you are drowned out of the conversation, you have good reason for blaming me. However, if you attack me directly, our relationship may be cooled. One option is to locate within me another voice that is "speaking me" in the situation. If you say, for example, "The way you are talking, I wonder if your father isn't present with you tonight..." or "You are really sounding very much like that teacher of yours..." In effect, you communicate your displeasure, but I am positioned to evaluate my actions as something other than "myself." What we take to be the "core self" is not placed on the defense.

*Conjoint Relations.* If in the heat of argument you insult me, I may justifiably blame you for your abuse and our relationship will suffer. However, I may also be able to locate ways in which it is not you, in particular, who is to blame, but our particular pattern of relating. It is not you vs. me, but we who have created the action in question. Remarks such as, "Look what we are now doing to each other...", "How did we get ourselves into this situation..." or "We are killing ourselves going on like this; why don't we start from the beginning and have a different kind of conversation..." all have the effect of replacing guilty individuals with a sense of interdependent relationship.

*Group Realities.* Alice finds Ted so irritating; he is messy, never picks up after himself, thinks only of his needs, seldom listens to her; Ted can scarcely tolerate Alice's pristine tidiness, her disinterest in his job, and her way of prattling on. They are seething in blame for each other. Yet, there is another vocabulary of possibility here, one that may shift the form and direction of conversation. Specifically, there is way of seeing ourselves not as singular individuals but as representatives of groups, traditions, families and so on. We may avoid the habit of individual fault finding in the context of group differences. For example, if Ted and Alice could speak about gender differences, and trace their proclivities to an origin in different gender traditions, they might move into a space of more congenial conversation. If we move the discussion to focus on group differences, individual blame recedes in importance.

*The Systemic Swim.* When Timothy McVeigh was found guilty of blowing up the Oklahoma City Municipal building and taking scores of lives, he was sentenced to death. There is a sense of collective relief; justice was done. Back to work. Yet,

consider again the logic of the Militia Movement of which McVeigh was part. The national government, from their perspective, is destroying the American tradition, trampling on their rights, and forcing them into poverty. Justice will be done when they destroy this malevolent force. In effect, the same logic underlies both McVeigh's crime and our reactions to it. Or to put it another way, there is an important sense in which McVeigh's crime was an extension of the very tradition that most of us support and sustain. This is not to forgive the crime. However, it is to say that the voice of individual blame is insufficient. Another voice may usefully be added to the conversation in which we broaden our concerns to the ways in which we participate as a society in creating the conditions for most of what we devalue. It takes more than a village to create a rape, a hate crime, or a robbery.

### **The Significance of Self-Expression**

If we can successfully avoid blame, how can we move dialogue in the direction of change? The Public Conversations work suggests that self-expression may be vital. Participants in their conversations were each given ample opportunity to share views that were important to them. In part the importance of self-expression can be traced to the Western tradition of individualism. As participants in this tradition, we believe we possess inner thoughts and feelings and that these are essential to who we are; they virtually define us. Thus, if dialogue is to proceed successfully, it is critical that one's voice is heard. To paraphrase the logic "If my position - what I truly think and feel - is not voiced, there is no dialogue."

Yet, the self-expressions encouraged by the Public Conversations Project are of a very special kind. They asked the participants to speak personally as opposed to using abstract arguments, to tell stories of their own involvement in the issue of abortion. There are at least three reasons that such expressions are desirable for transformative dialogue. First, and most simply, they are *easily comprehensible*; from our earliest years we are exposed to the story or narrative form, and we are more fully prepared understand than in the case of abstract arguments. Further, stories can invite *fuller audience engagement* than abstract ideas. In hearing stories we generate images, thrive on the drama, suffer and celebrate with the speaker. Finally, the personal story tends to *generate acceptance* as opposed to resistance. If it is "your story, your experience," then I can scarcely say "you are wrong." However, if you confront me with an abstract principle our common traditions of argumentation prepare me for resistance. By flailing me with a principle, you set yourself up as a mini-god, issuing commandments from on high. My resentment will trigger a fusillade of abstract statements that you will find equally alien. "Who are you to tell me that a fertilized egg, detected only microscopically, has a 'right to life?'" "And who are you to tell me that a woman has a right to murder a child in the making?" At this juncture the conversation is effectively terminated.

### **Affirming the Other**

It is one thing to relate one's feelings or life experiences; however it is quite another

to gain a sense of the other's affirmation. Because meaning is born in relationship an individual's expression doesn't acquire full significance until supplemented. If you fail to appreciate what I am saying, or I think you are distorting my story, then I have not truly expressed anything. To affirm is to locate something within the other's expression to which we can lend our agreement and support. Such affirmation is important in part for reasons deriving from the individualist tradition and the presumption that thoughts and feelings are individual possessions. As we say, "*I* experience the world in these ways," or "These are *my* beliefs." If you challenge or threaten these expressions you *place my being into question*; in contrast, to affirm is to grant worth, to honor the validity of my subjectivity. Second, as one's realities are discounted or discredited so are the relationships from which they derive. If you as reader dismiss social constructionism as absurd, and argue that I should give it up, so are you asking me to sever an enormous range of relationships. To embrace an idea is to embrace new relationships, and to abandon one is to undermine one's community.

Yet, how can affirmation be achieved when people live in oppositional realities? How can they affirm each other when they do not agree? The work of the Public Conversations Project is informative here. The conversations were effectively staged so as to promote forms of appreciation. Curiosity was invited and listener appreciation was facilitated through the other's telling of stories, many of which were also touching. To "be moved" is a high form of affirmation. Sympathetic attention may be a significant step toward affirmation. Similarly, in her volume, Conversation, Language, and Possibilities, Harlene Anderson speaks for many change agents when she proposes that therapy becomes transformative when, "the therapist enters the therapy domain with a genuine posture and manner characterized by an openness to another person's ideological base - his or her reality, beliefs, and experiences. This listening posture and manner involve showing respect for, having humility toward, and believing that what a client has to say is worth hearing."(p.153) Of course, the possibilities for transformation may be enhanced when the affirmation moves from concerted attention to actual agreement. It isn't essential in this case that one agree with all that is said; support or delight in some aspect of the other's expression may be sufficient. If you praise my intentions but find my arguments wrong-headed, our conversation will proceed far more productively than if you simply condemn my entire expression.

### **Coordinating Action: Invitation to Improvisation**

In our view one of the most important contributions to the success of the Public Conversations Project derives from the fact that the meetings began with a shared meal. At the outset the participants exchanged greetings, smiles, handshakes. They began to converse in an unprogrammed and spontaneous way about many things - children, jobs, tastes, and so on. They developed rhythms of conversation, eye contact and simultaneous eating, platform for the conversations that followed. In our view transformative dialogue may thrive on just such efforts toward mutual coordination. This is primarily because meaning making is a form of coordinated action. Thus, if we are to generate meaning together, we must develop smooth and

reiterative patterns of interchange - a dance in which we move harmoniously together.

Yet, coordinating actions is not itself sufficient. Not all patterns of mutual action are favorable to transformative dialogue, and distinctions are required. Consider first two forms of coordination that are not: First, there is what we may call *thanatopic* (terminal) coordination, that is coordination that leads to the death of meaning. For example, hostile arguments and armed warfare are well coordinated actions, but such interdependencies conduce toward division and mutual annihilation. In the same way, as discussants in a dialogue each pick apart the other's ideas, finding fault, demonstrating the superiority of their own position, they are working thanatopically. When such forms of coordination are extended to their logical conclusion the other is eradicated; or, in effect, there is no one else with whom to generate meaning. Thus all meaning, all articulations of the real and the good, come to an end. Also problematic is a second form of coordination we may term, *sedimented*. Here the participants are not moving in such a way that the other's voice will ultimately be eliminated. Rather, the patterns of reiteration are born of longstanding interchange; they are steadfast and secure. The result, however, is a freezing of meaning. There is little possibility for deviation or transformation. Many public rituals exemplify sedimented coordination, as do traditional relationships between patients and doctors, salesmen and buyers, toll collectors and drivers. In each case the patterns of interdependence are so deeply ingrained that there is little room for negotiation.

For present purposes, the most important form of coordination may be termed, *co-constituting*. Here one person's moves in the conversation will validate, affirm or reflect the other's moves. One's actions or utterances will help to constitute the other's actions in their own terms, and in so doing, also re-constitute oneself. This does not mean duplicating or agreeing fully with what the other has done or said. Rather, one's actions will be a partial, provisional, and ambiguous reverberation of the other, reflecting the other in oneself. In effect the other is aligned more fully with oneself. Perhaps the most common form of co-constituting coordination takes the form of *metonymic reflection*. Metonymy refers to the use of a fragment to stand for a whole to which it is related. Thus, "the golden arches" are used to signify the McDonald's restaurants, or the British flag to indicate the United Kingdom. In the present case, metonymic reflection occurs when one's actions contain some fragment of the other's actions, a piece that represents the whole. If I express to you doubts about my parents' love for me, and you respond by asking, "What's the weather report for tomorrow?" you have failed to include my being in your reply. If your response includes the sense of what I have said, possibly concern over what I have said, then I find myself in you; I locate the "me" who has just spoken. At the same time, because it is you who have generated this expression, it is not quite mine. You move us closer, and in doing so, I am invited to reply metonymically to you. Transformative dialogue, then, may depend importantly on locating ourselves within each. Let us consider an additional form of co-constituting coordination:

*Coordinating Discourse*. If we construct the world in entirely different terms, it is

difficult to locate grounds for co-creating meaning. However, there are means of moving toward mutuality in language, including the use of similar phrasings, cadences, or tone of voice. One of the most interesting routes toward mutuality of discourse is through what we may call *semiotic shading*, that is the substitution of a word (or phrase) with a near equivalent, for example, "attraction" for "love," "irritation" for "anger," "tension" for "antagonism." The potentials of shading are enormous, for every substitution of terms also brings with it an array of different associations, new ranges of meaning, and fresh conversational openings. To say that there is "tension between us," (as opposed to "antagonism") is to reduce the degree of implied hostility, and to replace it with a sense of being in a state that one wishes to reduce. There are virtually no limits, other than practical, to the possibilities of shading. At the extreme, any term may have infinite possibilities for meaning - even to the point of signifying its opposite. For example, if "love" can be "intense attraction," "intense attraction" can be an "obsession," and an "obsession" can be "a sickness" - with the other now serving as "the source of my illness." Of course, the source of one's illness is "undesirable," and something that is "undesirable" is "not liked;" what is "not liked" is "hated." Thus, when its implications are fully extended, to love is to hate.

In this light consider again the challenge of co-constituting coordination. If all statements are *defeasible*, that is, not themselves fixed in their meaning, then they are open to semiotic shadings that can transform them into something else. In effect, oppositional statements are only so by virtue of the particular stance adopted within a conversation. Everything that is said could be otherwise, and with appropriate shading could be brought into a state more resembling what is otherwise eschewed. On a more practical level, with appropriate shading the most antagonistic arguments can be remolded in such a way as to allow an exploration of mutual interests. You may oppose someone who favors the death penalty for cold blooded killers. However, if "favoring the death penalty" can also mean, for example, a "radical measure against heinous crime," chances are you could agree that "radical measures" are sometimes necessary. In such agreement you locate common ground.

In sum, co-constituting coordination is not an attempt to pin down precisely what is meant, to lock it in place, but rather to sustain a mutually supportive interchange that is without a necessary terminus. It is in co-constituting coordination that we locate the possibility for the conversation to move from the sedimented to the synergistic, from the conventional to the catalytic, from the nascent to the novel.

### **Self-Reflexivity: The Promise of Polyvocality**

If one's grounding realities are heard and affirmed, and the conversation the conversation becomes increasingly coordinated, the stage is set for another significant contribution to transformative dialogue: self-reflexivity. One unfortunate aspect of traditional conversation is that we are positioned as *unified egos*. That is, we are constructed as singular, coherent selves. Logical incoherence is subject to ridicule, moral incoherence to scorn. Thus, as we encounter people whose positions

differ from ours, we tend to represent ourselves one-dimensionally, ensuring that all our statements form a unified, seamless web. Thus, when we enter a relationship defined by our differences, commitment to unity will maintain our distance. And if the integrity or validity of one's coherent front is threatened by the other, we may move toward polarizing combat.

The transformative challenge here is to shift the conversation in the direction of self-reflexivity - or a questioning of the otherwise coherent persona. In deliberating on our stand, we must necessarily adopt a different voice. We cannot question our statement that "X is true" or "Y is good," by saying the same thing. Thus, in self-questioning, we relinquish the "stand fast and firm" posture of conflict, and open possibilities for others conversations to take place. In Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) terms, we demonstrate one of the most important dialogic skills, namely the "ability to recognize multiple, simultaneously salient systems"(p. 199) Such self-reflection is made possible by the fact that we are seldom participants in only a single, reality-making nucleus. We participate in multiple relationships - in the community, on the job, at leisure, vicariously with television figures - and we carry with us myriad traces of these relationships. In a Bakhtinian sense we are *polyvocal*; we can speak with many voices. For example, with effort we can typically locate reason to doubt virtually any proposition we otherwise hold as true, and see limitations in any value we think central to our life. Suppressed at the moment I "speak my mind," or "say what I believe" is the chorus of internal nay-sayers. If these suppressed voices can be located and brought forth within the conversation of differences, we move toward transformation.

In the case of the Public Conversations Project, self-reflexivity was built in as a conversational requirement. After the opportunity to tell their stories, participants were asked about possible "gray areas" in their beliefs, pockets of uncertainty, or mixed feelings. As participants spoke of their doubts, animosities seemed to soften. Such reflections on the part of one participant seemed to encourage a similar response in others. Possibilities were opened for other conversations to take place than defending differences. More broadly speaking, self-reflexivity may be only one member of a family of moves that will inject polyvocality into the dialogue. For example, in their conflict work, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) often employ "third person listening," in which one member of an antagonistic group may be asked to step out of the conversation and to observe the interchange. By moving from the first person position, in which one is representing a position, to a third person stance, one can observe the conflict with other criteria at hand (e.g. is this a productive form of interaction, what improvements might be made). In other conflict work, participants have found it useful to make salient the opinions or beliefs of groups that differ from both the antagonists. Thus, for example, a conflict between two religious groups (e.g. Christians vs. Muslims) takes on entirely different character when many alternative religions are made salient (e.g. Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism).

### **The Co-Creation of New Worlds**

The Public Conversations Project is a generative source for both illustrating and

pondering the nature of transformative dialogue. However, there is one significant way in which it does not take us far enough. As outlined earlier, transformative dialogue is essentially aimed at facilitating the collaborative construction of new realities. Although the Project does much to soften the antagonisms between conflicting parties, there is far less emphasis on collaborative construction of alternatives. None of the components thus far discussed actively promotes the conjoint construction of the real or the good. Needed in the dialogue are what might be called *imaginary moments* in which participants join in developing new visions of a reality. These imaginary moments not only sew the seeds for co-construction, but also shift the position of the participants from combative to cooperative. As participants move toward common purpose, so do they redefine the other, and lay the groundwork for a conception of "us."

Perhaps the simplest way of moving toward a conjoint reality is through locating what conflict specialists call *superordinate goals*. That is, antagonists temporarily suspend their differences to join in an effort they both support. For example, battling spouses may turn in unison on an intruding do-gooder, or feminist radicals and conservative traditionalists may join in a crusade against pornography. Or more broadly, there is nothing so unifying for a country than to be threatened by invasion. In terms of practice, much of the negotiation and mediation literature does place a strong emphasis on locating mutually acceptable options - solutions that enable each participant to obtain (at least partially) certain desired ends. Yet, from a constructionist perspective, "desired ends" are not fixed tendencies to which the process of dialogue must accommodate, but rather constructions embedded within discursive communities - including the community created by the dialogue itself. Thus, the challenge is not so much to consider the future in terms of fixed starting points (e.g. "my needs," "my desires"), but through dialogue to construct a viable future together. This is not to rule out the investments with which one enters the exchange, but to focus on the potentials of the dialogue to reveal new, unifying amalgamations of perspective.

One of the most impressive practices of conjoining realities - termed *appreciative inquiry* - has been developed by organizational specialist, David Cooperrider, and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University. The emphasis on appreciation sprang from the conception of "the appreciative eye" in art, where it is said that within every piece of art one may locate beauty. Is it possible, Cooperrider asked, that within every organization - no matter how embroiled in conflict - one locate beauty? And if beauty can be found, can organizational members use it as a basis for envisioning a new future?

The specific means of fostering appreciation draws from the constructionist emphasis on narrative. People carry with them many stories, and within this repertoire they can typically locate stories of value, wonderment and joy. Within an organization these stories are valuable resources, almost like money in the bank. To draw them out, to place them in motion, proposes Cooperrider, is also to sew the seeds for alternative visions of the future. And in listening to these stories confidence is stimulated that

indeed the vision can be realized. In effect, they set loose the powers of creative change.

A single example will convey the potential of appreciative inquiry. Acme Farm Equipment, as we shall call it, suffered from gender conflict. Women in the company felt poorly treated by the males, seldom acknowledged, sometimes harassed, underpaid and overworked. At the same time, their male counterparts felt unfairly blamed, and blamed the women employees for being unnecessarily touchy and hostile. Distrust was rampant, there was talk of litigation, and the company began to falter.

The Acme executives then asked Cooperrider and his associates for help. In particular, the executives felt, there should be a code of good conduct, a set of rules specifying appropriate conduct for all parties, along with penalties for misconduct. Yet, for Cooperrider this orientation simply objectified "the problem," and such a "solution" would still leave a strong residue of distrust. An appreciative inquiry was thus carried out in which small groups of men and women employees met together; their specific challenge was to recall some of the good experiences shared within the company. Were there cases where men and women worked very well together, had been effective and mutually regarding; were there times when men and women had especially benefited from each other's contributions; what were these experiences like and what did they mean to them as employees? The employees responded enthusiastically to the challenge and numerous stories were recalled about past successes. The groups then shared and compared their stories. As they did so a discernible change began to take place: the animosities began to melt; there was laughter, praise, and mutual regard. In this positive climate, Cooperrider then challenged the employees to begin to envision the future of the company. How could they create together the kind of organization in which the experiences they most valued would be central? How could they make the organization the kind of place that could bring them this kind of joy? As the organizational members began their discussion of the future, they also began to think of new practices - policies, committees, social planning, and the like. Optimism and a high sense of morale prevailed. "The problem" drifted into obscurity.

The practice of appreciative inquiry provides an excellent means by which people can move toward the generation of new realities. By sharing stories of value, commonalities are located. And using the sense of shared value, visions are fostered. Dialogue is then employed to fill out the landscape of the vision, to create a sense of a new reality, which, in turn, lays the groundwork for alternative forms of action. At the same time, the participants move from a divisive, "we" vs. "them" orientation, to a conception of a "we." In effect, they simultaneously construct a new unit in which they exist together.

### **In Conclusion**

The present account attempts to cement theory to practice in such a way as to lend

vitality to the former and intelligibility to the latter. Drawing from a social constructionist theoretical orientation, and a range of congenial practices, our concept of transformative dialogue has placed special stress on relational responsibility, self-expression, affirmation, coordination, reflexivity, and the co-creation of new realities. Conversational moves that accomplish these aims seem highly promising; at the same time there is no attempt here to legislate or draw final conclusions. As pointed out, cultural forms are many and varied, and undergo continuous change. Thus, the present is more attempt is to generate a potentially useful vocabulary rather than a set of marching orders. The account should be subject to continuous emendation and alteration over time.

### **Footnote**

(1) For more on such tendencies see Hunter, J.D. (1994 ) The culture wars. New York: Basic Books; and Gergen, K.J. (1991) The saturated self. New York: Basic Books.

### **References**

- Anderson, H. (1997) Conversation, language, and possibilities. New York: Basic Books.
- Baxter, L.A. and Montgomery, B.M.(1996) Relating, dialogues and dialectics, New York: Guilford.
- Chasin, R. and Herzig, M. (1992) Creating systemic interventions for the sociopolitical arena. In Berger-Could, B. and DeMuth, D.H. (Eds.) The Global Family Therapist: Integrating thee Personal, Professional and Political. Needham, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994) Realities and relationships. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hunter, J.D. (1995) Culture wars. New York: Basic Books.
- McNamee, S. and Gergen, K.J. (1998) Relational Responsibility. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearce, W.B. and Littlejohn, S.W. (1997) Moral conflict. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.