Relational Leading and Dialogic Process

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DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.5278/vbn.phd.hum.00063

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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VOLUME 1

BY
LONE HERSTED

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED 2016

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

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Dissertation submitted November 29, 2016

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ISSN (online): 2246-123X
ISBN (online): 978-87-7112-843-7

Published by:
Aalborg University Press
Skjernvej 4A, 2nd floor
DK – 9220 Aalborg Ø
Phone: +45 99407140
aauf@forlag.aau.dk
forlag.aau.dk

Cover Photo: Jan Brødslev Olsen

Printed in Denmark by Rosendahls, 2016

CV

Lone Hersted (M.A.) works as a lecturer and PhD fellow at the Department of Learning and Philosophy at Aalborg University (Denmark). Her teaching and research is concerned with leadership, change management, organizational development and learning, coaching, innovative and creative change processes, dialogue training, conflict dissolution and collaborative team development. At Aalborg University, Lone is coordinator and lecturer of the M.A. program entitled *Master in Organizational Coaching and Learning*. Lone has also worked as a consultant since 2003 and, in addition to her academic work, she contributes to organizational development and learning processes through coaching and workshops, e.g., by using roleplay and dialogically based approaches.

Originally Lone was educated as an actress at the Nordic Theater School (1993) and obtained a Master's Degree in Dramaturgy at Aarhus University (Denmark 2002). She has more than 10 years' professional work experience in performance theater production and interactive digital arts. She has also participated in and directed cross-cultural theater projects in Latin America.

In 2007 she was trained and certified as a systemic coach at Attractor (DK), and in 2010 she obtained a Certificate Degree in Systemic Leadership and Organizational Development at the University of Bedfordshire in collaboration with KCC (England) and MacMann Berg (Denmark).

In addition, Lone has worked as a family therapist in the Municipality of Aarhus. Here she worked with traumatized refugees and their integration into Danish society.

ENGLISH SUMMARY

This dissertation consists of two, closely related themes:

1) Relational leading – the development of a new orientation to leadership
2) Action based learning and research for the enhancement of relational, dialogic and reflexive skills in organizations

The overall research questions, which have been guiding the work for the dissertation, are:

1) How can we understand leading in a relational view?
2) How can we contribute to create development in organizations through dialogic practices?
3) Is it possible to enhance relational and dialogical skills through roleplaying methodology?

The thesis is divided in two volumes: 1 and 2.

Content of volume 1:

Volume 1 contains four chapters. The first is an *introduction* to the thesis as a whole including the overall research questions (chapter 1).

Following is an *introduction to the idea of relational leading,* a relatively new orientation to leading primarily based on social constructionist ideas (chapter 2). This orientation to leadership builds on the understanding of leading as a shared process where dialogue has a central place. The chapter begins with a brief review of significant literature concerning the subject, followed by a general account of relational leading as a focal subject for the work with the thesis.

In Chapter 3, I offer *a social constructionist approach to learning and research*, which explains the foundational understandings behind the research practice carried out in this thesis.

Chapter 4 is specifically concerned with the participatory research on the *use of roleplaying with reflective team for dialogical enhancement.* This introduces one of the main research inquiries in the thesis, and includes a full description of method.

Content of volume 2:

Volume 2 contains of 7 chapters, all of which are now published (or accepted for publication) in journals and books. These include:

1. *An approach to leadership and organizational development with John Shotter*. The chapter is about how Shotter's concepts and ideas can be understood in relation to leadership and organizations. It introduces some of the social constructionist ideas that serve as a foundation for this thesis and the applied practices for the enhancement of dialogues, reflexivity and relational skills in organizations.

2. *Relational Leading - Practices for Dialogically Based Collaboration* This chapter offers a view of leading from a social constructionist orientation where relationships are put in the foreground. It is subdivided into three specific domains:

- *Relational Leading and the Challenge of Dialogue*
- *Understanding Dialogue*
- *Creating Organizational Culture*

3. *Developing Leadership as Dialogic Practice*. This chapter explains how we can understand leading as an overall relational phenomenon and how dialogue can be understood in this perspective. Furthermore the chapter explains about a practice for developing dialogic and relational skills among leaders and employees by the use of roleplaying.

4. *Reflective Role-playing in the Development of Dialogic Skill*. This chapter describes one of the main research inquiries of the dissertation. In an action research setting, I explore the use and efficacy of roleplaying and reflecting teams in developing relational, dialogical skills.

5. *Leadership Development in Dialogic Learning Spaces*. This chapter is about the enhancement of learning and development through dialogue based practices in leading teams at ten public schools in the northern region of Denmark. The chapter is an example of how the work with dialogue informed by the ideas of relational leading and action research can contribute to the development in leading teams.

6. *Polyphonic Inquiry for Team Development, Learning and Knowledge Production.* The chapter presents a dialogic approach to research contributing to organizational learning and development. The project is located in a Danish NGO working for organic farming.

7. *Constructing leadership identities through stories*. This chapter is on the discursive construction of leadership identities, and presents a qualitative study on how leadership identities in postmodern organizations are built on negotiation and co-construction of meanings, relations and stories. It contains an analysis of four narrative interviews with the use of outsider witnessing. The notion of *co-authoring* (rather than *authoring*) is applied to the development of leadership identities through reflexive dialogues and emerging stories within the frame of action learning.

Overall conclusion

This thesis contributes to a relational orientation to leading, emphasizing leadership as a shared, collaborative activity. In this paradigm major emphasis is put on dialogue and interaction. Inspired by social constructionist ideas, the thesis considers approaches to learning and knowledge building as related to relational leading. The practices developed in the thesis research demonstrate that it is possible to enhance leadership development in organizations through collaborative, dialogic practices in groups and teams. These practices are particularly successful when the participants themselves are the ones who define the overall themes and questions of inquiry. Furthermore, the thesis proposes that it is crucial for a positive learning outcome to create learning environments and knowledge building practices where the participants are recognized and appreciated as persons and professionals. In the work with the thesis, dialogically based practices inspired by action research with the aim to enhance collaborative knowledge building, reflexivity and dialogical skills in groups and teams were carried out, analyzed and documented. Participants included school principals, leaders of kindergartens, and counselors working in an NGO for organic farming.

The thesis furthermore concludes that it is possible to enhance relational and dialogic skills among both employees and leaders through the use of roleplaying with a reflecting team. These kinds of practices must be facilitated and carried out in a careful and gentle way and be sensitive to the organizational context and the many different stakeholder perspectives. A participatory research project, which took place among the staff and the leading team at a 24-hour care center for neglected children and adolescents, demonstrated the potential of working with drama involving the whole body and all the senses. Not only did the participants develop skills in dialogue, but as well, enhanced bodily awareness, self-reflexivity, relational consciousness, perspective taking, and a stronger capability to identify with others. This project not only used roleplaying retrospectively in relation to past episodes, but as well as action guiding. The hope in this future forming inquiry was to create better relationships in the organization and more reflexive pedagogical practices in relation to the children and adolescents living at the institution.

DANSK RESUME

Denne afhandling består af to, tæt forbundne, temaer:

1) Relationel ledelse – udviklingen af en ny forståelse af ledelse
2) Aktionsbaseret læring og forskning med henblik på styrkelsen af relationelle, dialogiske og refleksive kompetencer i organisationer

De overordnede forskningsspørgsmål, som har været guidende for arbejdet med denne afhandling lyder således:

1) Hvordan kan vi forstå ledelse i et relationelt perspektiv?
2) Hvordan kan vi bidrage til at skabe udvikling i organisationer gennem dialogisk praksis?
3) Er det muligt at styrke relationelle og dialogiske kompetencer gennem rollespil som metode?

Afhandlingen er inddelt i to bind: 1 og 2.

Indhold i bind 1:

Bind 1 indeholder fire kapitler.

1. Det første er en *introduktion* til afhandlingen som helhed indeholdende de guidende forskningsspørgsmål (kapitel 1).

2. Herefter følger en *introduktion til begrebet relationel ledelse*, en relativ ny tilgang til ledelse primært baseret på socialkonstruktionistiske idéer (kapitel 2). Denne tilgang til ledelse bygger på en forståelse af ledelse som en fælles proces, hvor dialog spiller en central rolle.

Kapitlet indledes med en let gennemgang af signifikant litteratur indenfor feltet efterfulgt af en generel indføring til relationel ledelse som fokusområde i arbejdet med denne afhandling.

3. I kapitel 3 præsenterer jeg et bud på en *socialkonstruktionistisk forståelse af læring og forskning*, der redegør for de grundlæggende forståelser, der udgør fundamentet i den forskning, som er udøvet i forbindelse med afhandlingen.

4. Kapitel 4 drejer sig specifikt om en participatorisk forskningstilgang i forbindelse med *anvendelsen af rollespil med reflekterende team til styrkelse af dialog*. Dette kapitel redegør for en af de hovedtilgange til forskning, som denne afhandling bygger på og indeholder en detaljeret metodebeskrivelse.

Indhold i bind 2:

Bind 2 indeholder 7 kapitler, som alle er publiceret eller blevet accepteret til publicering i tidsskrifter og bøger.

1. *At tænke ledelses- og organisationsudvikling med John Shotter*. Kapitlet er et bud på, hvordan Shotters begreber og idéer kan forstås i relation til ledelse og organisationer. Det introducerer til nogle af de socialkonstruktionistiske idéer, der udgør et fundament for denne afhandling og de applicerede praksisformer til fremme af dialog, refleksivitet og relationelle kompetencer i organisationer.

2. *Relationel ledelse – dialogisk baseret samarbejde*. Dette kapitel byder på en forståelse af ledelse fra et socialkonstruktionistisk paradigme hvor relationer er sat i forgrunden. Det er inddelt i tre underafsnit:
    - Relationel ledelse og dialogens udfordring
    - Forståelse af dialog
    - At skabe en organisationskultur

3. *Udvikling af ledelse som dialogisk praksis*. Dette kapitel forklarer, hvordan vi kan forstå ledelse som et overordnet relationelt fænomen og hvordan dialog kan forstås i dette perspektiv. Derudover redegør kapitlet for udviklingen af dialogiske og relationelle kompetencer blandt ledere og medarbejdere ud fra anvendelse af rollespil.

4. *Reflekterende rollespil til udvikling af dialogiske kompetencer*. Dette kapitel forklarer en af de bærende metodiske tilgange anvendt i denne afhandling. Indenfor rammen af aktionsforskning udforskes anvendelsen og effekten af rollespil med reflekterende team til udvikling af relationelle og dialogiske kompetencer.

5. *Ledelsesudvikling i dialogiske læringsrum*. Dette kapitel handler om styrkelse af lærign og udvikling gennem dialogbaseret praksisformer i ledelsesteams på ti offentlige skoler i den nordlige region af Danmark. Kapitlet er et eksempel på, hvordan arbejdet med dialog inspireret af af idéerne om relationel ledelse og aktionsforskning can bidrage til at skabe udvikling i ledelsesteams.

6. *Polyfonisk tilgang til teamudvikling, læring og vidensproduktion*. Kapitlet præsenterer en dialogisk tilgang til forskning til styrkelse af orhganisatorisk læring og udvikling. Projektet fandt sted i en dansk NGO, der arbejder for økologisk landbrug.

7. *Skabelsen af ledelsesidentitet gennem fortællinger*. Dette kapitel handler om den diskursive konstruktion af ledelsesidentiteter og præsenterer et kvalitativt studie omhandlende hvordan ledelsesidentitet i postmoderne organisationer er konstrueret på baggrund af forhandlinger og samskabelse af meninger, relationer og fortællinger. Det indeholder en analyse af fire narrative interviews med anvendelse af bevidnende team. Begrebet *co-authoring* fremfor *authoring* er anvendt i udviklingen af ledelsesidentiteter gennem refleksive dialoger og emergerende fortællinger indenfor rammen af aktionslæring.

Overordnet konklusion

Afhandlingen bidrager til formuleringen af en relationel forståelse af ledelse, hvor der lægges vægt på ledelse som fælles og samarbejdsbaseret aktivitet. I dette paradigme er hovedvægten lagt på dialog og interaktion. Inspireret af socialkonstruktionistiske idéer tager afhandlingen tilgange til læring og vidensproduktion forbundet med relationel ledelse i betragtning. De praksisformer, der er udviklet i forbindelse med afhandlingen demonstrerer, at det er muligt at styrke ledelsesudvikling i organisationer gennem fællesskabsorienterede, dialogiske praksisser i grupper og teams. Disse praksisser er særligt succesfulde når deltagerne selv definerer de overordnede undersøgelsestematikker og undersøgelsesspørgsmål. Dertil viser afhandlingen, at det er afgørende for et positivt læringsudbytte, at skabe miljøer for læring og vidensproduktion hvor deltagerne er anerkendt og værdsat som personer og som fagprofessionelle. I arbejdet med denne afhandling er dialogisk baserede praksisformer inspireret af aktionsforskning med det formål at styrke fælles vidensproduktion, refleksivitet og dialogiske kompetencer i grupper og teams blevet udviklet, analyseret og dokumenteret. Deltagerne omfattede skoleledere, lederne af dagtilbud og rådgivere, der arbejder i en NGO for økologisk landbrug.

Afhandlingen konkluderer yderligere, at det er muligt, at styrke de relationelle og dialogiske kompetencer blandt både ledere og medarbejdere gennem anvendelsen af rollespil med reflekterende team. Disse former for praksis bør faciliteres og gennemføres nænsomt og forsigtigt med en sensitivitet i forhold til organisationens kontekst og de mange forskellige interessentperspektiver. Et participatorisk forskningsprojekt, som fandt sted blandt ansatte og det ledende team på en

døgninstitution for anbragte børn og unge demonstrerede potentialet i at arbejde med drama, idét denne tilgang involverer hele kroppen og alle sanserne. Dette udviklede ikke blot kompetencer i dialog men ligeledes kropslig opmærksomhed, selv refleksivitet, relationel bevidsthed, perspektivskifte og en styrket evne til at kunne indleve sig i andre. Dette projekt anvendte ikke kun rollespillet i form af tilbageskuende undersøgelsesform men også som fremadskuende metode til undersøgelse af nye potentielle handlemuligheder. Håbet med denne fremtidsskabende tilgang var at skabe bedre relationer i organisationen og mere refleksive pædagogiske praksisformer i relation til de børn og unge, som er bosiddende i institutionen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to express thanks to my two supervisors professor emeritus Kenneth Gergen and associate professor Søren Frimann for our dialogues and their feedback concerning this dissertation. Apart from being my supervisors, we have also written book chapters and articles together concerning leadership and dialogically based approaches to the development of leadership and organizational learning. In particular, I would like to thank Kenneth Gergen for encouraging me in developing and refining practices based on roleplay with the aim of developing relational and dialogic skills in organizations.

I would also like to thank professor Kenneth Mølbjerg Jørgensen, professor Sheila McNamee and associate professor Ottar Ness for forming part of the Review Committee and making time to read and discuss this thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the head of the Department for Learning and Philosophy at Aalborg University, professor Annette Lorentsen, for offering me the opportunity to do research at the department and for her faith in my capabilities as a scholar and a university teacher.

I also owe thanks to my colleagues and writing fellows, professor Jørgen Gulddahl Rasmussen, associate professor Mette Vinther Larsen, associate professor Charlotte Øland Madsen, and associate professor Marita Svane at the Department of Business and Management at Aalborg University for our inspiring dialogues during the last five years concerning relational leading and the development of new qualitative research inquiries inspired by social constructionist ideas.

In addition, I would like to thank my colleague, Asbjørn Molly, who agreed to take over some of my teaching and coordinating tasks in the last period of the writing process.

Furthermore, I will say thanks to the great number of master and candidate students who have shown interest in diverse themes related to this thesis and with whom I have immersed in dialogues about learning, organizing, leading, organizational change and learning processes, and the significant role of communication in these processes. In particular, I would like to thank my former student Maria Beyer Ravn, who spent a whole semester taking part in the action research with use of roleplay and with whom I have analyzed and discussed a large part of the video material.

I also want to thank the Director at the Department for Children and Youth Affairs in Rebild Municipality, Torben Rune, and the more than forty school leaders and leaders of daycares in Rebild Municipality who agreed to take part in action research processes related to this thesis. Furthermore thanks to all the employees and leaders at the 24-hour center for adolescents who were ensured anonymity and as well thanks to the group of counselors within organic farming from the national association of organic farmers, Økologisk Landsforening.

In particular, I want to express special thanks to my son, Toke, for his patience with my work and for enriching my life with playfulness, humor and music. And thanks to my parents, Hanne and John, for their backing and encouragement.

Finally, I want to thank my friends in the world of art, music, theater and consultancy for being lively dialogue partners and for inspiring me through their creative ways of living and "world making."

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Today's organizations are confronted with rapidly changing and highly complex conditions. Traditional conceptions of leadership are increasingly less functional. It is in this context that this dissertation grapples with two closely related and important issues: 1) the potentials of a relational orientation to leading and 2) the means for enhancing relational, dialogic and reflexive skills.

Three overall research questions are prominent:

1. How can we understand leading from a relational perspective?
2. How can we contribute to creating development in organizations through dialogic practices?
3. Is it possible to enhance relational and dialogical skills through roleplay methodology?

In my work with relational leading, I integrate two overall perspectives—both a practice perspective (based on the notion of process or becoming) and a linguistic or dialogic perspective. I believe that these two perspectives are closely related to each other and that both perspectives are found interwoven together in social constructionist scholarship today.

The practice turn in leadership and organization scholarship is based on a "becoming" approach to organizations (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). It draws on a process view where organizations and people are understood as being constantly in processes of change in a world in continuous motion. In this perspective of becoming, meaning is not given beforehand but something that we construct relationally in the moment, in ongoing process. In this perspective, attention is paid to continuous emergence, and processes and incidents are seen as emerging and unpredictable, created by the interactions among organizational actors in their contextual surroundings.

The linguistic (or dialogic) turn puts special emphasis on communication and language (Rorty (1967); Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004), in particular language understood as constitutive of our social realities. Here language is understood as a way to relationally shape our understandings and our constructions of our realities and identities. Through language we co-create and co-construct meaning, and through communication we can anticipate and create new pathways for action.

The dissertation draws upon ideas from social constructionism, which replaces the notion of language as representation with the idea of language as constitutive or formative; language shapes our understanding of our social worlds. In this view,

organizations can be understood as webs of conversations, through which people interact and coordinate with each other. These conversations are carried out among people and groups who have different points of view, different taken-for-granted assumptions, and different ways of understanding their tasks and their surroundings, etc. In this way, organizations are made up of multiple understandings and variations in locally and relationally constructed realities (Hosking, 2010). These different understandings and realities are not static but constantly in movement, influencing and interacting with other, which means that understandings, meanings and opinions change over time.

In my account of relational leading, it is not a matter of attempting to control these understandings (which would be an impossible effort) but to acknowledge diversity and work *with* and *within* this diversity. In a relational view, polyvocality is seen as necessary and enriching, contributing to decision-making and enhancing organizational intelligence and creativity. It is a matter of understanding differing views and interpretations as co-existing and complementary and to work reflectively with the ways in which we engage in daily conversations. As Cunliffe and Eriksen put it: "Relational leadership is about recognizing the heteroglossic nature of dialogue and the potentiality that lies within the interplay of voices within dialogic or conversational spaces" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, pp. 1436-37). Relational leading builds on the notion that through dialogical interaction and collaboration we can find and construct new ways of moving forward together while accepting that there are always different voices and interpretations at stake in an organization. Viewing organizations as webs of conversations contrasts with the traditional view of the organization as an ultimately rational, controllable and efficient machine. Relational leading is an alternative to the modernist conceptions of leadership and organization, which fundamentally are built on the belief in rationality and control.

This thesis draws on an understanding of leading and organizing, where communication is seen as a continuing process, emergent and open, and where people attempt to construct meaning together in *joint action* (Shotter, 2008, 2010). This means that meaning is not something preconceived and preplanned, rather it emerges and develops through interplay, interaction, and co-creation.

Sense-making, decision-making and leading, from this perspective, are emergent processes. Leading from a relational perspective is not embodied in an independent person who manages the organization, but emerges out of relational process. Rather than attempting to control the organization, relational leading is about moving *with* or *within* these emerging relational processes. It is a matter of taking part and engaging dialogically in a relational process. In short, leading takes place within a shared and distributed activity in the entire organization. Thus, the development of relational leading puts the main focus on what is going on in the interplay among people, and draws attention to simple every day conversations in organizational practice.

In addition, the thesis contains a series of action-based learning and research projects for the enhancement of relational, dialogic and reflexive skills in organizations. My scholarship serves a practical purpose, and it is my hope with this thesis to make a contribution to the dialogue and the development of our understandings of leading as shared process and contribute to the development of dialogically based practices for organizational development, learning, and knowledge building.

CHAPTER 2. HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND LEADING FROM A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE?

2.1. AN INTRODUCTION TO RELATIONAL LEADING AS A RESEARCH FIELD

Both in the social and human sciences, we have seen a *dialogical* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Flecha et al., 2003) or a *relational turn* (Donati et al., 2011). During the last approximately two decades, these ”turns” have gained ground within organizational and leadership studies. One of my concerns in this thesis is: *How can we understand leading from a relational perspective?*

In this chapter I will present an understanding of leading in a relational perspective that serves as a foundation for my work with leadership and organizations in theory and practice. For readers interested in reading more about this approach to leadership, I recommend reading volume 2 of this thesis, in particular, or the book entitled *Relational Leading. Practices for Dialogically Based Collaboration*, which I wrote together with Kenneth J. Gergen in 2013.

Relational leading is an approach to leadership and organizing still in its early phase. With this thesis, I hope that I can contribute to the field. Over the last approximately twenty years, there has been an increasing interest in this theme, and a relational turn in leadership scholarship has contributed to the development of thoughts, ideas and theories concerning the topic. Still, it is my experience that there is very little research concerning relational leading as *practice* and, furthermore, *learning practices* that can enhance relational leading in everyday organizational settings. Among the contributions to the field, I find it important to mention a series of authors, whose work has had a special impact on me and inspired me in my work with relational leading in theory and practice. This does not mean that I necessarily agree with everything these authors say, but without a doubt, I have been inspired by some of their ideas. This is not an attempt to present a detailed review of all the literature in the field, but an attempt to draw an overall map of relational leading as a research field. For more comprehensive reviews, I recommend Ospina, 2006; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012. After presenting these major works in the literature concerning the research field, I will introduce my own account on relational leading.

One of the early books anticipating the development of ideas on relational leading that I find important to mention here is *Management and Organization: Relational alternatives to individualism,* edited by Hosking, Dachler and Gergen in 1995. This book draws attention to the social dimension of organizing processes in a time, according to the authors, characterized by rapid changes, increasing complexity and globalization. It discusses leadership, organizational conflict, power and politics in organizations from a social constructionist orientation. Its chief argument related to leadership, is to shift the focus from the personality or attributes of those in leadership positions to the relational processes of which they are a part. Among other things, it distinguishes between different forms of power conceptualized as *"power over," "power to"* and *"power with"* (see book chapter by Gergen 1995: "Relational Theory and the Discourses of Power"). This way of looking at power inspired me and two colleagues at Aalborg University to write a book chapter entitled *Dialogue and Power,* concerning the working ambience in a private Danish enterprise (Svane, Hersted & Schulze, pp. 81-105 in Larsen & Rasmussen, 2015). In this study we discuss how power dynamics can unfold in an annual employee interview on performance and development between a leader and an employee in a bank. Through this case, we demonstrate how power can be constructed, reproduced, challenged and changed in the relationship through discursive moves.

Another book worth mentioning here is Wilfred Drath's book, *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership,* published in 2001. Here, from a story of a fictive piano company, the author describes the development of an understanding of leadership from an individual orientation to a practice and understanding where group members share the responsibility of leading. Drath claims that a shift in understanding leadership is needed in order to face the challenges of globalization and the postindustrial information age. Influenced by social constructionist and systemic thinking, Drath envisions the idea of relational leadership, which he views as "a relational process of sense- and meaning-making" (Drath 2001, p. 151). With inspiration from Karl Weick, he argues for a "relational dialogue principle," where people who share work, create leadership together by "constructing the meaning of direction, commitment, and adaptive challenge" (p. 153). This does not mean that Drath totally rejects the idea of formally appointed leaders, but he argues that:

> "If a person is not a leader simply on his or her own, but as a result of participation in some relational process, then we have a new and potentially powerful tool for recognizing leadership and for making it happen. We need not confine ourselves to teaching, training, and developing individuals to be or become leaders (although we will continue with this as well), we can begin to teach, train, and develop

> whole communities, whole groups, whole organizations, in how to participate in various leadership processes […]" (Drath, 2001, p. 150).

I find this idea of working with whole groups and communities of people in developing skills as participants in leadership processes very meaningful and, if we carry this out in practice, it requires developing skills in dialogue, perspective change and collaboration—which are some of the elements in the practices we see unfolded in this thesis.

In 2001 Cunliffe published the article, *Managers as Practical Authors: Reconstructing our Understanding of Management Practice*. Here she draws on Shotter's conceptualization of management as a *rhetorically-responsive activity in which managers act as "practical authors" of their social realities* (Shotter, 1993, pp. 148–59). As Cunliffe writes: "Managing is seen as an embodied and situated dialogical activity in which managers act as authors of organizational realities through their conversations" (p. 351). In her article she takes as the central premise the constitutive and metaphorical nature of language and suggests that "authorship may relate to how managers attempt to construct a sense of who they are, create a shared sense of features of their organizational landscape, and how they may move others to talk or act in different ways through their dialogical practices" (p. 351). She offers a way of understanding leadership and dialogue, that may "allow managers to author or construct organizational experiences in more deliberate ways" (p. 351). Cunliffe argues that we should see managers in a new light, which means not as scientist-problem solvers but as authors (p. 352). She claims:

> Managers, along with other organizational participants, author the shape of their organization's operational space or social landscape, as well as a sense of their own identities and the identities of those around them. This authorship occurs between people, dialogically, as they respond to each other in their everyday conversations. What makes managers authors, is that they are concerned not merely with the design of organizational structures, systems, or goals, but with creating new possibilities for action, new ways of being and relating in indeterminate, ill-defined realms of activity. In this way, they are more like artists than engineers (p. 352).

What I find important here, is that Cunliffe in this article points to the constitutive force of language in leadership and argues that, through language, managers and other organizational participants can create "new possibilities for action, new ways of being and relating […]".

In other words, language has a future forming capacity; through language the leader/manager and other organizational participants can open up possibilities for action. At the same time Cunliffe suggests that, "no one person is wholly in control

of meaning" (p. 352) and points to the overall social constructionist assumption that meaning is constructed in relationships. She says:

> "Managers do not act as rational agents in an already existing reality but simultaneously construct, make sense, and are constructed by dialogue and ways of relating in their organizational landscapes. "Good" managers are those who have a reflexive awareness of the complexities of the authorship process and who may use a range of linguistic tools to jointly construct possibilities for participating in conversations and organizational life in different ways". (Cunliffe 2001, p. 367).

These ideas point to the need of working with linguistic tools from a reflexive awareness among managers and other organizational participants and lead directly to the main concerns of this thesis.

Two interesting texts about leadership were written by Joyce Fletcher in 2004 and 2007. Both texts have a feminist orientation and point out the issue of power in relational interactions. In her 2004 essay, *The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change*, Fletcher discusses paradoxes in new—often called postheroic—models of leadership. The author argues that "post-heroic leadership is defined by its shared and distributed qualities, its understanding of leadership as a social process, and its outcomes: mutual learning, greater collective understanding, and ultimately, positive action" (2004, p. 649). In her 2004 essay she explores these issues and suggests that "theories of leadership that fail to consider the gender/power implications of social interactions and networks of influence may lead to the cooptation of these models, resulting in their being brought into the mainstream discourse in a way that silences their radical challenge to current work practices, structures, and norms" (p. 647). In relation to these concerns, in 2007 Fletcher published the book chapter *Leadership, power, and positive relationships*. In this chapter she discusses the construction of leadership as a particular kind of "positive relationship at work" and explores emerging models of leadership that put relationships in the foreground. Furthermore, she identifies opportunities for learning about relational leading in collective, interactive learning processes. Finally, she offers a particular perspective on positive relational interactions influenced by a feminist orientation, which deals directly with the issue of power differences in relational interactions.

In 2006, Hosking and McNamee edited the book, *The social construction of organization* with contributions from more than twenty social constructionist scholars, among others Gergen, Cunliffe, Shotter, Holzman, Barrett, and McNamee and Hosking themselves. The book shows how traditional organizational science is rooted in modernist assumptions and, instead, offers a social constructionist understanding of organization—or organizing—within a postmodern discourse where the belief in rational agency is questioned and replaced with communal rationality, empirical knowledge with social construction, language as representation

with language as social action. As I see it, this book is a significant contribution to the debate. It would be too comprehensive to go in depth with this extensive book here, but among other themes, the authors have contributed chapters on modernism versus postmodernism, organizing and organizational learning, relational practices in groups, the dialogic and performative turn, evaluation and assessment, consulting, and improvisation in organizations with inspiration from jazz. Although this book says very little about leadership in practice in concrete terms, it has been an inspiration to the development of the ideas on relational leading explored in this thesis and in our book (Hersted & Gergen 2013) and offers, as opposed to modernist views, a postmodern vision of organizational science. Of special significance, the book shifts the metaphor of the organization from that of the machine (dominating the modernist era) to the conversation. In this way it shifts the concept of the leader from a manager to a dialogic participant in the meaning-making process.

In 2006 Ospina & Sorenson published a book chapter entitled: *A constructionist lens on leadership: Charting new territory*. Here they present a comprehensive and detailed review of different understandings of leadership as shared practice seen through a constructionist lens. They point out that, "these approaches rest on the assumption that leadership is intrinsically relational and social in nature, is the result of shared meaning-making, and is rooted in context or place" (p. 188-189). Furthermore, Ospina & Sorenson discuss the implications for practice and propose different forms of research inquiry concerning leadership studies from a relational perspective, among others action-based participatory or cooperative inquiries and narrative inquiry. For instance, when proposing the use of cooperative inquiries from an action-oriented approach, they argue that participants can do research together while inquiring into "burning issues of their practice, thus exploring leadership from the inside out" (p. 197). In line with these ideas, I have attempted, in this thesis, to carry out research understood as participatory and action-based (which will be unfolded later in vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

In 2007 Fairhurst published a comprehensive book *Discursive leadership: In conversation with leadership psychology* where, inspired by linguistic turn and drawing on social constructionist ideas, she argues and demonstrates through concrete examples that our understandings of leadership and leadership identities are discursively constituted. Fairhurst points out that discourse analysis has much to offer within leadership studies and can be seen as complementary to scholarship in leadership psychology. She takes a critical stance towards the tendency among psychologists to study individual cognitive functions among leaders and directs attention instead to organizational discourse and the communicative aspects of leading. Fairhurst claims that discursive leadership can complement leadership psychology, because it leads attention to social and communicative aspects of leadership instead of, for instance, focusing on personality traits. Despite this critical stance, she also points out that there is great potential for doing cross-disciplinary work between discursive scholarship and leadership psychology. She seeks to

combine different traditions, both little ”d” discourse analysis, studying talk and text in social practices while focusing on language in use and interaction processes (e.g., drawing on Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998) and big ”D” Discourse referring to general and enduring systems of thought and disciplinary power in a historically situated time (drawing on Foucault, 1972, 1980). She demonstrates the ways in which many different aspects of power intertwine in discourse that construct leadership and claims that leaders are passive receptors of meaning as much as they are managers of it. Furthermore, she presents and draws on other approaches to analyzing communicative aspects of leadership, e.g., Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethnography of speaking and narrative analysis, just to mention a few. This book draws a comprehensive methodological map and gives an overview of the research field of discursive leadership.

The same year (2007) Hosking published the book chapter *Not Leaders, not followers: A post-modern discourse of leadership processes.* In this chapter she challenges the distinction between leaders and followers as the traditional subject-object position often referred to in leadership literature influenced by modernist discourse. Instead, she proposes a *postmodern discourse of leadership as process* and points out that, “leadership (and all relational) realities may be variously constructed in different local-cultural-historical processes” (p. 29). She draws attention to possibilities for training and learning practices that embrace the idea of distributed leadership and involve all participants, not only formally appointed leaders. Hosking advocates for more dialogically based learning practices, which explore leadership as relational process by involving all the organizational members, as well stakeholders outside the organization. She puts emphasis on language as “key process in which relating “goes on” and in so doing, constructs people-world realties and relations” (p. 9). Furthermore, inspired by Harlene Anderson (1997), she suggests that consultants and change agents working in organizations should take a *not-knowing position* and work from a dialogical approach, as she writes:

> “Moving away from subject-object relations means shifting from practices in which change agents act as knowing about leadership and act to form what trainees need to know. This means that consultants act as part of, rather than apart from, development processes. Some consultants work this way, although, as yet, mostly outside the leadership area. Such practices often are spoken of as “collaborative” or “dialogical””. (Hosking 2007, p. 24).

Hosking has been especially important for my own work with leaders and employees in action research projects (see vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

Inspired by social constructionist ideas, Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff published in 2007 the article *Shared Leadership: A postheroic perspective on leadership as a collective construction.* In this article the authors take a critical stance toward the traditional view of leadership as a single-person activity building on the ideal of the heroic leader, and they argue for leadership going on in a collective construction process created by many people who interact with each other. In line with Fletcher (2004), they use the term *postheroic leadership* and point out that, "[…] early explanations of leadership effectiveness were based on the notion that leaders possess certain psychological traits and personal characteristics that distinguish them from ordinary people. These theories are all individualistic in the sense that they focus on the individual leader, thereby supporting the general taken-for-granted assumption that leadership is a single-person task" (p. 43). As an alternative to this individual centered view, they argue for *postheroic leadership*, which "[…] implies that different roles—not only the outgoing, driving personalities—are seen as important to leadership and that the notion of role complementarities may become even more important in the composition of managerial teams (p. 62). Furthermore, they add that, "If employees are recognized as responsible and accountable co-leaders rather than as untrustworthy subordinates, they should be entrusted to make decisions not only on operative matters but also on governance matters" (p. 62). In their article they also present qualitative data from four case studies of organizations which, "on the surface, are organized by unitary command but where the everyday construction of leadership and leader identity is a collective one" (p. 42). They demonstrate how leadership in these organizations can be seen as "ongoing construction processes where leaders, expectations on leaders, idea generation, decision-making, and arenas for leadership are continuously negotiated and reformulated over time" (p. 42).

In 2010 Fairhurst & Grant published the article: *The Social Construction of leadership: A sailing guide.* Building on the 2007 book of Fairhurst, the article is an attempt to distinguish among many approaches to understanding leadership through a social constructionist lens. The *sailing guide* comprises four key dimensions in social constructionist leadership research: the construction of social reality versus the social construction of reality, theory versus praxis, critical emancipatory versus pragmatic interventionist, and mono-modal versus multi-modal (p. 195). The chapter offers a theoretical overview of social constructionist approaches to leadership, and the authors suggest researchers use it as a reflexive tool "to clarify their own constructionist stance and perhaps consider a wider range of approaches to studying leadership than might otherwise have been the case" (p. 195).

In 2010 Hosking wrote a chapter for The Sage Handbook of Leadership entitled: *Moving Relationality: Meditations on a Relational Approach to Leadership.* Here she criticizes Western individualism and advocates for practices where participants are more "relationally responsive." One of the things that drew my attention was that Hosking advocates for the use of improvisational jazz or theater to develop what we

might call a relational-responsive sensitivity and skills in improvisation. As she writes: "While improvising, participants could be said to discover the future that their actions invite, as it unfolds, by being relationally responsive and by being ready to connect with what cannot be seen or heard ahead of time. This is possible, for example, through making space for "distributed leadership" […] She adds: "relating in these ways involves being ready to dare, to leap into the unknown, and perhaps, like Picasso, "refusing to appeal to the familiar" by repeating some already established pattern or form" (p. 462). She advocates for new forms of organizational research inquiries where the researcher leaves the detached observer position and engages in process *with* practitioners, for instance, in more collaborative practices which "avoid centering scientific rationality above others" (p. 464). Hosking calls for "performing research *with* others" (p. 464) and explains: "This could mean, for example, joining with organizational or community participants to perform some sort of participative or collaborative inquiry […] that might help (perhaps in quite different ways) the various participating forms of life" (p. 464). She adds: "Conducting inquiries 'with' others means working in and through dialogues and so opening up the possibility of becoming more multi-logical—of multiple local rationalities" (p. 464). In this way Hosking points to new research methodologies that in creative and aesthetic ways are able to capture and enhance the development of relationships and dialogue in organizations and communities. She argues for new practices that "give more space to the body, to feelings and the senses" (p. 465). These ideas resonate very well with the inquiries based on roleplay with a reflecting team carried out in my work on this thesis (see in particular vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3 and 4).

The ideas of leading as relational and dialogic process was elaborated further in the article entitled *Relational leadership,* where Cunlife and Eriksen (2011) locate leadership in a jointly constructed relational process and suggest that practicing relational leadership is about a "way of being-in-the-world". Drawing on Bakhtin's ideas about dialogue and Ricoeur's notion of ethical selfhood they write:

> "Relational leadership requires a way of engaging with the world in which the leader holds herself/himself as always in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to others; recognizes the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of life; and engages in relational dialogue (p. 1425)."

Furthermore, Cunliffe and Eriksen draw inspiration from Shotter's work on *action-guiding anticipatory understandings* (Shotter, 2008b) that "may sensitize leaders to the impact of their interactions and enable them to become more reflexive and ethical practitioners" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1428.) They emphasize practical wisdom, intersubjectivity and dialogue and write about the importance of sense-making as a collective practice, the creation of possibilities for learning and reflection, the need for open communication, and the capability to facilitate and accommodate change through dialogic process. The idea of working with

"sensititizing" leaders to become more aware and reflexive concerning their interaction in relationships has had a direct impact on my own research inquiry, for instance, while working with roleplay and a reflecting team among school principals and leaders at a 24-hour care facility for neglected adolescents (see vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3 and 4).

A comprehensive book entitled *Advancing Relational Leadership Research. A Dialogue among Perspectives* was edited and published in 2012 by Uhl-Bien & Ospina. I consider this book to be a significant contribution to the discussion and research on relational leadership. It comprises no less than 18 chapters written by more than 35 scholars discussing relational leadership from diverse perspectives within the leadership field, among others Ospina, Uhl-Bien, Barge, Hosking, Alvesson, Svenningson, Day, Drath and Fairhurst. In the introduction to the book, the editors, Ospina and Uhl-Bien, point out that relational leading as a research field is dominated by two overall trends: 1) the entity perspective focusing on "traits, behaviors, and actions of individuals or group members as they engage in interpersonal relationships to influence one another" (p. xxii), and 2) a constructionist perspective, which "considers processes of social construction and emergent practices that reflect common understandings through which leadership gains legitimacy and produces outcomes" (p. xxii). Seen in an overall perspective, the different contributions to the book reflect these two movements. In addition, the editors set the modernist paradigm up against the postmodernist, constructionist paradigm. They claim that approaches associated with the former tend to privilege the individualist view on leadership, while constructionist approaches understand leadership as defined by "those who construct it in their interactions, in very particular contexts" (p. xxix).

In 2013 Hornstrup and Johansen wrote a book in Danish entitled *Strategisk Relationel Ledelse* (trans.: Strategic Relational Leadership) drawing on social constructionist and systemic theories. The book offers a view on leading organizational change processes from an understanding of strategy as something that should involve all organizational partners and not only the formal leaders. Among the "strategic skills," the authors emphasize the capability to include and involve colleagues, clients and customers in the development of the organization, and in order to succeed with this aim, according to the authors, focus must be put on relationships and communication. This book led to the development of the Ph.D thesis by Hornstrup (2015) entitled *Strategic relational leadership: Building organizational capacity to change*.

In 2014 Fairhurst and Connaughton reviewed the literature on communication in organizations most relevant to the study of leadership in their article *Leadership: A communicative perspective*. In line with other constructionist scholars, the authors point out that early work in leadership studies was building on individualist and cognitive theories, but that we now have a significant movement drawing on the

communicative perspective. They discuss communication as transmission versus communication as meaning-centered view (where language is considered as constitutive of reality), and they argue that leadership communication has both transmissional and meaning-centered aspects. Among other things they describe how researchers have worked with themes such as sense-making, framing, and identity work, as well with aesthetics in leadership communication. They explain different social constructionist approaches to studying leadership as a relational phenomenon grounded in language games (Wittgenstein, 1953) and discourse (Fairhurst, 2007), where dialogue has become a central issue. In addition, they attend to the issue of power struggles in organizations and introduce critical management studies which both pay attention to discursive and non-discursive practices (the former involving language systems, texts, and ways of talking, and the latter including institutionalized structures, social practices and regulating techniques).

In 2016 a book entitled *Leadership-as-Practice* was published, edited by Joseph Raelin. It contains chapters from Crevani & Endrissat, Cunliffe & Hibbert, Shotter and many others. Leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) is written from a constructionist stance where leadership—or leading—is understood as fundamentally relational and social, and enacted by a wide range of organizational actors in the context of specific organizational settings. In line with earlier mentioned works, here leadership is conceptualized as a practice, a coordinative effort, occurring among participants in their day-to-day experience rather than residing in the traits or behaviors of particular individuals. L-A-P resonates with relational leadership where leadership is considered a social phenomenon. As Raelin writes: "L-A-P emphasizes collective engagement, divergence, intersubjectivity, and ambiguity" (p. 8). To create leadership development and carry out L-A-P research, Raelin recommends participatory and action-based strategies such as action learning, action research, action science, cooperative inquiry, participatory research, etc., as well narrative inquiries (p. 7). At the same time he argues that the role of the researcher "would not so much be to inquire from outside the activity but rather to provide tools to encourage the observed to become inquirers themselves […]. These tools would not serve merely as mirrors for "looking in" to the activity but actually constitute the activity in all its rich dialogic interaction" (p. 8). In other words, Raelin advocates for engaged and participatory research inquiries carried out in the interplay between researchers and practitioners. Even though L-A-P can be seen as very similar to relational leading, and there are many overlaps, the book attempts to identify some overall differences. In chapter two (p. 23-49) Crevani and Endrisat point out that L-A-P is about:

- Producing direction for organizing processes
- Re-orientation of the flow of practice
- Emergent co-construction through collaborative agency
- Attention paid to patterns of connected actions

- Emphasizing practices, not the practitioner (leader)
- Paying attention to both discourse, body and material objects
- Interaction (including both humans and non-humans)

Whereas relational leading (according to Crevani and Endrissat, 2016) is more preoccupied with:

- Giving primacy to unfolding relations (we "become" in relationships)
- Co-construction of each other and the leadership process in communicative relationships
- Main focus on language and conversation and main attention paid to leaders as they relate to others
- Interaction and dialogue between humans as central for meaning-making
- Attention paid to ways of organizing that affect relations and interactions where social order is negotiated, constructed, and enacted.

When describing relational leading, Crevani and Endrissat (2016) claim: "Talk and language are foregrounded when studying how leadership is co-constructed in interactions and how this construction shapes further interactions and developments. In fact, the emphasis in this approach [relational leading] is on becoming in action—which takes place in interactions and relationships" (p. 26-27).

I have chosen to mention the L-A-P book here, because there are many similarities with relational leading and because the two, as I see it, complement each other very well. Whereas relational leading puts main focus on dialogue and conversation, leadership-as-practice also studies the interaction between humans and *non-human actors* and in this ways gives more attention to materiality than is the case in the relational leading approach. However, in my view, this also demonstrates a limitation with the approach thus far. Future contributions to relational leading must expand the scope to include, for example, office configurations, technological devices, furnishings, and more.

We find that the research field of relational leading understood as social, shared, and distributed practice is still developing, and I expect there to be a boom within literature on this topic, based on both theory and practice, in the coming years. Hopefully, we will also see more examples on different learning practices inspired by these overall ideas. I believe that the works from the scholars mentioned above and others have shown us an inspiring pathway, and my own work with this thesis draws inspiration from these various writings, in particular, in the ones where emphasis is put on relationships, dialogue and reflexivity, which are three main concerns in this thesis.

In the following I will present some basic assumptions in my understanding of relational leading. My aim is not to freeze or fix a specific and determined concept of leadership, but to contribute to and sustain further dialogue on the topic.

2.2. MY OWN ACCOUNT ON RELATIONAL LEADING

In the following I will give my account on relational leading inspired by social constructionist ideas. This account is in line with the other texts in this thesis and can be seen as an introduction to these. I attempt to move beyond the traditional leader-follower division (as criticized by Hosking 2007) and prefer the term ”leading” rather than ”leadership” because I see it as a process where organizational members are relating to each other in a shared ongoing ”doing.” In an organization there may be formally appointed leaders but, as I see it, the task of leading the organization is a co-created, shared activity. As Gergen writes:

> “If significant movement is to take place within an organization, it will emerge from the generative interchange among the participants. To be sure, individuals may be designated as leaders, but the process of leading is ultimately relational”. (2009, p. 333).

We live in a time characterized by flux, rapid change and increasing complexity. The world is in constant change and so too are the organizations. We can understand an organization and the surrounding world in a constant state of *becoming*, in a perspective of *ongoing change* rather than stability. As Shotter put it: “We are living in “an unfinished, still developing world” (Shotter 2015b, p. 2) and “[…] we are part of the making” (Shotter 2015b, p. 8).

In this view of *becoming*, any kind of organization must interact with the surrounding world, be responsive to it and adapt to change in order to survive. At the same time this adaptation should not be headlong but based on dialogue, reflexivity, negotiated values and exchange of ideas involving the many different voices and forms of knowledge in the organization. If we are “part of the making” as Shotter says, it also means that we, as organizations and individuals, contribute to the ”world making” and that we are responsible for the ways in which we, as organizations and individuals, relate to the surrounding world.

The conditions of rapid and ongoing contextual change give rise to new forms of leadership and new ways of organizing. At the same time any organization is constantly changing form ”within.” Relational leading puts major emphasis on continuous emergent change over durable structures. Change in this perspective is seen as an ongoing process in organizations, where actors are constantly “reweaving their webs of beliefs and actions to accommodate new experiences” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 580). This view is in contrast to traditional approaches, often dominated by the attempts of privileging stability, order and routine controlled from

a top-down position. As an alternative, we can see an organization as an organic web of conversations, coordinated actions and interactions, a web, which is never static but always in movement (see eventually Taylor & Every, 2000, Shotter & Tsoukas, 2011a). Or as Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) formulate it: the organization is a *community of people and conversations*:

> "A relational ontology causes us to radically rethink our notions of reality and who I am in the world, because it suggests the origin of our experience is intersubjective rather than individual and cognitive. Thus, organizations are not understood as structures and systems but communities of people and conversations. And in contrast to the focus on process and mechanisms found in other relational perspectives, a relational leader sees people not as objects to be manipulated but as human beings-in-relation with themselves". (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, p. 1431).

In this kind of network or community, people and groups are constantly communicating, interacting and coordinating with each other. This view of the organization is different from the traditional bureaucratic and mechanistic view, where the organization has frequently been understood as a smoothly functioning *machine* (for instance, represented in Taylorism). In the mechanistic organization, relationships are defined by a clear hierarchy characterized by command-and-control, and communication is basically based on a belief in rationality. According to this logic, the machine should be well-oiled, and if a cogwheel breaks, it can easily and rapidly be replaced by a new one. The same is true concerning the employee: if an employee has a workplace injury, he or she can simply be replaced by another. The employees are clocked in and out according to a precise work schedule, and their work is often characterized by routines, which may be repeated week after week, month after month, year after year. Time should not be "wasted" in useless conversation, so very little space is left for informal communication among the employees. Communication is basically understood as a means of transmitting information, and human relationships are often impersonal. Alienation and competition is often more common than a feeling of belonging and appreciation. The organization as a machine is defined by detailed work schedules and clearly defined tasks. Every function and task is measured by time. In addition, this form of organization is usually characterized by a division into "silos," where different departments work separately. In these conditions very little space is left for knowledge sharing, creativity and innovation.

In the mechanistic organization, the manger is often sitting behind a pane of glass or in an office at the upper level of the building. The leader is expected to have a 360 degrees overview of the organization and has the function of a controller. The ideal manager is a hero, who can effectively manage the organization in a rational and objective way. This is a view based on the belief in individual rationality and favors high efficiency and maximized productivity. This ideal of the heroic leader is

basically rooted in Western individualism and modernist ideas concerning organizational science, where the main focus has been on hierarchical structures and personality traits, behaviors and managing skills of the leader.

Management is seen here as a process of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling (see Hosking & Morley, 1991; Hosking, 2010), and the employee is turned into an "automaton" or "machine" directed by stopwatches. Usually, the work in these kinds of organizations is very monotone and divided into small units where each employee's tasks are measured by time, in order to maximize efficiency. Often the employee gets paid individually for his or her efforts (piecework), a principle that has been implemented in order to enhance competition rather than solidarity.

The notion of the organization as a machine was developed during the industrialization of our society, most clearly in Taylor's ideas of ideas scientific management (1911). Taylor, who had a background in mechanical engineering, was primarily concerned with efficiency. We still see this logic in new forms of packaging such as Total Quality Management (TQM), LEAN, New Public Management and similar ideas concerning so-called "peak performance." In this vision every organizational member is expected to contribute to the smooth and effective flow of production and to the fulfillment of the strategy set by the top management. This might sound logical and reasonable, but one of the problems with this model is that in such a well-oiled machine, no, or very little, attention is paid to the well-being and the job satisfaction among the employees, and little space is left for the creation of nurturing relationships and knowledge-sharing within the traditional hierarchy and across departments. Under these conditions it is difficult to develop an inspiring space for development and innovation. Innovation and new development does not emerge on command but in environments and relationships that inspire us to think in new ways, for instance, in cross-disciplinary working groups and in spaces where people have the opportunity to talk together and share their experience at an informal level (Amabile, 1998, 2002; Hersted, 2015). Another problem is that this model is not flexible enough to meet the challenges that many organizations face today, such as rapid changing policies and new regulations from the authorities, changing markets, changing economical contexts, developments in new technology, changeover to sustainable energy forms and less contamination, and the increasing diversity among the employees, expectations of more democracy and higher job satisfaction, etc. In addition, today many workplaces are subject to policies and agreements concerning the creation of a healthy and safe working environment where people can go through learning processes, and experience that they are included in the decision making processes regarding the future organization. The mechanistic model does not fulfill these demands.

Today many organizations depend on people who have different kinds of skills, competences and educational backgrounds and who are capable of working across

disciplines and professions. We see a movement from unification towards diversity. The leader today has lost his or her monopoly on knowledge and needs to take the knowledge and experience of others into account in the meaning- and decision-making processes. Furthermore, he or she needs to negotiate with the employees concerning specific organizational decisions (in Denmark, usually officially appointed representatives from various groups of employees, for instance in works councils, staff committees and labor unions). Thus, all the elements mentioned above make new demands on leadership, and new ways of relating, involving and communicating are required.

Relational leading moves away from the view at the organization as a machine and the image of the individualized, monologue-based Western view of personhood and puts relationships in the foreground. Leading in this view is seen as a shared, relational activity emerging from conversations, interaction and coordinated actions. It develops from within the microprocesses of everyday interaction in the organization and in relation to the surrounding world. In this understanding, leadership is not something that the leader, as one person, practices alone, but a shared practice, which could be formulated in the following way:

> "We identify relational leadership as views that recognize leadership, not as a trait or behavior of an individual leader, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions and relationships among people—a 'collective capacity'" (Day, 2000; Drath, 2001 cited in Uhl-Bien & Ospina (2012), p. 540).

From this perspective leading becomes *post-heroic* and a distributed phenomenon based on the capability of coordinating and communicating in social processes. Leading from a relational perspective relies on social processes involving many practitioners. Furthermore, leading from this perspective is seen as dynamic, constantly developing and changing over time. In brief, relational leading can be understood as:

- Relationally-responsive processes of communication and coordination
- Facilitating and engaging in dialogical processes
- Generating meaning collaboratively in social process
- Focusing on relationships rather than individual "leaders" or "followers"
- An embodied and situated dialogical activity with attention paid to language (in a broad sense) as constitutive of our social worlds
- Recognizing and valorizing diversity and complexity while working *with* many different voices and different local ways of organizing and working (multivocality/the polyphonic principle).
- Nurturing and building with the active engagement of leaders, employees and stakeholders
- Coordinating in ever shifting circumstances with an emphasis on continuous, emergent change

- Creating from *within* relationships
- Relating responsibly to each other within the organization and in relation to the surroundings, including the environment

2.2.1. MOVING AND MEANING MAKING IN RELATIONALLY-RESPONSIVE PROCESSES

Relational leading represents a shift in our understanding from seeing persons, objects and organizations as independent entities to see everything as connected in relational, responsive process. From a relational perspective we are all interrelated with each other and we are always in the process of coordinating meaning and constructing our reality. In daily organizational practice we are embedded in relationships that continuously develop through our daily interactions. Relationships in a social constructionist perspective are seen as a fundamental condition and as something that we constantly construct through *relationally-responsive* processes *(*Shotter 2006, 2008a; Hosking, 2010), and in these processes we attempt to construct meaning together. As Cunliffe and Eriksen put it: "[M]eaning emerges in specific moments of responsive conversations between people" (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, p. 1434).

Moving in *relationally-responsive* processes becomes a matter of finding new pathways together and teaching ourselves "thinking in duration" (Shotter, 2008b; Chia, 1998), which means seeing everything as interrelated and fluid. It is a matter of navigating in a continuous state of becoming where we need to learn how to move within fluidity, complexity, disruption and unpredictability, without having the answers and conclusions beforehand. Relational leading builds on curiosity, listening, responsiveness, and reflexivity, including our capability to question our taken-for-granted assumptions. Some of these skills can also be identified in the old Greek term *Phronesis.*

As written elsewhere (Hersted, 2015), Phronesis involves the use of judgement and the ability to make organizational decisions on a reflective basis with a great degree of sensitivity in relation to the organization's conditions and any circumstances that may affect it. In line with Shotter & Tsoukas (2014), I consider Phronesis as a matter of being sensitive in relation to the events that occur, recognizing and taking into account the fluent, changeable and undefinable in our surroundings and accepting that each time we have to start from scratch. We may say that rather than routinely applying and imposing standardized procedures and generalized knowledge, it is a matter of being reflexive while showing special sensitivity to the unique situation, the people involved, the circumstances and the surroundings (see also Hersted 2015). In my understanding, relational leading not only requires sensitivity in relation to other human beings, but also involves being sensitive and responsible in relation to the environment and the world we leave to future generations. Seen from my perspective, relational leading implicates that we

critically rethink our previous concepts and practices and initiate dialogues about the creation of more sustainable and human ways of organizing, working, learning and producing.

2.2.2. FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS AND CONVERSATIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS

When leading is seen as *relationally-responsive* process that develops in communicative acts and coordinated actions, then relational and communicative skills become crucial for the organization to function. Relational leading is a way of understanding and participating in the daily life of the organization, a new way of engaging in processes and relationships, which differs significantly from the command-and-control based culture we saw in the mechanistic organization. In relational leading language is seen as the central means for making sense, creating, and sustaining relationships. Furthermore, we use language to shape and anticipate future actions (Shotter, 2015).

In my work with relational leading, I put special emphasis on the function of utterances within ongoing conversation. Here I am particularly influenced by Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) dialogism and his idea of polyphony and of human beings as dialogically interwoven, Austin's notion of *performative utterances* (1962), Wittgenstein's metaphor of *language game* and his idea of language use as taking part in *life forms* (1953, 1980), and Gergen's notion of *dangerous dances* (Gergen 2009). I also draw on Shotter's notion of *joint action*, *withness*-thinking and *relational responsiveness* (2005a+b, 2008, 2010a) inspired by the Bakhtinian circle. Furthermore, I am inspired by Tsoukas & Chia (2002), Hosking (2007; 2010), Hosking & McNamee (2006), Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011), Shotter & Tsoukas (2011a, 2011b, 2014) and others, as described in the literature review (see also vol. 2).

Relational leading is not only a matter of *engaging* and *participating* reflexively in communicative processes (made up of speech acts, bodily gestures, artifacts, emails and documents) but, as I see it, also a matter of being able to *make space for and facilitate* dialogic processes with many different voices. In facilitating dialogic process, it is crucial to be curious and ask questions, which allows participants to raise their voice and, together with the participants, to find new pathways to explore that make sense for all the voices involved. Often it is a matter of being able to mediate between many different voices and encourage these voices to listen and connect to each other. This does not mean that we necessary have to end up in consensus; rather it is a question of being able to navigate in, and tolerate, dissensus and diversity.

In this matter I find the notion of *polyphony* by Bakhtin (1984) crucial. In the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue, conversations are never final but ongoing.

We carry with us traces from different voices from past conversations into new conversations in order to shape meaning. In other words, we are polyvocal or polyphonic. If we recognize the polyphonic nature of dialogue (both in our so-called *inner* dialogues and in dialogues with other human beings), we may become more open and capable of integrating different voices in processes of meaning- and decision-making. In this reflexive, multivoiced approach, we find more paths to action. In this dialogical view, meaning or ”truth” can never be fixed, but remains in a continuous state of becoming. It is therefore important that we do not attempt to terminate or freeze an absolute ”truth,” but that we remain open for improvisation and new, jointly constructed meanings. As Shotter emphasizes, it is not a matter of planning conversations beforehand but to meet each other in *open-ended dialogue*:

> “[…] if we refuse to meet the other in a situation of open-ended dialogue, if we for instance insist on following a check-list questionnaire in sequencing our utterances rather than in response to our dialogue partner’s utterances, then we not only reduce and humiliate our dialogue partner, we make the creation of the appropriate, dynamically unfolding inter-activity from within which the relevant ”action guiding calls” can emerge, impossible”. (Shotter 2005c, p. 593).

According to social constructionist understanding and inspired by Wittgenstein, language is considered an action in itself and our “speaking of language is part of an activity, or form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 23). Therefore language must be understood from within the context and the activity itself. As Wittgenstein points out: “What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see an action” (Wittgenstein, 1970, no. 567). When we participate in conversation, then, we can invite new options for action. Thus, language in a constructionist view is not just a medium, but an action in itself, and a change in language can have reverberating effects on other patterns of action. As Shotter and Tsoukas explain: “If individuals start talking differently about the world they experience, they will make a difference—they will produce change. Change in language amounts to change in how problems are viewed, experienced and managed” (Shotter & Tsoukas 2011a, p. 334).

In an organization or in any other form of community, we are not isolated entities but relationally and dialogically interwoven with each other and embedded in our surroundings. We depend on each other in our ability to coordinate, communicate, share knowledge, learn and solve problems. Although we may move around in shifting contexts within and outside the organization and jump from one conversational situation to another, we must strive to be present and see every situation as unique. Inspired by Bakhtin (1984, 1993) and Shotter (2005c, 2010, 2015a) we could say that it is a matter of engaging *from within* a situation and talking *with* people (not *to* them). It is a matter of engaging *in dialogue* instead of

monologue. I appreciate the following sentence by Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011 inspired by the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue versus monologue:

> "Bakhtin criticized the oppressive nature of monologic discourse, suggesting that it rules out diverse meanings, silencing and marginalizing other voices. *Dialogism* means talking *with* people not *to* them, understanding that meaning emerges in specific moments of responsive conversation between people, and that everything that is said is in relationship to "others": other people, other ideas, other conversations. Talking *with* means all views are shared and considered – cross/back and forth dialogue…" (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011, p. 1434).

In particular the idea of talking *with* people appeals to me, but from time to time it can be very difficult. Sometimes we get caught in "dangerous dances" (Gergen 2009) with our conversational partners where we communicate in repetitive patterns and construct degenerative scenarios together. One word and one gesture lead to another and as conversational partners we might end up in a polarized conflict. According to Wittgenstein; "we are often captured by the grammars of the language games in which we live" (Pearce, 1995, p. 92) or as Gergen says:

"No one wants to "fight it out," and yet, once the fight has begun it is difficult to excuse oneself, to "cut and run." From a relational standpoint these corrosive patterns are not inevitable. They are not built into our genes. Together we stand as creators of the future. The question is whether we can locate new and compelling steps, moves that will enable us to leave the dance floor before disaster strikes". (Gergen 2009, p. 111).

In this respect, I believe that if we reflect upon our own engagement in different language games and actively use our ability to imagine alternative scenarios, we can change the language game and move it in a more generative direction. As organizational members we shape and get shaped by the social realities we create together through communication. We co-create our social realities and therefore I think it is crucial to practice our ability to currently reflect upon the ways in which we take part in conversation.

2.3. CAN WE LEARN RELATIONAL LEADING?

So how can we develop practices that help organizational members to become more reflexive and pay attention to their ways of relating to each other? How can we develop the capability to engage in generative ways in different situations, in shifting circumstances? And how to develop skills in dialogue that enable and invite people to work together on a collaborative basis?

Kevin Barge once wrote: "If we can develop ways of working that assist leaders in developing their linguistic capacity to anticipate, to be present, and to reflect on their

conversational experience, then we will have begun to fulfill the promise of relational leadership" (Barge, 2012, p. 138). In this quote Barge focuses on the formally appointed leaders, but seen in a relational leading perspective, where leading is seen as a shared practice, I think that it is not only a matter of preparing leaders to be able to practice relational leading but as well the employees.

Through my work with this thesis, my basic aim has been to develop a learning practice for organizational development involving both leaders and employees, which engages with organizational experiences and which is situated, experiential, interactive, embodied and relational. In a series of workshops and longer projects inspired by action research participants were invited to reflect on and experiment with their different ways of communicating. Together we searched for ways in which degenerative ways of relating could be transformed into more generative outcomes. We based our work on roleplay and dialogues with a multi-voiced reflecting team. Together we searched for—and experimented with—alternative ways of talking, ways that could open new understandings, new possibilities and new relationships in the daily organizational life of the participants. This practice was based on the assumption that conversations are always co-created through coordinated, responsive action, and that we always have possibilities for choice. Every utterance can be seen as an invitation, and we can practice our ability to be more reflective concerning the ways in which we respond to an utterance from another person. We do not necessarily need to follow a *dangerous dance* (Gergen 2009) and we can change the genre of the dance by inviting another kind of dance. To illustrate, I work with the idea of *double engagement*, which implies both listening to the content of another's utterances, while simultaneously paying attention to the subsequent ripple effects of what is said. In a tense situation or in an explicit conflict it is a matter of asking oneself: "How can I (or we) say the things in such a way that we can go on together, with both of us (or all of us) maintaining our dignity?"

In my practice, participants develop their ability to approach an episode from different perspectives by identifying themselves with the feelings, logic and needs of others. By experimentation with roleplay we challenged the creative ability to find new openings in a conversation and change degenerative communicative patterns. In this way, we enhanced the capability to change the language game, for instance by inviting to another kind of *speech genre* (Bakhtin, 1986). Take for example a team meeting that has become a "tragedy" or a "horror movie," and imagine how it can be transformed into a "comedy" from which participants feel energized and excited about their collaboration.

Furthermore, in my practice, I have been working with the ability to question our taken-for-granted assumptions, prejudices and established truths, for instance when we tend to make closed or *finalized* identity constructions of others and of ourselves. Inspired by Bakhtin's notion of the *unfinalizable self* (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2005), I

believe that we can practice or train our awareness in order not to judge human beings and put them into fixed categories, but instead see them as multiple beings or *multibeings* (Gergen, 2009). It is an ethical question of avoiding *negative stereotyping* (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett 2001, p. 680-681 or *finalizing* the other Frank, 2005, p. 966). As Frank puts it:

> "To finalize the other person is to leave that person "hopelessly determined and finished off, as if he were already quite dead" [ref. Bakhtin 1984, p. 58]. For Bakhtin, all that is unethical begins and ends when one human being claims to determine all that another is and can be; when one person claims that the other has not, cannot, and will not change, that she or he will die just as she or he always has been". (Frank 2005, p. 966).

Sometimes in organizational life we find ourselves being stuck or having difficulties in finding a generative way of proceeding in a bewildering or conflict-ridden situation. In seeking orientation there are no fixed rules or universal recipes. As I see it, the challenge is to improvise in such a way that together solutions are found. In line with Shotter and Tsoukas I think it is a question of letting oneself be guided by the "sensing from within our involvements in our surroundings" (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014, p. 391) and, as I see it, a matter of being reflexive and taking into account the many different voices and stake holders relevant to a specific situation.

In my work on conflict situations, I also draw inspiration from Gergen's proposals for conversational moves that may invite the conversation in a more positive direction, (2009), such as:

- *Reconstructing or redefining the situation* by for instance saying: "You know, I think we are both very tense. Otherwise we wouldn't treat each other this way." (Gergen 2009, p. 113). In this example anger is reconstructed or redefined as tension.
- *The Meta-Move, for example by saying:* "Look at what we are doing to each other; do we really want to go on like this?" (Gergen 2009, p. 113).
- *Shifting emotional registers,* for instance *instead* of responding to an aggressive utterance with anger we can say: "It really hurts me when you say things like that to me" or " I am so sad we are hurting each other like this" (Gergen 2009, p. 114).
- *The theatrical move,* for example by saying: "Hey, we are really making a mess of this. Why don't we start over, and see if we can do this conversation better" (Gergen 2009, p. 114).

If we see all these language games as speech genres or co-created scenarios then we can invite alternative kinds of play. As Gergen puts it: "Realizing that "life is like theater," one can more easily abandon the script (Gergen, 2009, p. 114). In my thesis research, a special effort was made to enable participants to see that they do not have

to follow the traditional conversational scenarios. Specifically, we played with alternative scenarios that might be defined as working from a *second order perspective* (Cunliffe, 2002a). Here attention is placed on reflexive processes concerning the *self-in-relation-to-others* and, as part of this, the ways in which we communicate with each other (see also vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2 chapters 3, 4 and 5). Communicative interacts were understood as *practical, verbal, embodied "doings,"* involving intonation, rhythm, use of voice, bodily gestures and facial expressions etc. In this way reflexivity, spoken words and bodily activity were closely integrated.

Through these inquiries I have experienced that the use of roleplay can encourage participants to take risks and improvise with new conversational moves. In this way, through a collaborative and playful approach, the communicative repertoire or *conversational resources* (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett 2001 p. 685) can be enriched and further nuanced with the final aim to enhance skills in relational leading and dialogically based collaboration.

CHAPTER 3. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO LEARNING AND RESEARCH

In my practice as a researcher, educator and facilitator of learning processes I have found social constructionist ideas very useful. In the following I will present a way of understanding both learning and research from a social constructionist perspective. In both cases many social constructionists are inspired by the language philosophy developed by Wittgenstein; sociocultural theory and cultural psychology represented by Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Bruner; and American pragmatism represented by Peirce, James, Dewey and Rorty. Social constructionism places an emphasis on participation in social processes based on dialogue, collaboration and active experimentation. Special emphasis is put on our engagement in society and relationships through our active use of language. Learning and knowledge building in this view are understod as relational activities, not private, cognitive processes. Gergen (2009) argues that our capacity to think about science, literature or art, after all is generated in relationships and depend on our capacity to communicate with other people through language:

> "If raised in social isolation, what would an individual think about? There would be no capacity to think about science, literature, or art; no deliberation on good and evil; no concern with family, community, or global well-being. These "objects of thought" all develop through our relationships with others. To deliberate at all about such matters first requires language, and language by its nature can only be generated within relationships. A language spoken by one person alone is nonsense". (Gergen 2009, p. 242).

Thus, in a social constructionist key communication, relational processes and active engagement in social life are put in the foreground. In this view, both research and learning derive from our active participation in a community. Different communities have different values, different moral codes and build on different kinds of discourse. Drawing on Wittgenstein (1953) we could say that there are different language games at stake in different communities, and even within a specific community there may be a variety of language games and discourses at stake at the same time. Our engagement in community through discourse influences our way of thinking and being in the world. It influences as well the ways in which we learn, how we understand learning and what we learn and the ways in which we develop and understand research.

In the following we will take a closer look at learning in a constructionist view, and then share some thoughts on how research can be understood in this paradigm. Furthermore I introduce to my own practice as a researcher and facilitator of learning in relation to these ideas.

3.1. LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL PRACTICE

While there are important constructionist contributions to understanding learning, the development of a fully elaborated theory of learning is still, as I see it, a research field in an early phase. The book, *The End of Knowing* written by Newman and Holzman (1997), the book by Holzman (1997), *Schools for Growth: Radical alternatives to current educational methods,* the book, *Learning for life in the 21st century: Sociocultural perspectives on the future of education* edited by Wells & Claxton (2002), and a recent book entitled *Education as Social Construction* (2015) edited by Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee and Tseliou serve as significant contributions to this field, and future contributions from the social constructionist community are expected to develop in the future.

The social constructionist approach to learning takes a critical stance towards traditional educational practice and offers an alternative view. Theorists move away from the traditional assumption of the learner as a passive recipient of knowledge. Instead, the learner becomes an active agent through involvement in relational oriented learning processes. As I see it, the overall understanding of learning in a social constructionist view is mainly concerned with:

- Learning through social practice, e.g. through participation and active engagement in communities (learning 'from within')
- The significance of collaborative and cooperative learning environments and engaging activities
- Problem solving and reflexivity through dialogue and experimentation (versus rote learning)
- Experimentation with the development of new practices inspired by learning-by-doing and playful approaches to learning
- Interplay and dialogue among multiple voices and different social constructions of 'reality'

These ideas are not entirely new but do not represent mainstream pedagogy either. As I see it these ideas are forming an important alternative to the dominant views on learning in many parts of the world, which still have a primary focus on the individual as an isolated entity, with its accompanying emphasis on rote learning. The constructionist approach differs significantly from mechanistic accounts rooted in the enlightenment tradition.

Social constructionist understandings of learning draw primary inspiration from Vygotsky (1978) (concerning ZPD, apprenticeship, creativity), Dewey (1897, 1900, 1916, 1938) (regarding democratization, active participation, experiential learning), Bateson (1972, 1979) (concerning the notion of "*a difference that makes a difference"*, scaffolding, the connectedness of all species), Bruner (1996) (with regards to the importance of language and narratives, the role of culture), Lave & Wenger (1991) (concerning communities of practice, legitimacy and participation), the ideas of Wittgenstein (1953/2009) (about language games, forms of life and the constitutive force of language, language as 'doing'), as well the notions of dialogue formulated by Bakhtin (1979, 1981) (for instance concerning responsiveness, internalization, polyphony) and Freire (1979) (who emphasizes learning through dialogue related to empowerment, democratization, liberation and transformation). In the following I will explain further some of these major contributions. Let us begin with Vygotsky who has been a significant source of inspiration for many social constructionist scholars and practitioners interested in learning processes.

For Vygotsky learning is a profoundly social process and he places a major emphasis on the teacher-student relationship. He pointed out that what a child could do with assistance from another person today she or he would be able to do by herself tomorrow (Vygotsky 1978 p. 87). He developed the metaphor of *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which has been and still is, a major source of inspiration for many constructionists. The ZPD can be understood as "the distance between the [child's] actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (John-Steiner & Souberman in the afterword of Vygotsky 1978 p.131). Here, emphasis is put on the significance of relationship in the learning process.

Other theorists go one step further and place even stronger emphasis on collaborative processes based on interaction and dialogue. Dialogue has a special focus in the social constructionist approach because it gives us the opportunity to share experience, try out and experiment with different points of view, meet with perspectives and ideas from others, modify our thoughts and co-create new ideas and knowledge together through active engagement in relational process. We may describe this way of learning through dialogue by using Shotter's term, *joint action* (Shotter 2008a, 2010). In short words *joint action* can be understood as: "action we do as a group, as a collective, as a 'we' or an 'us'". (Shotter 2008a). Shotter describes joint action in the following:

> "Joint action comes into being when, in their meetings with each other, people's activities become spontaneously and responsively intertwined or entangled with those of the others around them. In such an intertwining,

> some very strange events occur – when after a time of mutual influence the participants separate again, they can no longer be simply described as before" (Shotter, 2008a, p. 37).

Elsewhere he explains:

> "Such developments depend on all those involved each responsively interweaving their activities in which those of the others around them; they determine its character. And it 'takes shape', so to speak, in an unfolding sequence of interactive events occurring between them. Each event occurs in responsive relation both to previous events, along with contemporaneously occurring collateral events, as well as being influenced by participant's anticipations of the yet-to-be-achieved aim of the interaction in relation to its origin" (Shotter, 2010a, p. 83).

Learning understood as *joint action* is closely related to the idea of *responsiveness* formulated in Bakhtin's (1979, 1981, 1986) writings on dialogue. In this understanding the partners involved take an *active* role where they respond to each other, and while doing so, shape their understandings and develop something novel and unpredictable together. They inspire each other and create and learn together from *within* the dialogue. In other words, they co-create *relational responsive understandings*. Bakhtin (1981) explained that: "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-world; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (p. 280). With inspiration from Bakhtin and Shotter learning can be understood as *responsive processes* or *joint action* building on dialogue taking place from *within* our active involvement with each other.

Though the social constructionist approach to learning often puts emphasis on dialogue and practice-based ways of learning, this does not mean that it is anti-theoretical and only based on practice experience. The crucial point is that 'thinking' and 'learning' in this view are seen, not as individual activity, but as entirely relational. We do not learn from 'out in the blue' but from engagement in relationships where we build on discourse, thoughts and ideas *from* or *with* others. For instance, Bakhtin argued that we carry and rework many different voices within us, voices that derive from our engagement in relationships with other people. As he explained:

> "Our speech, that is all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness"… These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin 1986, p. 89).

We not only assimilate these voices but we also rework and re-accentuate these in ongoing inner dialogues. This means that the dialogue is infinite. In this view, thinking can be seen as an ongoing, internalized conversation without end, because we carry words and discourse of others with us and continue elaborating on these. It means that we are not producing thoughts alone, as isolated individuals, but drawing on multiple voices from others and as well, through our participation in dialogue, while contributing to the *world symposium* (term by Bakhtin, 1979, p. 293). Thinking is *thinking together*, and thinking in this view is in its essence *social* and *dialogic*, even when we engage in inner dialogues while sitting alone behind a writing table trying to write an essay, a poem or composing a symphony. For instance Wells points out (with inspiration from Vygotsky and Bakhtin) that thinking and knowledge production can take a variety of forms and that all these forms are essentially social and dialogic in nature (Wells 2015, p. 73). With reference to Bakhtin, he explains that, "this social form of thinking can be taken over as a model for private thinking, as each move in inner dialogue serves as a thinking device that elicits a further rejoinder" (Wells, 2015, p. 73).

Not only have Russian intellectuals informed the social constructionist understanding of learning. The constructionist orientation to learning, thinking and knowledge building is also significantly influenced by the American pragmatist and educational reformist, John Dewey (1897, 1900, 1916, 1938). As he pointed out, learning and knowledge are created through the 'lived and living' experience where people are at work within their environments. Dewey's notion of learning was not a concept focusing on mind, cognitive structures, mental models nor abstract causalities, but instead focusing on the importance of an active engagement in a living society. Dewey (1903) claimed that we as human beings are constantly in interaction with our surrounding world and that we adjust our activities to the reactions we receive from it. Our understanding of the world is not passive, but active, likewise the surrounding world is ever changing, constantly moving which means that knowledge cannot be static. For Dewey it was crucial that we create spaces for learning which invite active participation. He pointed out that we, as humans are not disconnected elements but organically connected with each other. Furthermore Dewey understood reflection as 'doing' and not merely 'thinking'. In this way he saw both experience and reflection as 'doings' and theories and concepts as 'tools to think with' (Dewey 1910). He believed that thinking was impossible without language. Language in this sense was not only considered as the spoken word, but as well including bodily gestures, pictures, visual images, monuments etc. Dewey put emphasis on learning through 'doing' and inspired the movement in Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which is now used as a concept and a method widely in many parts of the world today. The basic idea is here that the learners learn through active problem solving.

To a certain extend social constructionists also draw on theories of the late Jerome Bruner (1990, 1996) who may be seen as one of the founding fathers of social constructivist theory. Since the early eighties, and strongly inspired by Vygotsky, he became critical of the 'cognitive revolution' and began to argue for the development of a cultural psychology. In this way he moved from an originally individually oriented focus to a more social view of learning. In line with Vygotsky, Bruner argued that cognition is closely related to language and participation in culture, and he criticized the computational view on the mind as if it was a "processor of information" (1990). This 'cultural turn' became explicitly unfolded in his 1996 book: *The Culture of Education*. In this book he explained the changes in his thinking since the 1960s and placed the impact of culture in the foreground.

The idea of learning through participation, through active engagement in culture, in different environments and communities has been taken further by Lave & Wenger. They see learning as 'legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice' (1991) in which the fundamental concepts can be formulated as:

- Learning as situated
- Learning through social practice

Communities of practice are most often understood as self-organizing systems and exist in many different types of environments, for instance at the workplace, in the family, in the NGOs, sports clubs, associations etc. In the following Wenger and Trayner (2015) present a broad definition of communities of practice:

> "Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger & Trayner, 2015).

According to Wenger (1998 pp. 72-73) a community of practice builds on "mutual engagement", "joint enterprise" (a shared understanding of what binds the members together which is continually renegotiated through their interactions) and the development (over time) of a "shared repertoire". Wenger explains that the shared repertoire includes "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice" (Wenger 1998, p. 83).

Again, learning in this view is not seen as knowledge conveyed from one mind to another but develop through interaction and participation in the social world through language, stories, bodily expressions, actions, tools, objects etc. Emphasis has moved from the individual to the social, from cognitive processes to our 'doings' and 'sayings'. In line with these overall ideas McNamee writes about teaching and learning in a social constructionist view as a form of "collaborative conversation" where knowledge is seen "as constructed in our conjoint activities with others – in what people do together" (McNamee, 2007, p. 314). In this view learning and facilitating learning has to do with our active engagement in relational, dialogic process, and the focus is put on the interplay between people interacting and communicating with each other parallel to the idea of *joint action* described earlier.

In sum, social constructionism takes a critical stance against the dominating individualist thinking in traditional Western societies and advocates for more collaborative, socially oriented ways of learning and knowledge building. As Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee and Tseliou point out:

> "Further, in Western educational systems the traditional emphasis is on educating the individual mind. As a result, teaching practices are aimed at the development of the individual, for example by private reading, recitation, and homework. And it is the individual who is tested for signs of his or her mastery. However, when relational process is placed in the forefront of concern, a major shift occurs. One begins to ask how pedagogical practices can become more participatory and collaborative; and to explore alternatives to the evaluation of individuals" (2015, p. XIII).

We see a movement from *knowledge absorption* to *knowledge making* or as Paolo Freire claimed from *banking* to *problem solving* (Freire, 1970/2006). The metaphor *banking* refers to the view at learners as containers or piggy banks into which educators must put knowledge. This metaphor follows the idea of transmission where knowledge is seen as a "package" that can be transmitted from the teacher to the student in a setting where the students are considered as passive absorbers of information. Learning in a social constructionist view is not considered as a transmission or transfer of 'information' nor as a matter of assimilating information, but as socially constructed through our engagement in society, in particular through our participation in language games but as well through other means of expression, for instance painting, theatre making, playing music, sculpturing etc. In this view knowledge is considered as something, which we construct through our ways of participating in the world. In line with these ideas the social constructionist understanding of learning value learning and teaching practices also named as experiental learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, action research and arts based learning (see eventually Gergen 2015 p. 57-58 in: Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee and Tseliou 2015).

This leads to one of the concerns in my own practice as a facilitator of learning processes and as a researcher: If learning and knowledge production can be understood as relational, as *joint action* (inspired by Shotter 2008, 2010); how, then can we develop practices for learning and research building on dialogue, critical reflection, and active engagement in collaborative process? The present thesis (vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6) offers some examples of dialogically based practices for learning and research, but let us first take a look at research in a social constructionist understanding.

3.2. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO RESEARCH

"Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction". (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110).

In order to understand this thesis in depth and the practice unfolded here it can be helpful to take a closer look on how we can understand research and knowledge production from a social constructionist perspective. In the following I will present some of the overall concerns while working with research from this paradigm as a meta-theoretical background to my own research practice. My basic overall concerns encompass the following:

- Understanding research as social construction
- *Future forming* research in a fluctuating world
- *'Withness'-thinking* in research

After unfolding these overall concerns I will introduce more directly my own research and present some ethical guidelines, which have served as premises for my practice. For further explanation I also recommend reading vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis to understand how these overall ideas have been unfolded in practice.

3.2.1. UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Early pragmatist philosophers Peirce (1877/1958) and Dewey (1938) introduced the idea of *communities of inquiry* concerning the ways in which knowledge and research are produced through social processes. In sum these ideas contrast with the Cartesian understanding of science where it is assumed that we can rationally and objectively observe the world as if it was a fixed, unchanged reality. Instead what these scholars did was to emphasize that the world is constantly changing and that

any kind of knowledge production is embedded within a social context and built on the negotiation of legitimacy among those involved in the knowledge building processes.

Similarly Fleck claimed (in his 1935 book, which was first published in the US in 1979) that the development of an objective truth in research is an unreachable objective because researchers are formed by and locked into specific thought collectives or thought styles. Fleck pointed out that a "truth" would always be relative, expressed in language or in symbols of the thought collective where it was formed. In line with these ideas Kuhn (1962) pointed out that all kinds of scientific communities construct their own paradigms while drawing on culture, relationships, values and norms and that we ought to understand these paradigms in order to understand scientific thought and knowledge. A paradigm, according to Kuhn, builds on coherent traditions of scientific research, which are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. In this meta-theoretical view research and knowledge building become a social creation. Knowledge is here seen as socially constructed, negotiated, maintained and established in certain communities among knowledgeable peers following the same set of rules and standards. To become part of a particular tradition within the sciences one needs to have the opportunity to become a member of a particular research community. Each research tradition – and paradigm - builds essentially on socially negotiated values, norms, and interests. Each paradigm gives emphasis to certain viewpoints and leaves others in the shadow. Kuhn pointed out that observations are always made on the basis of theoretical assumptions and that paradigms are shifting through history. What we see today, in our postmodern times, more than fifty years after Kuhn wrote about these ideas, is that a multitude of research traditions have developed and are now *coexisting* (McNamee & Hosking 2012 p. 5) but as well *competing* against each other.

Parallel with these ideas presented by Fleck (1935) and Kuhn (1962), Geertz pointed out that human thought is entirely social: both social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its form, and social in its applications (Geertz 1971, p. 76-77, 360). In accordance with these thoughts, Rorty (1979) argued in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that if we want to understand any kind of knowledge we must understand that communities of science produce knowledge through *the social justification of belief*. Concerning Rorty's idea of *social justification of belief*, Bruffee (1984) explains:

> "We socially justify belief when we explain to others why one way of understanding how the world hangs together seems to us preferable to other ways of understanding it. We establish knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by challenging each other's biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced

> communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities' interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought" (Bruffee 1984, pp. 646-647).

At the same time Rorty suggests researchers should give up the idea of representing or "mirroring" the world. In line with these ideas, McNamee (2014) points out that research worlds are worlds of coordinated actions (p. 77) and that research practices have developed into specific taken-for-granted patterns of action based on shared orientations and values. She explains:

> "These patterns, in turn, generate standards and expectations that participants use to assess their own actions and the actions of others. So, for example, researchers who inhabit the traditional quantitative research world are not expected to report the results of their research in emotional terms. Rather, they are expected to present their data and results as objective measures of "what is there." These evaluating and standardizing practices are carried into future interactions, where they will be confirmed and sustained, challenged, or transformed. Thus, from the very simple process of coordinating, we develop local-cultural norms and values and patterns of influence that, in turn, serve as "common sense" justification for future coordinations" (McNamee 2014, pp. 77-78).

McNamee summarizes this process of constructing worldviews in the following figure (McNamee 2014, p. 78):

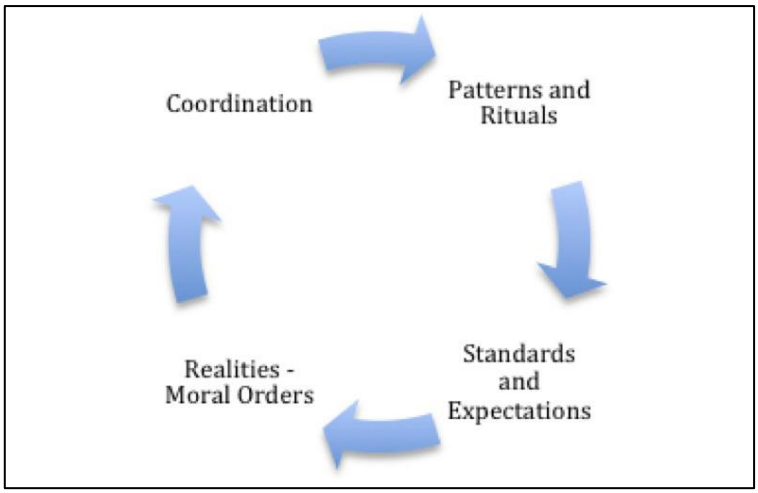

Fig. 1. Source: McNamee, 2014

In her view all accounts are locally, historically, and culturally specific (McNamee 2014 p. 93). So what are the consequences of understanding research as relationally

or socially constructed? When research is seen in this way it leads to questioning our taken-for-granted ways of *understanding* research and opens up for new possibilities of *doing* research. As McNamee puts it:

> "Since constructionists give precedence to the constitutive nature of all inquiry, we are invited to explore what sorts of worlds we are generating as well as what sorts of knowledge and understandings are being crafted when we engage in any inquiry process". (McNamee 2014, p. 75).

Later on she points out:

> "The most important questions within all research worlds are: *In what ways is this inquiry useful? Does it generate new forms of understanding and thus new ways of 'going on together?'* And most important, we must remember that research itself is a practice – a form of professional practice, if you will. Thus, the research/practitioner divide is not a divide at all but a matter of stepping into diverse discourse communities. Any form of practice (e.g., education, psychotherapy, organizational development, community building, etc.) is a form of inquiry". (McNamee 2014, p. 93).

Again, we see a movement away from the understanding of research as knowledge accumulation towards paying attention to the generative force of research and research as engagement in a relational practice. I will unfold these ideas more in the following.

3.2.2. FUTURE FORMING RESEARCH IN A FLUCTUATING WORLD

"We are all deeply accustomed to seeing science as the one enterprise that draws constantly nearer to some goal set by nature in advance. But need there be any such goal? If we can learn to substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of vexing problems may vanish in the process" (Kuhn 1962, p.170).

Heraclitus reminded us that it is impossible to step in the same river twice. While working from a perspective of *becoming* (believing that we are inextricably immersed in a world, which is 'still in the making') social constructionist scholars put major interest in research as *future forming* instead of *mirroring* (Gergen, 2015). If the world is seen as unstable, constantly moving (in flux), then knowledge cannot be frozen but must be constantly in movement too. Both Gergen (2015) and Shotter (2015a, 2015b) have criticized the tendency in traditional research of looking

retrospectively back on something which has already happened, and instead they suggest researchers to take an active role and help participants to grasp and try out new possibilities in the future, for instance in action research projects or in similar kinds of participatory or collaborative research projects (see also McNamee & Hosking 2010). Shotter advocates for situated dialogic action research inquiries that can bring about change among individuals and groups (Shotter 2010b). Shotter defines such an approach as "a form of research or inquiry situated within a place where there is a focus on an actual, ongoing practice, shared both by the practitioners of the practice and a group of researchers or inquirers versed in traditions of thought that might help provide some useful ways of making a new kind of sense of the practice in question" (Shotter 2010b). According to Shotter (2010b), while describing a dialogically oriented approach to action research it is a matter of working from *"within"* the process itself and "being prepared to catch a glimpse of such new possibilities in those moments when events "strike" us" (Shotter, 2010b p. 279).

While moving away from the metaphor of *mirroring* where the researcher can be seen as a *mirror holder*, Gergen (2015) argues for the researcher to engage in society and undertake research as a form of social action as a proactive *world-maker*, a *change agent*. Ryle (1949) made a distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how". Both Gergen and Shotter advocate for developing a practical "knowing how" more than a striving for "knowing that" whereas they think that knowledge making should be continuous, process oriented and not cumulative. In this way they challenge the traditional conception of knowledge as embodied in propositional representations. As Gergen points out, "we should not look for knowledge in stabilized propositions, but within ongoing relational process (Gergen in: Dragonas, Gergen, McNamee, & Tseliou, 2015).

In this view it is not a matter of accumulating knowledge in a "storage box" but rather of working with research as creative construction from an orientation towards *change*. Gergen argues for "research as a future forming practice – a practice in which social change is indeed the primary goal" (Gergen 2015 essay, p. 292). He (2015) offers an alternative to the mirror metaphor, one that defines the researcher in terms of *world-making* and a shift from a view of knowledge as propositional to a practical *"knowing how"*.

While working from traditional patterns, the result often becomes an extension of existing ways of thinking because we tend to repeat ourselves, and alternative ways of experiencing and understanding the world will often be ignored. As an alternative Gergen takes a quite revolutionary standpoint and suggests that we as researchers use our imaginative senses and start visualizing alternative future possibilities:

> "[…] what if we suspended the mirror metaphor, and its invitation to study that which captivates the gaze? Metaphorically speaking, what if

> we closed our eyes and began to imagine the worlds of our hopes? What if we replaced the persistent rush to establish "what is the case" and began to ask, "what kind of world could we build"? […] The aim of research would not be to illuminate *what is*, but to create *what is to become*. Herein lies the essence of a future forming orientation to research" (Gergen 2015 p. 294).

In line with these ideas, Shotter (2015b) argues that traditional research practices orient toward the world as an *already-made-world*, and that they reflect on it *with the aim of mastering it* for the satisfaction of certain *wants*. This can be seen, for instance, in the attempts among natural scientists to dominate and control nature. Furthermore, he points out that, in traditional Western research tradition we have favored the practice of studying objects by separating them into smaller units or categories in 'systematic' ways and that we have been driven by the Cartesian cause-and-effect logic. Shotter argues for an approach to research, which is based on *immersion* rather than *observation*:

> "[…] we have shifted (or are trying to shift) from seeking to understand an external world of static shapes or configurations (forms) by merely observing it, to coping with our immersion within a dynamic world of meanings in constant motion, a world that has made us more than we have made it, and which affects us more than we can affect it—a world which is still to a degree indeterminate, still developing, in which a) nothing is entirely separate from everything else, and in which b) nothing is a simply repetition of what has already occurred in the past" (Shotter 2015b p. 2).

Instead of understanding the world in the mechanistic metaphor of a "clockwork" and doing "rational structured research" (Shotter 2015a), social constructionists argue for a more process oriented understanding, an anti-Cartesian approach to knowledge construction and research. Shotter points out:

> "[…] once we switch from thinking and talking of "things," and of human activities – from within that Cartesian-Newtonian, mechanistic world, in which everything exists in separation from everything else, to thinking of them from within an *organic* or *living* "world" of growing and developing "things", in which every "thing" is dynamically related to every "thing" else – then everything changes. We need a different, more fluid ontology to the "atomistic," Cartesian ontology basis to current, rationalistic forms of thought" (Shotter, 2016 p. 135).

3.2.3. 'WITHNESS'-THINKING IN RESEARCH

In a social constructionist understanding of research there is most often a soft (not hard) differentiation between researchers and practitioners while the traditional subject-object division is abandoned. Often social constructionist researchers engage in dialogically based research projects together *with* practitioners, for instance in projects termed as *action research, participatory research* or *collaborative research.* Shotter even writes about "a dialogically structured action research practice" (Shotter 2010b). Here, the idea is to learn and investigate themes of interest for and with the participants in their own circumstances, for instance in a community, a neighborhood, a private or public organization, a NGO etc. Instead of positioning others as "objects" or "informants", participants are usually positioned as co-researchers. The idea of *'withness'-thinking* versus *'aboutness'- thinking* formulated by Shotter is crucial here. While in overall terms "*aboutness (monologic)-thinking and acting* is unresponsive to another's expressions" (Shotter 2010, p. 179), what characterizes "*withness (dialogic)-thinking and acting* is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with an other's living being; with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their 'works'. *'Withness'-thinking* is based on dialogue, questioning and interaction. Rather than studying objects, phenomena and things from a detached stance, it is a matter of being *with* and coming to an understanding *from within* the process, together with the participants, described by Shotter as *knowing from within* (Shotter 2005c, 2008, 2010) the interplay where participants create and learn together in a collaborative *joint action.* Shotter explains:

We have here, then, a process of inquiry in which practitioners become co-researchers, and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been 'struck by' in the unfolding process. It is a process in which both researchers and practitioners alike are engaged in creating *with* each other an "action guiding" sense *from within* their lived and living experience of their shared circumstances. But such an action guiding sense can emerge only in the collaborative dialogical activities occurring between them; once it ceases, such a guiding sense ceases to exist (Shotter 2005c p. 601).

I will return to the idea of *'withness'-thinking* in vol. 1, chapter 4 and vol. 2, chapters 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

3.3. MY OWN RESEARCH PRACTICE

After introducing an overall understanding of research in a social constructionist view, in the following I will introduce my own research practice and explain how my practice is related to the ideas presented above. In overall terms, I undertake research as a form of *social action* as described by McNamee (2010), McNamee and Hosking (2012), and Gergen (2015). As earlier mentioned, in this research

paradigm, the researcher is often seen as a change agent, and in line with these ideas I often consider my own role as a *co-constructor* or *reflexive inquirer*. In the following I will most often use the term *reflexive inquirer* concerning my own research practice.

To a great extent, in my research practice I draw on inspiration from the Bakhtinian school, social constructionist ideas and as well as the transformative methods from the tradition of systemic family therapy. In my practice I focus on multiple perspectives, relationships and dialogic process. While working from an action research-inspired inquiry based on dialogue, I draw mainly on Gergen, Shotter, McNamee and Hosking, and as well the understanding of action research represented by Peter Reason & Hillary Bradbury. In their approach to action research, Reason & Bradbury (2013) point out that:

> "[...] action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Reason & Bradbury 2013, p. 4).

I am inspired by the idea of working with research from a *future-forming perspective* (Gergen 2015) where research is considered as creative construction and a relational activity. I believe that researchers must take an active role in creating alternative social worlds. Instead of focusing exclusively on writing reports, articles and books with the aim of "reflecting" the "real world", research and knowledge production can be developed together with practitioners in order to create social change. For instance through collaborative research and action research, as mentioned earlier, it can be presented in many different communicative forms, such as for instance theatre, poetry, movie making etc.

Gergen advocates for new forms of research based on co-construction where the production of knowledge becomes a resource for the people involved but also for others, both practitioners and scholars around the world. He calls for "research in which knowledge is acquired through the complex and creative process of constructing a successful practice" and adds "when such knowledge is shared, it becomes a resource for others" (Gergen 2015, p. 301). It is my hope that my research can serve as a resource for others and inspire researchers, practitioners and students to develop new practices together based on dialogue and collaboration.

As I see it, the research practice carried out in this thesis resonates very well with the ideas described previously in this chapter and I agree very much with McNamee when she suggest researchers to be curious about how we can create new worlds together by focusing on relational processes:

> "Traditional researchers are curious to *discover* how to understand the world "as it really is" and how to discover "new knowledge" about that world. Yet, if our view is a relational constructionist view, the "thing" (or entity) we are examining is the interactive process of people in relation with each other and their environments. We are curious about what sorts of worlds can be made possible through particular forms of interaction, particular ways of talking and acting. Thus, the focus on relational processes that construct our world is understood as something very different from the focus on *discovering* how the world is" (McNamee 2014, p. 74-75).

3.3.1. RESEARCHING FROM WITHIN THE FLOW

To expand on the preceding, most often I work with facilitating dialogical processes from a collaborative approach, for instance while working with leaders and employees on the development of reflexive, communicative and relational competences in an organization. As a researcher I strive to work *with* people from a relationally-responsive approach instead of *about* people (Shotter 2005a). In this approach, the idea of "*withness* thinking" (Shotter, 2006) is crucial. What is interesting here is how the participants (both practitioners and theoreticians) in a research project can unfold their ideas and co-construct knowledge in new and innovative ways by applying methodological practices that encourage dialogue, relational reflexivity and a particular way of "listening to the others and the "othernesses" around us" (Shotter, 2009).

The research inquiries presented in this thesis are based on the idea that all participants could be creators of knowledge and that all participants could learn from the process while actively participating, sharing, and reflecting together in a dialogically based practice. In this kind of dialogic and collaborative research inquiry there are no final recipes or fixed standards but we can work from some guiding premises. As I see it, it is very much a matter of being sensitive to the ideas and requests of the participants, and being sensitive as well to the influencing contexts and the surroundings. Most often while working with processes in different kinds of organizations the conditions are very unpredictable and it is often a matter of finding the "here-and-now-best-way-to-go", which emerges in the moment. These kinds of participatory and collaborative processes can be seen as pathways to explore a "foggy landscape" of possibilities where flux and emergence are walking hand in hand. In this perspective of 'becoming' I as a researcher or reflexive inquirer do not try to describe the studied phenomena as consisting of stable and separate entities and I do not take a position as "the expert" but I move the attention towards relationships and process. Most of all, this approach to research requires an entirely responsive attitude among all participants and the readiness and curiosity to constantly adjust the direction and move *with* the surroundings while discovering new pathways. As Shotter describes it:

> "For, coming to act in a way that seems to be *for the best* in a particular situation is not something we can decide upon simply within ourselves, we must turn towards the now new situation to which we have chosen to relate ourselves, and open ourselves to being spontaneously responsive to it—if we can do that, we will find that various crucial happenings will occur quite spontaneously in the complex processes at work in the "popping up" of alternatives". (Shotter 2009, p. 4).

According to Shotter 2009 (p. 8), such a reflexive process differs from the simpler process of "problem solving," and he emphasizes that the researcher as facilitator or consultant develops methods that encourage the practitioners to actively dwell in the situation and explore the complex circumstances before acting. In this way, according to Shotter (2009) the complexity of the ongoing situations will reveal itself. He says that the task;

> "[…] is not to tell practitioners of better ways of conducting their professional activities but to help them to come to a more well-articulated understanding of their own ways of working; of making use of the "relating" skills they already possess and understanding how they can develop their future by drawing on the resources available to them from their everyday dealing with other people". (Shotter 2010b, p. 283, note 3).

Furthermore I am inspired by Shotter's notion of *before-the-fact*-thinking as opposed to *after-the-fact*-thinking. Shotter criticizes the tendency to practice *after-the-fact*-thinking (or 'downstream-thinking) and argues instead for a new orientation based on a *before-the-fact*-thinking ('upstream-thinking') (Shotter, 2014; 2015a), which is situated from *within* a process oriented towards future possibilities. As mentioned earlier, in a perspective of becoming, things, people and phenomena cannot be put into fixed and finished categories or static models because they will always be in movement. Shotter defines *before-the-fact*-thinking as:

> "[…] a kind of thinking that oscillates back-and-forth between our exploratory movements within a circumstance, and our sense of our progress so far in achieving within it an outcome acceptable to the others around us. We could say, paradoxically, it is a kind of thinking in which we only find out what to do in the course of our doing it" (Shotter 2015b, p. 5).

While doing action research or collaborative research in organizations I try to inspire the participants to think *before-the-fact* and become more sensitive towards process, concerning their relationships, their surroundings and openings for future opportunities. But practising research inspired by *before-the-fact*-thinking is not a simple activity because easily we get caught in traditional language games concerning specific ways of doing research and understanding the world. Shotter

advocates researchers to sense and be *with* the researched phenomena "from within our own immersion within the flowing activity of the circumstance in question" (Shotter 2015b p. 16).

3.3.2. THE DIALOGIC TURN

Furthermore my research practice is based on the assumption that social worlds are created and sustained through communication. Inspired by the late Wittgenstein and Gergen my research is based on the idea that we can extend our experience of - and our participation in - our social worlds by developing our use of language and our skills in the dialogic process.

Wittgenstein's saw language within broader forms of life, as actions and he pointed out that we participate in different sorts of language games (Wittgenstein 1953). With inspiration from Wittgenstein and social constructionist scholars I believe in the constitutive force of language and that we sometimes get caught in language games, genres or discourse. The ways in which we talk about things influence the ways in which we see and understand ourselves, the others, our relationships, our circumstances, our organizations and communities and our future possibilities etc.

I believe that some kinds of language games can be limiting and block for our ability to see new perspectives and new openings. In some of the action research projects (described further in vol. 2) I have been working with communication and performativity through theatre (roleplaying) together with leaders and employees. The aim has been to reflect on the ways in which relationships were created and disrupted through conversations (including as well the bodily aspects of communication). These inquiries have been enriched with the use of circular questioning and similar approaches from the systemic and social constructionist practice. During these processes we have questioned traditional language games and taken-for-granted assumptions and new openings and alternatives have been envisioned, formulated and tried out. For deeper explanation, I recommend reading vol. 1 chapter 4 and vol. 2 chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

When working closely with people in groups, I find it important to rely on some basic ethical guidelines. In the following I will unfold the ethical codex underlying my research practice.

3.3.3. RESEARCH ETHICS IN A RELATIONAL KEY

When doing research we interfere in other peoples' lives and as researchers and facilitators of processes, we may, occasionally find ourselves in different sorts of ethical dilemmas or orientational difficulties, asking ourselves 'how to move on?' In an action research inspired processes, as in other kinds of processes, there can be contextual interests and needs at stake, specific power dynamics in the group and

structural constrains. The researcher as reflexive inquirer and facilitator of process must be aware of these forces and contribute to the creation of a climate based on mutual respect in the group. In the following I present some ethical reflections and guidelines, which serve as a foundation for my own research practice.

My research practice builds upon the idea that we all engage in social communities where shared experiences and judgments are socially constructed. However, these experiences and judgments can never be seen as "certain" or "correct." We are always thrown into a flow of temporal unfolding of events, relations and circumstances. This has very important implications for the way in which we work with ethics in our research practice because we cannot:

Assume that others see the world as we do. This means that the researcher must engage in research from a "not knowing" position (Anderson 1990), rather than occupying an expert role, and be curious to explore how social constructions develop in the social communities we are invited into. This means that the method applied must always arise from curiosity towards the polyphony or multiplicity of voices rather than a wish to reach "an objective true".

Assume that we can make a "thick description" of the social communities we engage in, describing relatively stable events, relations and circumstances. We need to throw ourselves, together with the research participants, into the temporal flow of these processes and in this way become co-constructors and reflexive inquirers together *with* the research participants.

Assume that we as researchers can bracket ourselves from the emerging flow of social construction when we engage with the practitioners in the field. We need to recognize and constantly be aware of and reflect upon our own role in co-constructing the flow of events, relations and circumstances in the not-yet finalized reality we find ourselves in. This means that we need to reflect from *within* each situation and carefully consider how we interact and co-construct identities with the practitioners.

Rather than striving for objectivity, it becomes a way of practicing and being in relationship with others. Concerning the research practice presented in this thesis I have elaborated some overall ethical guidelines, which I find useful:

- Strive to work from *within* the concerns formulated by the participating practitioners and follow them in their process. The researcher must keep asking questions during the process both as a "disturber," "facilitator" and "co-creator."
- Be sensitive to conflicting interests and power play in the process – and as well to power mechanisms in the organizational context that may influence the process.

- Be curious concerning the social constructions in the research field and with the group of participants, including your own constructions as a researcher. Curiosity must be the most important driving force in the research work.
- Be irreverent to your own and others' taken-for-granted-assumptions about events, relations and circumstances. Here lies the foundation for development and learning. Be careful not to accept and reproduce inter locked social constructions but be aware of nuances and keep unfolding the complexity of the theme or situation.
- Be prepared to challenge inter-locked and degenerative ways of interacting by inviting the whole group into the session, avoiding privileging some voices over others. Ensure room for multiple voices being heard. Keep in mind that the process is unfolding within mutual respect among the participants and create appropriate room for further reflection and evaluation in the group.
- Challenge stereotypical identity constructions of others, including as well persons who are not physically present.
- Always invite new perspectives on a given topic, which opens up for new ways of seeing and understanding.
- Work as much as possible from a second order reflexivity level by encouraging others and yourself to critically reflect on yourself *in-relation-to-others* (inspired by Cunliffe 2002).

Furthermore I try to invite the practitioners to look at challenging situations from a meta-perspective and help them to broaden their contextual understandings.

Inspired by Gergen and Shotter I find it important to assist practitioners in seeing new openings and possibilities and reflect with them on possible new initiatives, actions, and pathways. In addition I find it important to recognize and encourage even small initiatives leading in a generative direction.

These points of reflection have implicitly been resources in my inquiry. Again, it is important to keep in mind that it is not a matter of following a recipe, a specific method, and it is not a matter of having the right "technique," but instead drawing on helpful *resources* for ongoing reflection before, during and after the process. In addition, I think that it is pivotal to reflect currently on your own ethical responsibility in the process. What kind of constructions are you co-creating with the participants? And is this the best possible way for the whole group or community to move forward?

CHAPTER 4. ROLEPLAYING AS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

> *"If innovative scholarship is the outcome of hybridity, impurity, or blurring the boundaries between disparate realms of reality, disciplining is its enemy. There is no "thinking outside the box" without risking banishment from the box". (Gergen 2009, p. 210).*

Working from within the movement, often referred to as the *dialogical turn (Flecha et al. 2003)* or *the relational turn* (Donati 2011), this chapter throws light on the development of a participatory inquiry for learning and knowledge-building based on roleplaying. The inquiry is aimed at enhancing dialogical and relational skills among leaders and employees in an organization and is inspired by action research, arts-based research and social/relational constructionist approaches to research. The practice presented in this chapter is based on the assumption that central to organizational collaboration and the development of fruitful relationships are processes of dialogic coordination, which are at work in the continuous process of organizing. The important challenge is whether our ways of communicating can, for example, motivate and inspire people, or increase tension, conflict and alienation. Often we tend to communicate in repetitive patterns, and we get stuck in predictable games without end (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch, 1974). Together we construct scenarios that can either move in a degenerative or generative direction. In this project a transformative approach was developed and applied where alternative ways of communicating and relating as living, responsive, embodied beings were explored in a playful, collaborative learning setting informed by the dramatic arts.

This chapter explains the methodological aspects of this approach based on roleplaying combined with supervision, including a polyphonic reflecting team. The practice is rooted in a constructionist stance where the research inquiry is considered a collaborative effort for generating change oriented insights and knowledge (see also McNamee 2010; McNamee & Hosking 2012; and Gergen 2015).[1] As a researcher with a professional background in theatre and consultancy, I do not make a hard distinction between researcher, facilitator and co-creator. This is in contrast to the notion of the researcher as an "objective observer", which historically has been

[1] My aim here is to develop and offer a reconceptualization of—and a new vocabulary about—the use of roleplaying in organizational contexts seen from a social constructionist paradigm.

the research ideal in the positivist tradition, where the dichotomy between researcher and researched is clearly marked. However, the relational/social constructionist approach towards research questions the researcher's positioning as the "expert." While working from a constructionist orientation, we concentrate on "exploring other, less hierarchical, more relationally engaged possibilities of co-inquiry in which knowing and influencing are more equally balanced" (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. xiv). In a constructionist understanding, there is no hard distinction between research and work for social change and what is usually considered "data" is seen as a co-construction and can assume many different forms. As McNamee and Hosking point out:

> "All research intervenes in the lives of those who participate, as well as in the lives of the researchers themselves. This means that professionals who work in fields focused on social change, such as health and human services, organizational development, education, and community development, are researchers just as much as they are change agents. Similarly, researchers are change agents; they are not simply scientists making discoveries about the world; they change the world as they examine it. Inquiry is a relational practice and (re)constructs or constitutes relational realities" (McNamee & Hosking 2013, p. xvi).

The researcher in this tradition is often seen as a change agent, a co-creator and sometimes even as an artist. Gergen (2009) and other postmodernist scholars acknowledge that all research is a constructed narrative and advocate for alternative approaches to research, for instance, by use of novel writing, poetry, theater, music, dance, sculpting, etc. However, since the early nineties we see a tendency towards the acceptance of the arts in research, strongly advanced by the arts based research movement, for instance represented by Barone (1990), Eisner (1997), Eisner & Barone (2012), Jackson (1993), Butler-Kisber (2002), and Norris (2009).

Both novel-writing and the performing arts have made certain gains in the research communities, in particular within human and social science. For instance, at the University of British Colombia, two novels were accepted as dissertations (Dunlop, 1999) and Sameshina (2007) and paved the way for a broader understanding of research. Some researchers have gone pretty far in this movement, such as Saldana (2005), who works with "ethnodrama" where "data" is performed in a dramatic form, whereas Blumenfeld-Jones (1995, 2002) and Snowber (2002) argue for "dancing the data," where the dance is used as a mode of research representation. For the critical reader, this might sound weird, but in the physical sciences as early as in the 1920s, Heisenberg pointed out that "data" is mediated by the research act (Norris 2009, p. 24), and in 1976 Robert Nisbet wrote an entire book entitled "Sociology as an Art Form."

Not only does the relational/social constructionist approach embrace hybrid forms of research, but it also questions the forced division between the researcher and the

researched, and as well the separation between inquiry and intervention, process and outcome, data collection and data analysis. The constructionist approach is more pragmatic and is often characterized by processes that orient towards *openness towards different social realities, appreciation of local rationalities and, relationally engaged practices,* where participants experience that they are connected in different ways (see Hosking & McNamee 2013, p. 14 for further explanation). Rather than *collecting data*, we as constructionists talk about *generating data*. Some scholars (not only constructionists) even question the term "data," pointing out that everything can be seen as data (Brinkmann 2014). McNamee argues for research as a relational practice and points out that:

> "Research that is associated with discovery is situated within a modernist worldview. Traditional researchers are curious to discover how to understand the world "as it really is" and how to discover "new knowledge" about that world. Yet, if our view is a relational constructionist view, the "thing" (or entity) we are examining is the interactive processes of people in relation with each other and their environments. We are curious about what sorts of worlds can be made possible through particular forms of interaction, particular ways of talking and acting. Thus, the focus on relational processes that construct our worlds is understood as something very different from the focus on discovering how the world is" (McNamee 2014, p. 75).

Knowledge from a constructionist viewpoint is mainly seen as a product of social process, building on specific language games and discourses. A social or relational constructionist approach to research opens up for new ways of conceptualizing and engaging in research.

> "Thus, what we commonly understand as the research tradition (i.e., post-positivist social science) is, indeed, a valuable form of research—but it is not the only form. There are other language games to be explored. Social construction is one" (McNamee 2014, p. 76).

In addition, McNamee (2014) explains:

> "Thus, for the constructionist, the "doing" of research can take many forms. Each is, as mentioned earlier, a different language game. And, different language games construct different understandings of the world" (McNamee 2014, p. 82).

Furthermore, she points out that "the research/practitioner divide is not a divide at all but a matter of stepping into diverse discourse communities. Any form of practice (e.g., education, psychotherapy, organizational development, community-building, etc.) is, according to McNamee, a form of inquiry" (McNamee 2014, p. 93).

Drawing on Gergen, Shotter, McNamee, Hosking, Cunliffe and other scholars working from a constructionist stance, by the present work, I wish to push the boundaries of our understanding of research, and I am aware that I might risk, as Gergen writes, ”banishment from the box” (2009). In line with Shotter, I am skeptical towards the tradition of separating living process into separated units and putting them into categories. Instead of examining objects and phenomena at a distance, I am interested in creating knowledge from *within* a practice and from a process-oriented view in what could be described in Shotter's terms as *relational responsive processes* in resonance and involvement *with* participants as co-constructers of knowledge. Here, I am in accordance with Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) when they argue for “participatory ways of knowing” (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006) and when Shotter (1993a) argues for *knowing of the third kind* as *joint knowledge* or *knowledge held in common with others*.

While working from this paradigm, the idea with the inquiry described in this chapter was to position the participants as co-creators of knowledge in the roleplaying sessions informed by living dialogues with a reflecting, multivoiced team. Inspired by Shotter we could see this as an attempt to do *research from within*.

Instead of analyzing processes from the outside, Shotter advocates rethinking our ways of doing empirical research, while claiming that we need a different form of “engaged, responsive thinking, acting, and talking that allows us to affect the flow of processes from within our living involvement with them” (Shotter 2005c p. 585). He argues for a living involvement and calls this approach “*thinking-from-within”* or “*withness” thinking,* in contrast to what he defines as “*aboutness” thinking*. With inspiration from Bakhtin's writings, Shotter suggests that the researcher positions him- or herself “within the moving” (p. 589) and advocates an “active, spontaneously responsive kind of understanding” (p. 590). In a paragraph later in this chapter entitled “The approach to dialogue and its implications for our practice,” I will explain further the idea of “*withness”* thinking as described by Shotter, because it is of significance to the inquiry described in this chapter.

In order to illustrate the inquiry, I will present an example of my work with a specific project. The duration of the project in practice was one and a half years. The aim was to develop skills in dialogue, relational awareness, critical self-reflexivity and collaboration among leaders and employees in a 24-hour care center for neglected adolescents between the ages of 12-18. The adolescents were removed from their parents because of social and psychological problems and had often, during their childhood and youth, experienced serious breaches of trust in their relationships with other people. My initial contact with the institution was during a two-day workshop where I was asked, as a consultant, to help a team solve some major internal conflicts. I noticed that there was a high level of tension, not only on the specific team, but in the entire institution. Distrust, tension and conflict between the adolescents and the staff, between different staff members, between the staff and

the leading team, and inside the leading team, as well. So I asked myself whether it would it be possible to enhance dialogic and relational skills among the professionals working at the institution? Would it be possible to do a larger research project working with the development of dialogical skills, for instance using roleplay? I asked myself whether a more relational approach and the use of roleplay could help these people create better relationships and a better social climate in the organization? Based on the short experience with the team, I asked the principal of the institution whether they would be interested in participating in a research project where they worked with their communication and relationships through roleplay. He recognized the need and showed enthusiasm about the idea. I then introduced the idea at meetings with each team of employees, and it appeared that they found it interesting and agreed to start the project.

4.1. THE BASIC IDEAS BEHIND THE RESEARCH

Thus, the research project was designed as a participative inquiry with inspiration from constructionist ideas and action research in line with Reason & Bradbury, 2008; McNiff & Whitehead 2011; Shotter 2008; McNamee 2010; McNamee & Hosking 2012; and Gergen 2009, 2014. The inquiry can be seen as a contribution to the rich tradition of drama as a pedagogical tool for change used in education, social action, community development, prisons, therapy, etc., for instance represented by Boal (1985, 1992, 1995); Rohd (1998); Sternberg (1998); Nicholson (2005); Taylor & Warner (2006); Jackson (2007); Norris (2009); Prendergast & Saxton (2009); Prentki & Preston (2009); Ackroyd & O'Toole (2010); Larsen (2011); Landy and Montgomery (2012), Pässilä, Oikarinen & Harmaakorpi (2015) and others.

Guided by Dewey's (1916) concept of learning-as-practice, the basic aim was to explore and refine an entirely collaborative learning practice for the enhancement of relational and dialogical skills. The idea was to enable the participants, not only to become *reflective practitioners* (Schön 1983, 1987) but furthermore to transform the social worlds and relationships in which they took part. Building on the constructionist idea that our communication is constitutive for our social world, the practice paid special attention to the use of language, as well as the bodily dimensions of communication. In the following I will describe how we created a process of collaborative learning based on the idea of learning-as-practice—*within* and from *within*—the organization. The project was guided by the assumption that we can reflect and create knowledge together in dialogical relationships, benefiting especially from the many different voices in a group.

In addition to these ideas on research and learning as participatory inquiry, the project draws in particular on the theories of dialogue developed by the Bakhtinian school (taken further by Gergen and Shotter since the eighties to the present day)

and on systemic supervision methodology inspired by Gianfranco Cecchin 1987; Tom Anderson 1991; and Karl Tomm 1987-88, 2014. These ideas and practices will be unfolded in the following sections of the chapter.

4.2. DIALOGUE AS AN EMBODIED SOCIAL PRACTICE

In the project we worked with the development of a broad repertoire of conversational skills while playing with different alternatives to degenerative scenarios and, in this way, changing these degenerative scenarios into more generative ones in order to become more "resourceful conversational partners." In order to comprehend the method described in this chapter, it is important to understand some of the basic underlying ideas, because these ideas have substantial implications for our practice. In the following I will account for some of the most pivotal ideas.

First of all, an important inspiration for this inquiry has been Gergen's notion of generative and degenerative scenarios (2009), as described in the following:

> "In a generative scenario, the participants build on each other's contributions. As one might say, the conversation "goes somewhere." There is learning, creativity, and often a sense of delight. [...] Most disruptive, however, are the degenerative scenarios. These are scenarios that move toward animosity, silence, or the breaking of a relationship altogether. They may begin subtly, but unless they are terminated at some point, relations will suffer significantly. So will the organization" (Hersted & Gergen, 2013, p. 26-27).

If we do not pay attention to these degenerative scenarios, they can easily and rapidly develop into *undesired repetitive patterns* (Pearce & Cronen, 1980, p. 225-240) or *dangerous dances* (Gergen 2009, p. 111), where conflicts escalate, the participants become alienated towards each other, they position themselves and the other in specific "corners" and finally, the conflict might even explode. But Gergen (2009) reminds us that these patterns are relationally constructed, and he gives emphasis to our ability to be creative and change these scenarios:

> "No one wants to 'fight it out,' and yet, once the fight has begun, it is difficult to excuse oneself, to 'cut and run'. From a relational standpoint these corrosive patterns are not inevitable. They are not built into our genes. Together, we stand as creators of the future. The question is whether we can locate new and compelling steps, moves that will enable us to leave the dance floor before disaster strikes" (p. 111).

What is interesting here is that these scenarios are not fixed or given by nature. People coordinate their actions and co-create scenarios all the time, and seen from a constructionist perspective, we always have a choice. Communication is something we learn from early childhood through participation in social processes, and we continue learning and refining communicative skills in a lifelong learning process. Communicating feelings also include a performative dimension; in other words, we learn how to perform feelings through participation in social life. As proposed elsewhere, the more familiar you are with the variations, the more options you have for moving in the conversation (Hersted & Gergen, 2013, p. 28). In my view, we are able to create alternative communication forms, but it requires that we allow ourselves to stop and reflect on our actions and, in this way, develop and refine our ability to reflect-in-action.

From a relational approach, dialogue can be considered as a form of *coordinated action*. Metaphorically speaking, we invite our conversational partners into "a dance," but we cannot control the outcome because we cannot predict how the other person will respond to our utterances. As Gergen, Gergen and Barrett (2004) point out:

> "No individual expression harbors meaning in itself. For example, what we might conventionally index as a "hostile remark" can be turned into "a joke" through a response of laughter; the "vision statement" of a superior can be refigured as "just more BS" through the shared smirk of the employees". (p. 4).

Something that has been of significant inspiration for this project is the Bakhtinian understanding of dialogue, often referred to as "dialogism." According to the Bakhtinian way of thinking, we are always in dialogue, and we always carry traces of former dialogues with us into new dialogues. Bakhtin (1984) and the circle of intellectuals around him developed a whole theory on dialogue that can be considered *polyphonic* (multivoiced). They argued that human life has an entirely *dialogic nature*:

> "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium" (Bakhtin/Voloshinov 1984, p. 293).

The dialogism developed by the Bakhtinian circle can be considered anti-individualistic and relationship-oriented. According to Bakhtin (1984), all social phenomena are constituted through the ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals and groups, where a multiplicity of languages, discourses and

symbolizing practices are involved. Instead of seeing individuals as isolated entities, Bakhtin placed emphasis on the relational processes that emerge between people in their daily dialogic interactions, claiming that "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p.110).

In line with Bakhtin, the constructionist-relational understanding of dialogue is in contrast to the representational-referential understanding, which is bound to the idea about transmission from one individual to another. Instead of transmitting messages from A to B and reverse, we are co-constructing and coordinating the dialogue as we adapt our response to each other. The communication is shaped in the responsive interplay between the dialogue partners in a process of mutually molding meaning and continuous coordination. As offered elsewhere (Hersted & Gergen 2013): "Our words are not containers of meaning sent from one mind to another; rather our words acquire meaning as they are taken up in ongoing interchange. Like a game of football, no single person is in control of the outcomes" (p. 9). Meaning is co-constructed and coordinated in relationships. Or as Voloshinov from the Bakhtinian circle (1929/1973) put it:

> "Meaning is realized only in the process of active responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between the speaker and listener […]". (p. 103).

In this view, language is a way of *acting* in the world, not the *mirroring* of thought. Another important dimension of dialogue is *embodiment*. Building on earlier experience from the world of theater, I am particularly drawn to the bodily dimension of dialogue, and in this project we worked with dialogue as an embodied social practice, which I will explain in the following. Drawing on inspiration from Shotter's (2014) concern with *embodied responsiveness*, we must be aware of the "living bodily responses related to things that occur to us in our surroundings" (p. 16). Shotter uses the term "embodied ways of responding" concerning our spontaneous bodily reactions in relation to living beings, things and occurrences (2014, p. 18). Shotter points out that we must try to be fully present and pay attention to what happens in "the living moment" (pp. 31-33). The idea is that by listening to the response of our bodies and our interplay with our surroundings, we can learn about ourselves, the others and the surrounding world. The way in which we meet the other person, and the way in which we express ourselves through our body, becomes crucial for the relationship going forward. As Shotter points out:

> "It clearly makes an enormous difference if we approach another person on meeting them with a clenched fist ready to strike or with an open hand ready to shake their's. To do this, we must learn how to see what is around us "in depth," as offering us a "space of possibilities" for our actions" (Shotter, 2005f, p. 3).

Therefore, in the project we attempted to be sensitive to multiple facets of communication, not only the spoken words, but also the voice, tone, pitch, rhythm of speech, body movements, gestures and facial expressions, etc. From my perspective, the embodied dimensions of dialogue is a significant part of this inquiry, a dimension that is often underestimated in communication studies in general. Here, we were interested in experimenting in which ways we, as human beings and professionals, can relate with each other through spoken and body language in daily organizational life.

4.3. "WITHNESS" THINKING

Another significant concept underlying our inquiry has been the idea of "*withness" thinking,* as opposed *to "aboutness" thinking*, which was developed by John Shotter (2005a, 2005c, 2008, 2010). Shotter's "withness" thinking is a kind of dialogic thinking, which reminds us to try to think *with* the other person instead of positioning ourselves *above* (or below) the person. Instead of treating the other as an object for fulfilling one's own goals, it is a matter of meeting him or her with equity and curiosity. In other words, it is a question of meeting and recognizing the other as a *unique other person*. This might seem obvious, but at an early stage of the project I discovered that the way in which the professionals spoke to the adolescents was often highly institutionalized and alienating, and often the communication had a notion of a *power game*. The employees often talked to the adolescents from *above*, from a position of supremacy and power. It seemed like their major concern was to ensure that the adolescents were following the rules of the institution, but there was apparently no big interest in meeting the adolescents on a more equal basis, which often resulted in even more conflict, sometimes including the use of force. In our project "*withness"* thinking became extremely relevant, for instance in the way in which an employee approaches a young resident or the ways in which a leader relates to an employee. As I see it, it is a matter of developing a special awareness of thinking from *within* the unique situation and context for the conversation, and from this position being able to sense and notice what is going on, what is on its way and what kind of new possibilities for action could be more generative to explore. For Shotter, "withness" thinking is purely dialogical, and he explains his understanding of the term in the following way:

> "Withness (dialogic) thinking and acting is a form of reflective interaction that involves coming into living contact with another's living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their words, their 'works' […] Whereas, aboutness (monologic)-thinking and acting, is unresponsive to anothers's expressions […]" (Shotter 2010, p. 79).

When expressing ourselves, we expect the other to respond or act actively. In the same way we experience that others call us into response and so on. In this way our communication is never completed but always in the making. In this view it is a matter of taking an open approach in relation to the emerging and unpredictable. Even though we cannot predict the response of another, we can, however, develop our relational skills by using our imagination. The inquiry described in this chapter was based on the idea that, with help from roleplay, we can strive to identify ourselves with the other and imagine the response from the other. In this way, we can become more resourceful and skilled in participating in living dialogues with others. Here it must be underlined that it is by no means a matter of strategically planning conversations and meetings but, according to Shotter's (2008) idea of "withness" thinking, it is a question of identifying oneself *with* others and of talking *with* each other, instead of talking *to* or *about* each other.

In the following, I will introduce the organizational context and the research inquiry, and then present some examples from our practice in order to give the reader an overall idea of the inquiry.

4.4. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The project took place over a period of 18 months at a 24-hour care center for adolescents (between 12 and 18 years old), who were removed from their parents. The institution was owned and operated by the local municipality. The project included both the leaders and the employees of the center (including pedagogues/social workers, schoolteachers, psychologists, secretaries, gardeners, and kitchen workers). Each group of employees went through three days of training, except one group, which asked for one extra training day, and the leading group, which went through six training days (three days in the initial phase and three days in the final phase of the project).

The project was based on 22 training days with six different groups. Except for the leading group consisting of 5 leaders, there were between 8-10 participants in each group. The majority of the dialogue training sessions were recorded on video, except for cases where the participants did not wish to be recorded. Participants were ensured anonymity. Likewise, all participants were promised professional secrecy regarding the lives of the adolescents living at the institution. During the process, I looked through the video recordings together with one of my students from the university who had supported me in recording the sessions. Our aim was to learn from these recordings and qualify our further work with the inquiry. We listened carefully to the utterances of the persons involved (including ourselves as participants in the inquiry), observed the bodily expressions and reactions and how participants (including ourselves) related to each other, interacted with each other and co-constructed their identities and the identities of others during the process. We

also noticed the level of engagement and enthusiasm during the process. While watching these video recordings, it became clear to us that a series of themes taken up by the participants were recurrent, and we tried to identify these themes and give them a name/title. These themes will be presented later on in this chapter. Once during the process, a participant asked if we could watch one of the video recordings together in order to learn from it. I thought it was an interesting idea. Together with his team we spent a couple of hours watching, analyzing and reflecting on one of these video recordings where this employee had a central role. The recording entailed 1) the presentation of a scenario he had picked by himself, 2) the following dialogues with him and the reflecting team and 3) the alternative roleplay scenarios, which were developed after the dialogues with the reflecting team. Apparently, both the main person involved and the majority of his colleagues learned from this process, but I also noticed that he, to a certain extent, was exposed to his colleagues, and furthermore it became a little long for some of his colleagues. Therefore, this experiment did not set precedence for further practice, even though I fully recognize the value of watching oneself in relation to others on video in order to learn from it. Seen retrospectively, the use of video recordings could have been taken further in order to sustain the learning process at a collective level in each group, but as mentioned, for some of the participants, it could have turned into a vulnerable process, and I considered that it was important to protect participants from feeling exposed in front of the group. It was crucial for me, as the facilitator of the process, to contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

Some of the video recordings were transcribed and analyzed by me and my student in between the sessions, and there is no doubt that we learned from this process and that the entire inquiry was improved by these observations and reflections However, due to the extent of recordings (22 working days from 9 am to 3 pm) and due to the fact that the project concerned the development of a *method* for enhancing dialogic and relational skills, I considered that a full transcription would not be appropriate. Instead, emphasis was put on the situated knowledge producing processes we created together with the participants. In this chapter I present two concrete examples from our practice, in order to demonstrate some of the main characteristics of the inquiry and give the reader an overall idea of our approach.

The central part of the research was something we did together, as a group. In accordance with constructionist ideas, intervention and knowledge-building took place at the same time. Rather than “collecting” data (as we have learned from more traditional research), reflections and knowledge were co-created and generated collaboratively in an on-going cyclical process (see the model presenting the phases in our practice later in the chapter). During the roleplay sessions with a reflecting team, multiple local realities were investigated and molded in different but equal relations. As a recurrent principle, we approached each scenario from multiple stakeholder perspectives in a cyclical process where all participants took part. I

consider this part as being central to our inquiry based on the overall ideas from action research.

In addition, to identify the potential effects of the inquiry, participants joined focus groups at the end of the process to discuss and reflect on their experiences. The three focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full length. The utterances from these focus group interviews were slightly divided in different categories concerning their learning outcomes. In particular, emphasis was given to outcomes such as acquiring bodily awareness, changing and expanding perspectives, developing critical self-reflection and enhancing relational consciousness. These outcomes will be presented and discussed in a forthcoming article (see vol. 2, chapter 4).

4.5. CREATING A FRAME FOR PLAYING AND RISK-TAKING

It is my general experience that learning cannot be instructed but, in line with Shotter's *withness thinking*, mentioned above, it must emerge from *within* the circumstances. As a process facilitator and reflexive inquirer, I emphasize the importance of creating a framework for play, risk-taking and reflection to occur. In order to create such a framework, we defined a set of simple rules. This helped the participants to establish confidence and, as well, to keep focus on the task. This was very important, because the climate in the institution was, as mentioned earlier, often marked by a high level of tension and activity, and therefore it was easy to become distracted by a series of disturbances from the surroundings. Seen from the facilitators' point of view, it is also a matter of creating a psychological contract together *with* the participants and an attempt to ensure that everybody in the process follows certain ethical guidelines. For instance, if participants become distracted and lose their concentration, the process is immediately affected, and the learning process becomes less intense. Or if participants become judgmental or start acting in a supercilious way towards one another, then the atmosphere for learning becomes toxic and repressive. Thus, we agreed on a simple set of rules for being present, focused, confident, non-judgmental, and respectful towards each other and, as mentioned, all participants were ensured anonymity.

The rules aim to establish a confidential zone for the allowance of showing professional dilemmas and vulnerability, and as well for new playful experiments and creative ideas to emerge. When participants are not familiar with role-play, they might feel anxiety with regard to public performance and may be afraid of showing their professional doubts and dilemmas in front of their colleagues. Most of all, some might fear being judged as unprofessional. Therefore, the most crucial thing, in my view, is to co-create and establish a level of trust within the group, which is not always an easy task. In this context, a few clear rules can be helpful, because they can constitute a more confidential framework for play. The rules serve as a kind of emotional scaffolding, which enables the participants to take risks, experiment

and to show their difficulties. Here, risk-taking and playfulness are two sides of the same coin. In Vygotskian terms, one could claim that the rules contribute to the creation of a safety framework, which allows participants to work from within and move beyond the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978, 2012).

4.6. SPECT-ACTORS IN DISORIENTING DILEMMAS

As mentioned earlier, before initiating the project I had worked a couple of days as a process consultant for one of the teams in the organization. I was asked by the principal of the institution to help the team, because they were stuck in internal and external conflicts. The principal had given the team the predicate "dysfunctional." Even though I am skeptical against any kind of diagnosing, it was my impression that these and similar kinds of conflicts were not only present in the current team but apparently permeated the entire organization. The reasons for these conflicts were multiple and often complex. I noticed that often the organizational members tried to solve the conflicts from an individualist approach, by locating the "problem" inside one or another person without recognizing the relational aspects and their own part in it. Just as the principal gave the team the predicate "dysfunctional," the employees classified the adolescents living at the institution by using diagnostic terms or specific categories. As an example, the girls who had problems with cutting themselves due to psychological and social challenges were named "cutters". Others were categorized as "Aspergers." The employees tended to use what could be named as *institutionalized ways of communicating*, which was often impersonal and alienating. Instead of creating contact, confidence and understanding, these ways of communicating seemed to create distance and polarization. For instance, I noticed some of the employees using the terms "inmate" and "prisoner" while talking about a young boy from the Middle East. When somebody is positioned as an "inmate" or "prisoner," the practice of punishment becomes legitimized. Nobody in the group questioned this term before we initiated a dialogue about it.

In order to maintain maximum participation in the roleplaying, the participants were asked to select challenging interpersonal episodes that they had experienced in the organization. For example, challenges in relation to the adolescents living at the institution or to their parents, or in relation to colleagues, other working partners, authorities or external stakeholders. Thus, the roleplaying challenges that the participants presented, were loaded with tensions, reflecting conflict and alienation within the organization itself. I viewed these roleplaying challenges in terms of what Mezirow (1994) calls *disorienting dilemmas.* According to Mezirow (1991), a learning process should facilitate the appropriation of new perspectives. Thus, as the participants played out these disorienting dilemmas, they were encouraged to create alternatives to the institutionalized routines of communication. They were invited to look at the episodes from new perspectives and to try out alternative scenarios by acknowledging the unique *otherness of the other* (Shotter 2005a; 2005d). Often the scenarios presented were divided into smaller sequences, where specific key

utterances, intonation, movements, and gestures were questioned and acted out in alternative ways. We could, for instance, repeat a short fragment, a gesture, a sentence spoken in a particular way, or play the whole scenario again with new variations. In this way, the routine perspectives were de-constructed, and alternative scenarios were developed. The participants not only played out the roles but were also asked to comment on what they had seen and experienced, to reflect and offer alternatives from specific perspectives. When someone offered an alternative, he or she was invited to take the part and play it out. It was not a demand but an offer. Here, the members of the reflecting team not only functioned as spectators but they became "spect-actors" as described by the Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal (1979), the pioneer behind *forum theater*. The idea of the "spect-actor" by Boal was (inspired by German theater director Bertolt Brecht) to activate the spectator and make him or her reflect on the scenarios. In Boal's approach to drama and theatre, the audience was invited to comment on the scenarios and to take an active role in order to change the presented scenario. Inspired by Boal, we adopted this notion of spectators becoming actively involved "spect-actors."

4.7. WORKING WITH A POLYPHONIC REFLECTING TEAM

In the beginning of each session, we generated a reflecting team in order to facilitate awareness of the communicative process in the roleplay scenarios and the potentials for alternative actions available to the participants. The team members were positioned as actively reflecting dialogue partners concerning the roleplay episodes enacted by their colleagues. During the roleplay, the team members observed, listened and reflected from specific perspectives. This could be, for instance, the perspective of an adolescent, a mother, a father, a friend, a social worker, a pedagogue, a teacher, a leader, a union representative, etc. By observing the episodes from these different perspectives, the dialogues on the reflecting team become multivoiced. Inspired by Bakhtin (1984), I termed these *polyphonic reflecting teams*. The members of the reflecting team were encouraged to participate in reflecting dialogues about the observed episodes in the roleplay. This initial phase of a cycle typically focused on a past episode, but there was no attempt to be "objective" in the construction of episodes from the past, nor in our multi voiced analytical attempts to understand these. We were, of course, aware that the scenarios with the disorienting dilemmas were constructions based on the memory of the past. And we did not stop here, but took the process one step further. In the next phase, the members of the reflecting team were invited to contribute with new ideas and alternatives to the presented scenarios, not from an abstract theoretical position, but from *within* the situation. The hope here was to enhance *knowing-from-within* as described by Shotter (2005c; 2012) by exploring what we learn "as we move around in relation to the others and othernesses we meet within the situations we inhabit […]" (Shotter, 2012, p. 135). This phase of the process was future-oriented as we experimented with *possibilities not yet actualized* (Shotter 2007) and we could term this as a *before-the-fact* inquiry (Shotter 2007), because through imagining and

experimenting with alternative scenarios, we co-created new understandings and action guiding anticipations of a situated kind.

The practice of reflective roleplay can be visualized as a learning cycle closely related to action research. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this visualization is just a model and that, in practice, such a learning and knowledge building process is characterized by non-linearity and a high level of complexity.

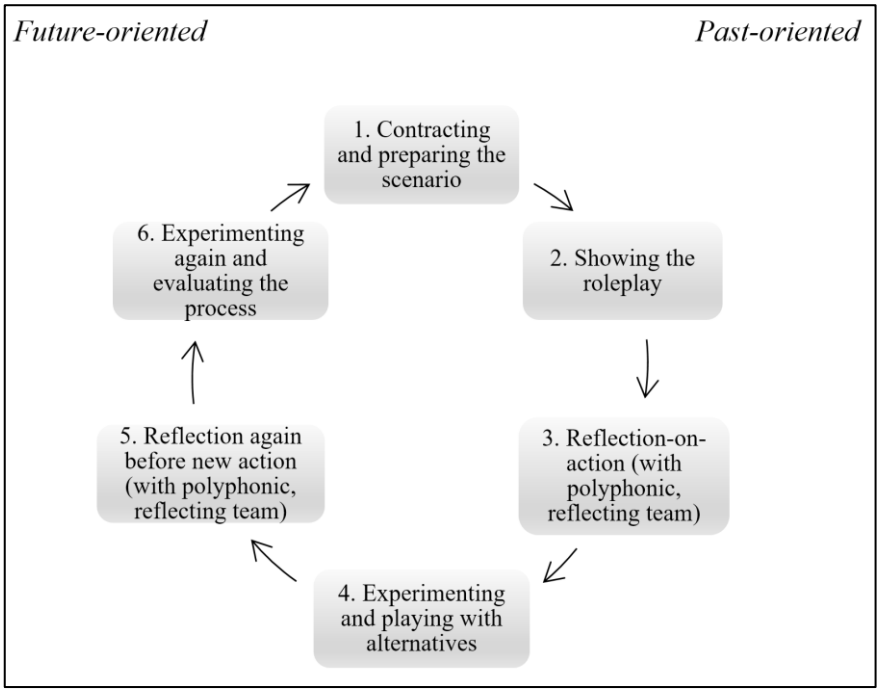

Fig. 2. Phases in our inquiry of reflective roleplay

As mentioned, the reflecting team was encouraged to take a non-judgmental approach and show *curiosity* in a respectful way. As a reflexive inquirer, I reminded them to be careful in the ways they expressed themselves, for example, using formulations such as: “It strikes me that…”, “What makes an impression on me is that…” or, “I wonder why….” The role players were not obliged to follow the ideas from the reflecting team. The person who originally offered the episode (the disorienting dilemma) was free to choose what to do next. For instance, as the facilitator or reflexive inquirer, I might ask him or her, “Now that you have been

listening to the reflecting team for a while, is there anything that you have heard from them that makes sense to you or somehow inspire you?"

The reflecting team members were not only observing, listening and having dialogues about the episodes, but sometimes, as mentioned above, moving (by invitation from the reflexive inquirer) into direct dialogue with the role players. Here, the method distinguishes itself from the systemic supervision method used and described by, for instance, Tom Andersen (1991). In our practice, we did not draw strict lines between the reflecting team and the main persons in process (in this case, the role players). On the contrary; we were all in process and learning together.

Sometimes a member of the reflecting team was invited to place him- or herself behind one of the role-players and try to identify himself with this person. The reflexive inquirer asked, for instance, "What do you think is important for X in this situation?" or, "How do you think X experiences the situation we just saw?" In this way the participants were invited to "imagine otherwise." The attempt was to enhance both *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* (Schön 1983), but also to train the ability to change perspective.

From a social constructionist viewpoint, reflexivity can be seen as ongoing dialoguing in a relational process, critically and creatively reflecting on taken-for-granted assumptions and opening up to multiple local forms of life and to what might be possible (Gergen, 1994; Hosking, 2008). Instead of considering reflexivity as an entirely individual process, in our inquiry, reflexivity was conceptualized as a collaborative learning and knowledge-building process by constantly asking questions and actively involving the reflecting team in the dialogues about past and future actions.

Cunliffe (2002) argues for incorporating reflexive dialogical practice in management learning as a way of developing "more critical and responsive practitioners" (p. 39) and advocates for *a critical self-reflexivity* or *a second order reflexivity* which puts emphasis on insights into ways, "in which we relate to our circumstances and to others" (Cunliffe 2002). A second order reflexivity differs from first order reflexivity, which is more focused on being critical towards the generalized other (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 40). She argues: "Self-reflexivity [second order reflexivity] is crucial because it is the basis for questioning the way we relate with others. By focusing on our own, often unacknowledged, representations of realities and working from within our experience, the impetus for change can be far more powerful than that mediated by externally imposed frames" (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 40). She furthermore argues that learning is not necessarily emerging in structured and linear processes, but can be a messy process of making connections.

By actively involving the many different voices in the reflecting team all participants were invited to reflect together and share responsibility for the learning

and knowledge-building process. Through the process we tried to deconstruct and open up *the disorienting dilemmas* to multiple understandings. Contradictions, doubts and new possibilities for action were discussed. By doing, so the reflexive dialogues were rendered more complex. In this way, the multivoiced reflecting team members co-created learning and a *knowing-from-within* together with the role players through dialogical process. We were dealing with what Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) define as "participatory ways of knowing," based upon the verb *knowing* rather than *knowledge*, where knowing can be characterized as "unbounded, fluid, bodily sensed and often tacit, i.e., implicit in one's practices and expressions" (p. 235).

4.8. THE RESEARCHER AS REFLEXIVE INQUIRER

During this kind of process the roles of the researcher are multiple, and therefore I prefer to name the researcher a *reflexive inquirer*. As described in an earlier article (Hersted, 2016 in press), it is first a matter of facilitating a nurturing framework for participation and helping participants to feel confident with the process. Building confidence is crucial for participation, which means that a relationship built on mutual respect and recognition between all participants is central for learning. Furthermore, as I see it, the *reflexive inquirer* must contribute with enthusiasm and engagement to the roleplay practices. For many participants, working with roleplay will be an unusual approach to learning, and it is important that they can trust the possibility for positive outcomes. Most important, the *reflexive inquirer* must encourage the participants in developing new practices and a new consciousness. The *reflexive inquirer* must move *with* the participants and be careful not to impose his or her "projects" or "solutions" on them. The participants themselves must, as much as possible, discover their own ways of navigating while trying out new ways of communicating through the roleplay. It may sound like a paradox, but on the one hand the *reflexive inquirer* must be humble and work from *within* the process, and on the other hand, he or she must be able to see the process from the outside, take initiative, formulate questions, introduce new language games, speech genres and sometimes even act as a provocateur. The *reflexive inquirer* must be able to see the process from a second order perspective and, at the same time, be a collaborative learner, one who joins in the experimental learning journey.

In more concrete terms, the *reflexive inquirer* must inspire the participants to see the disorienting dilemmas from new and different perspectives, and encourage them to imagine and to act out alternative scenarios where they experiment with different options for moving toward an active attentiveness to the process of relating. As I see it, the *reflexive inquirer* cannot and must not manage the process, but can contribute significantly by drawing distinctions and highlighting specific aspects and details during the process. By asking questions, the *reflexive inquirer* can draw the attention to specific aspects, invite participants to dwell on specific dialogic moves and encourage reflection on alternatives.

As described elsewhere (Hersted, 2016 in press) I draw on the systemic questioning orientations of Gianfranco Cecchin (1987) and Karl Tomm (1988, 2014), and especially what is often defined as reflexive, circular questioning. This way of questioning is from a relational orientation and invites participants to reflect on an episode from different perspectives and to imagine alternative scenarios in their relationships. Thus, the *reflexive inquirer* might ask the roleplayers directly: "What would be important, do you think, for person X?" "And how would Y respond to this, if he or she heard your discussion?" Or he/she might ask the reflecting team what could be characterized as meta-questions: "Do you notice some specific patterns in their communication?"; "What do you think characterizes this language game?"; "How can we change the pattern?"; "What kind of relationship could you imagine instead?," etc. The *reflexive inquirer* might also turn to genre questions such as: "If this was a movie, what kind of genre do you think is played out here? For instance, a thriller, a melodrama, a comedy, a tragedy or something else?"; "What other kind of scenarios could they create together if X and Y started communicating in new ways?" or "What kind of utterance could be the first helpful move towards an alternative way of communicating?" The *reflexive inquirer* does not have "the right answers" or "solutions," but through questioning and through experimenting with alternative scenarios, the *reflexive inquirer* participates together with the participants in a creative *wayfaring* (Ingold 2008). Furthermore, it is important that the *reflexive inquirer* is sensitive and responsive to the needs of the participants and the overall context, showing flexibility and readiness to adjust the practice during the process.

4.9. CASES

In the following, two examples of the roleplay scenarios will be presented in order to illustrate our practice in a more concrete way. Breaking with old communicative patterns is not necessarily an easy task, because it requires that we question our immediate reactions (based on *reflex*) in relation to others. As mentioned earlier, when working with disorienting dilemmas, the *reflexive inquirer* gets insight into the "back stage" of the organization, and it happens that the *reflexive inquirer* finds himself in a disorienting dilemma. One might ask oneself: Should I go further and insist here? Or should we let it go and change the subject? One might feel tempted to bring in one's own points of view in the dialogues, but the *reflexive inquirer* has to be very careful in these matters. I consider it to be of higher pedagogical effect if the *reflexive inquirer* can avoid giving direct advice, but instead use questions that inspire the participants to reflect and come up with alternative ideas themselves. During the entire process, the *reflexive inquirer* must be extremely patient and not put too much pressure on the participants, otherwise they will block out learning. It is a matter of finding a balance in being appreciative and challenging at the same time. Respect must be shown to the participants in such a way that nobody feels that he or she looses face. At the same time, the *reflexive inquirer* must question and

challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and communicative patterns, so as to keep this delicate balance.

Case example 1

A relatively new employee (who was not educated as a pedagogue but as an engineer) asks for help to create a better relationship to one of the girls living at the institution. Initially, he tells us about an episode where the communication with the girl went really badly and turned into a conflict. The situation took place during the daily room inspection. According to the employee, the girl was messy and refused to cooperate in the cleaning of her room. The employee found himself in a dilemma: How should he react in that situation? After he told his story, I asked him to show it through roleplay as detailed as possible. Together with a couple of colleagues from the team he prepared the scenario (around 15-20 minutes preparation) and showed it to me and the reflecting team. The reflecting team members were invited to listen to and see the scenario from different perspectives: the perspective of the girl (Jennifer), the employee (William), a colleague, a leader, etc. The following presents a direct transcription from the beginning of the roleplay scenario recorded on video. Some of the physical actions of the participants are described in parenthesis, as I consider these actions to be just as important as the spoken words.

William (knocks three times on the door to her room)…

Jennifer: Come in.

William (enters the room)

Jennifer (is sitting on her bed)

William (approaches her but almost starts vomiting while shaking the hand of the girl and saying): Hello, Jennifer (he remains standing and Jennifer remains seated on her bed. He avoids eye contact and looks at his watch, while saying): You have to get out of bed now. It's the middle of the day.

Jennifer (remains silent)

William (visually inspects the room by turning his head): Just look at your room. Didn't you clean up yesterday?

Jennifer (remains silent and looks down at the floor)

William: Listen, Jennifer. When people enter your room, it smells so much that you would almost think you had pooped in your bed. That is really bad. Are you hiding

something here that is making it smell? Or is there a dead rat in here? It's absolutely terrible!

Jennifer: Can't I just open the window and vent the room?

William: Well, that would be a start. But we need to figure out where the smell is coming from. This smell isn't normal. What…could it be some of these clothes lying in here that need to be washed? When was the last time you washed your clothes?

Jennifer: The day before yesterday.

William: Well, then it's a shame that the clothes aren't placed in the closet instead of the floor. So… at least you could start by doing that. (He takes a look beneath her bed): What kind of bottles are those lying there?

Jennifer (looks terrified): What are you talking about?

William: There are two bottles lying there. Will you please pick them up, because I'm an old man.

Jennifer (picks up the two bottles and gives them to William): Well, it's just two bottles of soda.

William (astonished, refusing to take the bottles): Soda? No, I sure don't want to touch them! Tell me, now I'm asking you directly: Do you pee in those bottles?

Jennifer: No, it's just orange juice.

William (even more astonished and apparently provoked, while raising his voice): Orange juice? It looks rather thin to be orange juice!

Jennifer: It's just orange juice!

William: Well, I don't think you feel like drinking this, do you?

Jennifer: No, it has been there for a long time, so I don't want to drink it.

William: Well, I understand that, but in fact I'm convinced that you've peed in those bottles, Jennifer. This is definitely not very tasteful… Why? There is a door right here… You can just walk out and pee. Or is it because you're afraid at night… or what's going on…?

Jennifer (looks down at the floor and remains silent)

William (raising his voice): Well...?

The employee stops the scenario and tells us that it turned into a conflict, but he does not inform us about the details in the conflict. As a facilitator of the process, I accepted this, because I did not want to put too much pressure on him, and we agreed to focus on the scenario presented above.

Relational reflections on case example 1

In the episode transcribed above, the ritualized "room inspection" at the institution turns into a conflict. While talking about the presented scenario with the presenters and the reflecting team, I discovered that the employee, William, was a newcomer and that he did not yet know the girl very well. Furthermore, he did not have any pedagogical education but had a background from working at a factory. Before we started working on the episode, he did not know that Jennifer had a life story that, from early childhood, had been characterized by violence from a brutal stepfather and an overshadowing fear of his reactions. After the first roleplay session, during the conversation with the reflecting team, we discovered that, for many years, the girl had been constantly escaping the stepfather in company with the mother. Apparently, it seemed like William, at the beginning of the session, thought that the girl was just bad mannered and needed clear instructions from the adults. By asking the reflecting team members how the episode was experienced from the perspective of Jennifer, we gained more insight into her background and, little by little, we began to understand the possible reasons why she might be afraid of going to the toilet at night. We also discovered that, in front of her door, the institution had installed a series of alarm clocks that would immediately start making noise if she attempted to walk out of the door. In this way, by dialoguing with the reflecting team, tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) about Jennifer and her circumstances was shared and new facets emerged. A team member informed us that several times he had found the girl lying paralyzed in the area around the institution, for instance in a ditch. "It seems like she's dead then," he said, " as if she had moved out of her own body". Another team member told us that Jennifer, according to the report, in her early childhood (since she was three years old) had refused physical contact with others. At the same time, several team members explained that she used to run away from the institution and prostitute herself in town. Apparently, we were dealing with a young girl with specific needs and relational challenges and it would not make any sense to raise one's voice in front of such a girl. It struck me that William had insisted on shaking hands with her (which was a ritualized convention at the institution), but at the same time he avoided any kind of eye contact with her. Apparently Jennifer needed emotional support in order to feel safe. How then, could the employee, in this case William, build up a trustful relationship with her? It was not only a matter of communicating in a more polite way, but also of taking the necessary time to meet the girl at "eye level," being *with* her instead of yelling at her, and building up confidence little by little. We then tried to work with alternative

possibilities from an approach of *being with* instead of *talking to* (Shotter 2010). For instance, we experimented with an alternative scenario where the employee, instead of standing in the door, took a chair and sat down and talked with the girl in a soft and patient voice. We also worked with the importance of having eye contact with the girl, which was rather difficult for William in the beginning. In short, it was not only a matter of finding the appropriate words (instead of blaming the girl), but also working with the ability to relate in all aspects: wordings, intonation, eye contact, gestures, positioning, careful listening, etc. It was very much a question of learning to pay attention to relational processes and being relationally responsive (and responsible) in a sensitive way.

Apparently the employee, William, was a novice in a pedagogical working context, and by trying out different alternative scenarios, he expanded his repertoire of dialogic actions. The roleplay setting offered him, with help and inspiration from his colleagues, a framework to try things out that he had never imagined nor tried before, and it seemed to have been an important learning process for him. Also the participating colleagues seemed to learn from the session.

At William's request, we saw the video recordings together in the team a couple of weeks after the first training session. William said that he wanted to see it again in order to intensify his learning. After watching the first episode and some of the alternative scenarios on video, we had a dialogue about our observations. We notice it was not easy for William to break with degenerative patterns, and it seemed a little uncomfortable for him to try out new forms of communication. Drawing on Vygotsky, one could say that we were on the edge of the proximal zone of development (ZPD). The following is a direct transcription from watching the video recording together, where William and his colleagues tried out new alternative scenarios to the episode above with William and Jennifer.

William: The last version in which I participated seemed totally awkward to me.

Mary: What?

William: When I played the last version. It isn't me naturally […].

[…]

Reflexive inquirer: I can see that you're working on it, and I also notice that it seems like you feel a little indisposed in this. Let's try watching the following…

[A new video clip from the earlier session is shown.]

Reflexive inquirer: What strikes you when you see this video clip? I'm also asking the newcomers to the project; you're welcome to offer your observations, too...

Robert: I think there is a change from what I observed in the first scenario. I can see my colleagues in new and different roles in a different way, in particular William. Normally, I like William's style, but I also appreciate the new version of William I see in the video. I would like to see more of this side, because it's something different and I think it could contribute to changing the way in which the young people look at William. It seems he had been given the nickname the "grumpy guy," that "he is so tough that we don't want him to check our cleaning." Then sometimes he gets the predicate of being "the grumpy guy" just like others here also have this label. I think somehow that it would be good for William… I see something different [on this video], and I also notice a kind of reflection as to what else could be done, how can we find other strategies and approaches in order to see how we can improve these things. And this, I think, is rather evident in the process.

Reflexive inquirer: What is it exactly you can see that he is doing differently?

Robert: Usually he stands up. Just the fact that he now sits down makes a clear difference. I noticed that before they start playing the new scenario, he says that this is difficult for him and that he feels insecure, because this is a new role and another way of doing things, and we all have to grow accustomed to this when making changes. So one might feel that it is a little awkward. This seems obvious and I also notice that William seems to reflect upon how he can say things? How to express oneself? Usually he is very clear, but he looks a little insecure [as if thinking:] "How can I make it better and maybe express myself in more caring and appreciative ways?" This is how I see it…

[…]

William: I just want to say, that there is a huge difference between the situation now, sitting here and talking after having worked with the episode for 2-3-4 hours, where we have been talking about sanitary napkins and how one could have acted and so on… But it is a whole other story when you find yourself in the middle of the situation and you have to react to what's happening, instead of having time to lean back and analyze "what if I had done that," "how would she have reacted if I had done x y z"… One acts in the situation and I'll probably do that next time as well, but now I have got some more tools to act with.

Peter: You can use these things all the time in your work, William.

William: Yes, but in the situation, I couldn't have reacted differently. I have now been shown some new possible actions that will stick to my memory, but I couldn't have done things differently in the moment, in that situation.

Peter: But William, for instance, you can sit down and talk instead of standing in many situations.

William: Yes, definitely.

[…]

Helen: The most important thing for me is the approach we take in our communication with our bodies and in our communication in general, for instance, the ways in which we stay standing or sit down. The ways, in which we move our hands and our entire body, seeking eye contact, etc. These are the things we talked about last time and that we can make use of in the communication when we wish to say something important.

Mary: When they sit down, it doesn't seem like he is blaming her; they're more at eye level. But also the vocal pitch and the ways in which they say the things... It is not because they are making fun out of it, but in this way it is more on Jennifer's terms, right? Maybe it is not so embarrassing. He tries to spare her, so that it doesn't get so awkward. The fact that she hides sanitary towels and pees behind the dresser makes the situation painful enough. But in many ways, it is more at eye level now.

Further reflections

Apparently, William was challenged here because his usual ways of communicating had been questioned, and he had now started experimenting with new ways of relating which were unusual to him. Obviously, he felt awkward doing so. As he put it: "It isn't me naturally."

In the role of reflexive inquirer, I tried to recognize his efforts and challenges and encourage him to keep on going. William's colleague, Robert appeared to be very careful and appreciative in his way of giving feedback to William from a non-judgmental approach.

It seemed like it was not only the staff members who were giving the adolescents nicknames or labels. Apparently it was also something that occurred among the adolescents in relation to the staff. According to Robert, William had received the label as the "grumpy guy" among the adolescents at the institution, a label, which did not offer the best conditions for his relationship with the adolescents. So the question was: How could William break with this categorization and show other aspects of himself, by practicing other ways of relating and communicating?

As we notice, Robert tried to encourage William and valorize his progress. He recognized that William might feel awkward in experimenting with new ways of communicating. He expressed his appreciation concerning William's efforts in reflecting and learning. Robert tried to identify himself with William by saying: "I also notice that it seems like William reflects upon how he can formulate things? How to express himself? Usually he is very clear, but he looks a little insecure [as if

thinking:] "How can I make it better and maybe express myself in more caring and appreciative ways?" In other words, Robert internalized William, and tried to see the situation from his perspective due to some of the exercises we had been working on in the process.

William expressed his anxieties and worries: "But it is a whole other story when you find yourself in the middle of the situation and you have to react to what's happening, instead of having time to lean back and analyze "what if I had done that," "How would she have reacted if I had done xyz?" One acts in the situation and I'll probably do that next time as well, but now I have got some more tools to act with."

As a reflexive inquirer, I understood William's anxieties, and I also worried whether the "disturbance" had been too big for him. I feared that he would move into a self-defensive position instead of finding the courage to continue exploring new ways of relating. Apparently, in this case, we had moved to the edge of his ZPD. At the same time, I was aware that William was a newcomer at the institution and that he did not have any pedagogical education, and I did not want him to "loose face" or feel that he was vulnerable in front of his new colleagues. That would not be a good beginning for William in his new job. So how could he maintain his dignity and still learn from the episode? How could I as a facilitator and reflexive inquirer "be with" him and at the same time challenge him? It was a matter of finding the right balance.

Another colleague, Peter, also tried to encourage William in his efforts by saying: "You can use these things all the time in your work, William". And William answered: "Yes, but in the situation, I couldn't have reacted differently. I have now been shown some new possible actions that will stick to my memory, but I couldn't have done it differently in that moment, in that situation".

Apparently, a third colleague, Helen, tried to move the attention away from William (maybe in order to spare him any awkward feeling) by formulating a more general learning outcome that could probably benefit the whole group: "The most important thing for me is the approach we take in our communication with our bodies and in our communication in general, for instance, the ways in which we remain standing or sit down. For instance, the ways, in which we move our hands and our entire body, seeking eye contact, etc. These are the things we talked about last time and that we can make use of in the communication when we wish to say something important." Helen's utterance made me think that she was in a process of learning and also capable of articulating and sharing her learning with her colleagues.

A forth colleague, Mary, showed her ability to identify both with William and Jennifer, without favoring either of them. Furthermore, she attempted to encourage William by saying: "[…] in many ways, it is more at eye level now". Apparently,

she recognized that William was trying to be *with* Jennifer in the alternative scenario.

In sum, learning can sometimes be frustrating because in the learning process we start questioning our common practices and we become challenged to rethink and re-conceptualize our taken-for-granted assumptions. It seemed obvious that the initial strategy by William in relation to Jennifer did not work very well and ended up in conflict where they both were stuck. As an employee, William had to find other ways of approaching her. Obviously, he felt awkward trying out new pathways, but it is interesting to see how the reflecting team members tried to support and scaffold him in his learning process. This seems to be in accordance with Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) understood as:

> "[…] the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86).

In my view, the recognition and support from the team is crucial for learning, and, it is my impression that not only William but also his peers were in the middle of an intensive and challenging learning process.

Case example 2

The following example was presented to us by two pedagogues working at the institution on the same team. It is a direct transcription from a video recording of the roleplay scenario presented by the employee, Liza and her colleague. Liza plays the role of herself and her colleague plays the role of a twelve-year-old girl, Kathrin. The girl has hidden herself in the lavatory, probably in order to smoke a cigarette, which is not allowed at the institution. One of the pedagogues tries to make her open the door. The conflict escalates and turns into physical violence from both parties.

Liza: Kathrin, you have to get out of that lavatory now.

Kathrin: Relax!

Liza: You have to get out now!

Kathrin: You don't decide that.

Liza: NOW, Kathrin!

Kathrin: (leaves the lavatory)

Liza: You must listen to what I'm saying.

Kathrin: Fuck you, nobody is going to… (Kathrin kicks Liza on her leg)

Liza (catches her arm): That's enough!

Kathrin: Fuck you! Shut your ass! Don't touch me!

(A physical fight begins, and after a while, Liza forces Kathrin down on the floor).

Kathrin: Go away you fucking idiot!

Liza (keeps her pinned on the floor): You have to talk in a nice way!

Kathrin: I don't give a damn! Ahr!

Liza: Kathrin, relax and then I'll let you go.

Kathrin: Ahr!

Liza: Try to move your arm away, and then I'll release my grip.

Kathrin: Ouch! Ouch! Stay away from me!

Liza: Relax, now! Then I'll leave so you can have five minutes alone.

Kathrin: Yes! Go away!

Relational reflections on case example 2

As we see in the example, the situation intensifies very quickly and the pedagogue (Liza) seems to lack other tools than use of force.

As a reflexive inquirer, I asked myself: Is it reasonable at all to use physical force against a twelve-year old girl who hides herself in the lavatory? As we notice, it was the girl (Kathrin) who kicked the pedagogue first, but could we find other possibilities for communicating than responding in a similar way? According to Gergen (2009), this could be identified as a "dangerous dance," and what is important to remember here is that we always have a choice in whether we follow the dance or introduce another way of communicating. So how could we turn the degenerative pattern into a more generative scenario? As a reflexive inquirer, I did not want to judge the employee who had been using force against the girl in self-defense. It was not my role to be a judge but to facilitate a process of learning. Instead, as a starting point, we looked at the episode from different perspectives with

the reflecting team—in particular, the perspective of the pedagogue (Liza) and the girl (Kathrin).

One of the other pedagogues on the team questioned why, after all, it was "mandatory" to insist that Kathrin immediately leave the lavatory? Why could she not stay in the room for a while until she cooled off? This question seemed to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of Liza and some of her colleagues, and different explanations were articulated, for instance: That one could be afraid that Kathrin might jump out of the window, or that she would occupy the toilet when others might need it, or that smoking in the lavatory was not allowed according to the rules of the institution.

One pedagogue mentioned that she had noticed that Kathrin had difficulties in relating to other people. For instance, she could "ask for hugs twenty times a day."

Another pedagogue presented the idea that if Kathrin did not get "positive contact" she would then search for "negative contact," for instance by initiating a physical fight.

One pedagogue indicated that Kathrin had been in an incestuous relationship with her father, where sex and violence were intertwined. Maybe this information could contribute to a better understanding concerning the difficulties for Kathrin in relating with other people. Often she was either very sexual or aggressive in her approach to other people.

Another pedagogue expressed the concern that Kathrin had become a prostitute. There were several antecedents where she had run away from the institution and been together sexually with strange men in exchange for money. The employees had searched for her and sometimes picked her up hundreds of kilometers away. In one of these episodes, the explanation from Kathrin had been that she "had been kidnapped by a group of bikers."

When we talked about alternative ways of relating to her, one of the male pedagogues said:

> "I think there is an enormous task in differentiating it for her, what it is and when it is enough and so on. It is about defining limits for her and also about helping her to find out how she can deal with different situations. I also think that she has been subject to sexual abuse, something, which her behavior also indicates. She has this screwed up way (now in the role of the girl): "If I can't get it one way, then I can get it another way. I know many tricks, I can hit people, I can doll myself up, I can…" (then, speaking as himself as a professional again): Then knowing when enough is enough is also a tightrope for me. I also have to

> be careful. It's my role to show her…how she can get it [positive contact] and what should she stop doing by correcting her. This is a big task, because she has this… it is second nature to her".

The dialogue went on for a long time. Apparently, we did not arrive at any concrete solution concerning the specific episode, but we agreed that violence against violence was not a good track, and we therefore tried out a series of alternatives. Through the dialogue with the reflecting team, many different aspects concerning the episode were illuminated, and we discussed several preventive initiatives such as building up mutual trust by relating to Kathrin in more appreciative ways, showing her that they were taking care of her without exaggerating giving hugs, talking with her in more personal and solicitous ways and taking her out to some activities that she enjoyed and could help her in building up self-esteem, such as sporting activities with other young people, horseback riding, etc.

4.10. GENERAL TOPICS

There is no doubt that during the entire project, we touched on themes that were usually difficult to talk about for the employees, yet important. It became clear that the inquiry opened up for dialogue about organizational taboos by offering a confidential framework in which it was possible to approach delicate topics from a gentle, non-judgmental approach. The two examples above are not exceptional. By retrospectively looking through the video material and the field notes from the process, I identified a set of overall, recurrent themes that were often repeated in different variations:

- Child neglect
- Transboundary, offensive behavior
- Sexual exploitation and prostitution
- Different sorts of crimes
- Cigarettes and psychedelic drugs
- Deviation from the institutional rules
- Learning difficulties among the adolescents
- Cultural, ethnic and religious differences
- Stigmatization and isolation
- Use of force and physical abuse
- Pedagogical disagreements, different points of view among the staff members
- Tensions between and within the professional groups
- Lack of coordination and disagreements concerning the division of tasks

These themes were often very complex and involved many different stakeholder perspectives, but as I see it, they all reflected a need for working reflectively with the relationships, dialogue, curiosity, discursive identity constructions, constructions

of social reality, taken-for-granted assumptions, relational coordination and collaboration.

4.11. SIGNS OF LEARNING

I found it important to explore the outcomes of reflective roleplay. Were there any signs that participants gained useful insight and skills from their engagement in the process? As mentioned before, relevant utterances concerning their learning outcome were collected through three semi-structured, focus group interviews, each an hour in length. Participating in the focus groups were nine random representatives from different employee categories (e.g., administrators, team leaders, schoolteachers, pedagogues, kitchen employees, and secretaries). In sum, some of the topics that showed up in the focus group interviews were learning outcomes such as: acquiring bodily awareness, expanding perspectives and enhanced self-reflection and relational consciousness (fur further information about the learning outcomes in details, see Hersted 2016 in press).

4.12. FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON OUR INQUIRY

During the entire process while experimenting with roleplay, I was impressed by the level of details and the convincing ways in which the participants identified with their roles. It occurred to me that the participants themselves were astonished to experience that they were able to do "theater" or "roleplay," and I observed that in the majority of the cases, they managed to play the roles quite well without overacting. In this kind of work, it is very important to avoid "stereotyping" the other but to be aware of nuances and multiple facets. The dedication and serious engagement among the participants was crucial to the process and helped us to go on and explore the dialogues with the reflecting team, and experiment with alternative scenarios.

The work with the polyphonic reflecting team consisted primarily of training the participants to see an episode from different perspectives and increase the reflexivity level by unfolding dominating stories, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, inviting other voices, etc. It was a matter of building up mutual confidence and introducing and keeping a smooth structure, which provided room for play, improvisation, dissensus, and multiplicity.

The work on the scenarios with William and Jennifer or Liza and Kathrin were not unusual examples. During the project, the participants opened up and revealed many episodes where tensions had escalated and turned into serious conflicts, and on some occasions, had ended with use of force. As a *reflexive inquirer*, I was initiated into a kind of shadow world, similar to what Goffman (1959) would define as *backstage*, which differs significantly from the official institutional website. I think that the confidence that we built up together was crucial for these things to happen.

Otherwise it would not have been possible to work with these delicate matters. Sometimes it was even difficult to bear the emerging insights as a *reflexive inquirer*. Working as a facilitator with roleplaying on a team of 8-10 participants who have not been used to this kind of "theater work" before is not always an easy task. It requires an augmented relational awareness in all aspects, and a specific aesthetic sensitivity to the process. In this kind of work the *reflexive inquirer* has to move on several tracks at the same time: being fully present in the process together *with* the participants and paying attention to details and, at the same time, keeping an awareness and overview of the process and paying attention to the organizational context. The reflexive inquirer must try to be sensitive to the responses and reactions of the participants and to the relationships developing in the process, find the right timing for each session, keep the dynamic, flow and energy in the process, and encourage the participants to put themselves at risk. Drawing on McNamee, we could use the term *radical presence* (McNamee 2015) as an ideal approach to be pursued. The idea of radical presence builds on a relational understanding of our social worlds and pays an active attentiveness to processes of relating. McNamee puts it this way: "Adopting a radical presence focuses our attention on the specificities of any given interaction while also allowing us to note patterns across interactions, across time, place, and culture (McNamee, 2015, p. 377). Earlier on she writes that the idea of radical presence has to do with "an exploration of broader relational and institutional contexts and the ways in which professionals and ordinary people alike can be responsive, present, and open to a multiplicity of life forms" (McNamee, 2015 p. 373).

It was my hope that the training could help the participants to develop their dialogical and reflexive skills in order to create better relationships and prevent delicate situations from escalating into irreversible spirals. The attempt was to help them to reflect and be able to break with degenerative patterns and in this way become more resourceful conversational partners (Shotter & Cunliffe 2003). The ultimate aim is to create organizational change. The process implied questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions and routinized daily practices by discussing pedagogical and human values and amplifying perspectives and repertoires for action. In my view, we succeeded to a certain extent in creating transformative learning (Mezirow 2000) among the majority of the employees and the leaders. Through roleplaying we were both bodily, emotionally and intellectually engaged, while discovering and learning "in the making" that there are no universal formulas in this kind of work.

4.13. LEARNING AS EMBODIED SOCIAL PRACTICE

Roleplay has an esthetic dimension and engages all our senses. As mentioned earlier, it involves multiple forms of communication, not only the spoken word. Similar to the learning theories presented by Dewey (1916) and Lave and Wenger (1991), we worked with learning considered as social practice, in which person,

activity and world are mutually constitutive. This is in contrast to learning as a uniquely cognitive process. Instead of holding that we learn a repertoire of cognitive schemata, the project was rooted in the idea that we learn new ways of practice through active, embodied engagement, as co-participation, which to a high extent relies on the capacity to improvise together. As Lave and Wenger point out, speech, knowing and learning are closely intertwined in the participation:

> "The notion of participation thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and involvement, between abstraction and experience; persons, actions and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing and learning". (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 52).

In sum, the roleplay with a polyphonic reflecting team contained many different elements: imagination, identification, multiplicity, changing perspectives, meta-reflexivity, dialogue, embodiment, relational responsiveness, improvisation, play, experimentation, risk-taking, collaboration, and co-creation. Engaging in this practice involves all our bodily senses. Together, these multiple elements constitute a whole, integrated, and multilayered approach, which I would characterize as synesthetic, collaborative learning. As Nicholson points out:

> "The gift of applied drama is that it offers an opportunity for an ethical praxis that disrupts horizons, in which new insights are generated and where the familiar might be seen, embodied and represented from alternative perspectives and different points of view" (Nicholson 2005, p. 167).

4.14. RELATIONAL ETHICS

A key concept in this inquiry is, in my view, the relational ethics condensed in Shotter's term *"withness"* thinking (Shotter 2008, 2010). This inquiry encourages us to understand processes from "within" and to be "with" the other person instead of positioning ourselves above (or beneath) the person. We saw this challenge clearly in the two examples presented above. Instead of treating the other instrumentally (for instance, by insisting mechanically on institutional rules) or as an object for fulfilling one's own goals, it is a matter of meeting the other with equity, thoughtfulness and curiosity. In other words, it's a question of meeting and recognizing the other as a unique person. In our project, "*withness"* thinking became extremely relevant, for instance, concerning the ways in which an employee approaches a young resident, a parent or another colleague or the ways in which a leader relates to an employee and vice versa. Instead of labeling the other, it is a matter of seeking to acknowledge and valorize the other's *unique otherness* (Shotter 2005a). As described elsewhere, this requires that we make an effort to try to relate to the other person and talk *with* him or her, instead of talking *to* or *about* the other. At the same time, it is a matter of developing a special awareness of thinking from

within the unique situation and the context for the conversation, and from this position being able to sense and notice what is going on, what is on its way and what kind of new possibilities for action are emerging (Hersted, 2016 in press, see also Shotter 208, 2010).

Closely related to "*withness"* thinking is Bakhtin's idea of *the unfinalized other* (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 63). According to Bakhtin it would be unethical to *finalize* (or determinate) another person by defining who that person *is*, as if that person had a fixed identity. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism we can say that dialogue avoids putting people into fixed identities, definitions or categories and builds on the recognition of the other's unfinalizability. Bakhtin did not believe in an autonomous inner self, a core nucleus, on the contrary, he claimed that what we usually understand as a 'self' is polyphonic (multivoiced) and that these multiple voices are born out of relationships. Drawing on Bakhtins dialogism, Frank (2004) elegantly puts it:

> "[…] no one person's voice is ever even his or her own; no one existence is ever clearly bounded. Instead, each voice is always permeated with the voices of others. Each voice resists and contests some voices, and it embraces others, but there is no one that could coincide with itself". (Frank 2004, p. 968).

When finalizing another person we create alienation and distance and we limit the possibilities of other people to show their polyphonic self. In a Bakhtinian understanding, this is not a dialogic approach. Frank points out that:

> "Dialogue depends on perpetual openness to the other's capacity to become someone other than whoever she or he already is. Moreover, in a dialogical relation, any person takes responsibility for the other's becoming, as well as recognizing that the other's voice has entered one's own". (Frank 2004, p. 967).

As mentioned elsewhere, when expressing ourselves we expect the other to respond or act actively. In the same way, we experience that others call us into response and so on. In this way our communication is never completed but always *becoming*. In this view of communication, it is a matter of taking an open approach and being responsive in relation to the emerging and unpredictable. As Shotter puts it:

> "As soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in the same way too), a little ethical and political world is created between us. We each look toward each other expectantly, with anticipations, some shared, some not, arising from what we have already lived in our lives so far" (Shotter 2005d, p. 104).

We may have anticipations concerning a relationship but we cannot predict the response of the other. However, we can develop our relational skills by using our imagination. With help from roleplay, we can train our ability to identify ourselves with the other and imagine different sorts of responses from the other before the response takes place. In this way, we may become more resourceful and skilled in participating in living dialogues with others. Here, it must be underlined that it is *not* a matter of strategically planning conversations and meetings but, according to Shotter's (2008, 2010) idea of withness thinking, it is a question of talking *with* each other, instead of talking *to* or *about* each other (Hersted, 2016 – in press). Or as explained here:

> "Dialogically-structured activities occur, then, only when we enter into mutually responsive, living, embodied relations with the others and othernesses around us – when we cease to set ourselves, unresponsively, over against them, and allow ourselves to enter into an inter-involvement with them" (Shotter 2005a, p. 23).

Not only did the participants in our project play and experiment with different ways of communicating *with* each other, but I as facilitator and reflexive inquirer also had to work closely *with* them and meet each of them as a *unique other*. The challenge is to show patience, recognition, and curiosity and to be fully present in the unique moments of creating together. This requires that the facilitator and the other participants constantly pay attention to the context and that they demonstrate flexibility and an ability to improvise during the process.

We can compress this kind of relational and contextual awareness into some basic ethical guidelines, such as:

- Always recognize the unique *otherness of the other* (term by Bakhtin and Shotter)
- Avoid the construction of closed identity conclusions (working from the Bakhtinian idea that we have *multiple* and *unfinalized* selves)
- Work *with* people and at the same time challenge and question the taken-for-granted assumptions and established truths (in the group and by oneself)
- Continue being curious, keep wondering and ask open questions
- Always be creative and look for new openings in the dialogue
- Avoid imposing initiatives on anybody but work *with* people in a *relationally-responsive* way
- Always respect a participant's wish not to participate in the roleplay. Be creative and offer other ways of participating, e.g. taking part in the reflecting team
- Work from the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky)
- Ensure that all participants feel comfortable during and after the process

- In order to avoid typical pitfalls, and based on our practice, I furthermore have some general suggestions to those readers who might consider using the inquiry of roleplay with a reflecting team:
- It is crucial to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere with mutual recognition
- The reflexive inquirer and the participants must be very sensitive towards tensions and conflicts in the organization and ensure relational responsibility and respect for everybody in the process
- The reflexive inquirer must stay curious and be able to use different kinds of questioning types (coaching skills is a must-have for a good outcome) in order to open up for new openings and new understandings. I, myself, have drawn great inspiration from the work of Karl Tomm (Tomm 1987-88; Tomm et al. 2014).
- Participants must help each other be fully present, also when a few colleagues are in focus during a longer session. It is important to activate the reflecting team frequently in order to keep the energy and motivation among all participants and to inspire each other mutually.
- The *reflexive inquirer* must bring energy into the process and possess a surplus of mental resources, in particular when the participants take up conflicting and vulnerable topics.

4.15. FINAL REMARKS

As this project suggests, dialogic roleplay combined with a polyphonic reflecting team can serve as a significant tool in the development of dialogical and relational skills for individuals and teams. The inquiry outlined here draws attention to the ways in which we use language in constituting reality, our relations, our identities and the creation of new opportunities in our social worlds. Adopting an explorative, experimental and playful approach, this educational practice was designed to increase discursive and relational awareness, and to invite creativity in developing new and alternative possibilities for action. Not only did the project involve learning among a significant group of employees but among the leading team, as well, in order to create organizational change. The results of the project are promising and can serve as inspiration within professional fields such as consultancy, education of leaders and employees and academic research. It is also important to notice that the benefits of this inquiry go beyond organizational development and can be stretched even more to the educational sphere, augmenting existing teaching and training practices. Our aim has been to experiment and try out a method for both learning and research at the same time, and there is no doubt that this inquiry based on roleplaying differs from many conventional research methods. However, from a constructionist approach, all research constructs the world on its own terms, and there is no research purified from human values, relationships, earlier experiences, etc. Seen from the perspective of action research (Reason & Bradbury 2008), the inquiry presented here can be defined as a qualitative, explorative and collaborative research inquiry.

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SUMMARY

This thesis contributes to a relational orientation to leading, emphasizing leadership as a shared, collaborative activity. In this paradigm major emphasis is put on dialogue and interaction. Inspired by social constructionist ideas, the thesis considers approaches to learning and knowledge building as related to relational leading. The practices developed in the thesis research demonstrate that it is possible to create organizational learning and development through collaborative, dialogic practices in groups and teams, for instance combined with the use of roleplaying. In the work with the thesis, dialogically based practices inspired by action research with the aim to enhance collaborative knowledge building, reflexivity and dialogical skills in groups and teams were carried out, analyzed and documented. Participants included school principals, leaders of kindergartens, teachers, pedagogues, and counselors working in an NGO for organic farming.

ISSN (online): 2246-123X
ISBN (online): 978-87-7112-843-7

AALBORG UNIVERSITY PRESS