SPECIAL ISSUE:
Private Pain,
Public Entertainment

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ABSTRACT

Team Inquiry is a new approach to organizational change, rooted in social constructionist, feminist and critical postmodernist theory and practice. It is designed to address the constraints on the elevation of marginalized voices and stories within organizations which go hand-in-hand with the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources of power within organizations. Drawing from White’s narrative approach (1990; 1992; 1997), Team Inquiry facilitates organizational actors to become audiences to themselves in the co-construction, telling and retelling of possible alternative stories. Consequently, the pain that exists within the private spaces of organizations has more potential for expression in the public sphere thereby lessening isolation and the individualizing of collective problems faced by given organizational members whilst promoting connection, solidarity and the creation of community.

The central theories and practices associated with Team Inquiry are described with reference to a case example situated within a leadership development process that took place within a division of a multinational manufacturing company in the U.S.A.

In this article I discuss Team Inquiry as a means to put on the agenda issues which have been identified by organizational actors as “unmentionable” within the public domain of an organizational change process and in a manner which minimizes the potential for reprisals.

I outline the central theoretical tenets which inform Team Inquiry and its associated practices. This is followed by an example of the approach in action drawn from my work within a division of a manufacturing company in the U.S.A. which is seeking to break with traditional models of management training and education.

The Team Inquiry approach draws extensively from Michael White’s narrative approach (1990; 1997). Working from the assumption that leading is an organizing activity (Hosking, 1988) it seeks to create opportunities for organizational actors across diversity of organizational position, gender and “race” to act as audiences to each other’s stories about preferred ways of leading in order to transform organizational culture from the bottom up, middle out and top down (Simons, 1998).

Through these processes, organizational actors whose voices may have traditionally been marginalized are intentionally elevated, transgressing the dominant cultural norms of elevating the experiences and voices of the upper most strata within organizations. In so doing, previously silenced and individualized stories are shared, resonating across diverse organizational actors and rippling out into the wider organization and beyond, offering a forum within which private painful stories can be told, shared by others, thereby contributing to the building of a community, sensitized to the power of relational and reflective knowing (Park, 1997).

The Need for a New Approach

The last decade has heralded many new and exciting developments in social constructionist consulting theory and practice including Constructionist Consulting, (Campbell, Caldicott & Kinsella, 1995) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1990). These approaches share a common set of assumptions concerning the way in which “reality” is constructed,
1. Reality is socially constructed, “storied” through negotiation among communities of people via language.

2. Stories are always open to interpretation; our stories can be “reread” from preferred, more empowering perspectives which more accurately speak to our experiences, offering new opportunities to build community, develop creativity and enhance the life-giving aspects of existence.

3. These “preferred” stories can be “brought to life” through a process of “amplification” (Bushe, 1995) by the creation of audiences who can be witnesses as well as contributors to the emerging new stor(ies).

Social constructionist consulting approaches appear to be complementary to the new, flatter organizational structures which seek to promote teamwork, participative management, flexibility and the capacity to continuously adapt to the larger turbulent socioeconomic environment.

Social constructionist consultants are working in diverse organizational settings, nationally and internationally, engaging organizational actors in intentional multilogues (Dachier & Hosking, 1995) through which they can become active partners in the construction of preferred organizational realities.

However, what has yet to receive serious attention in the consulting literature are the effects of the unequal distribution of the material and symbolic resources of power and control on the kinds of stories which organizational actors are either enabled or constrained from creating.

For example, during a team-building retreat with a team of managers my colleague, Ellen Abell, and I were approached privately during the first coffee break by a participant who was new to the company. He wanted to know more about his new manager’s philosophy and expectations of his team as he felt this hadn’t yet been made sufficiently clear to him. This person wanted to make sure that this question could be addressed within the design of the consulting event without having to be the person to put the issue on the agenda as he was concerned as to how his new boss might then view him.

Despite good efforts to redistribute knowledge, to flatten the hierarchy and to encourage feedback within this team, this manager nonetheless felt constrained from asking the senior manager a direct question. As a result, my colleague and I decided to “change course” and interview the senior manager in the presence of his team as to his philosophy of management and how this had informed his expectations of those who reported to him. The assembled team of managers then reflected upon what they heard from their boss. Not only was his philosophy clarified but they also gained a richer sense of the kinds of personal experiences of leadership that had contributed to his particular style.

This experience is by no means unique. It seems that no matter how well I think I’ve canvassed in advance with a team with whom I’m going to be working, the ground has shifted by the time the event begins, as each telling leads to new understandings. Therefore, “new” concerns emerge and are in need of attention and organizational actors often feel constrained from raising these issues up front.
Speech within the workplace is inevitably shaped by the matrix of power relations which reside therein. Who can say what, when, how and to whom is constrained by concerns associated with the potential effects of given utterances — what Pearce refers to as the “implicative force” (Pearce, 1989). For example, will there be retributions visited upon the person from co-workers or managers for having spoken up?

Furthermore, who gets to speak and who gets to be heard, whose voices are valued and whose are marginalized are pivotal issues to confront for those of us concerned with aligning our professional practice with our values.

In this article, I contend that what is called for is a consulting practice that does not “smooth over” the thorny issues associated with power relationships within organizations but which pays close attention to the effects of its distribution on the consulting process as well as to the diverse stories which emerge from differently situated organizational actors. As Orner states, “there are multiple voices and contradictions present in specific sites at specific historical moments” (Orner, 1992, p. 80). The power relations which prevail within a given context will determine how safe organizational actors consider it to be to freely participate and contribute. According to Orner, there may be “compelling conscious and unconscious reasons for not speaking - or for speaking, perhaps loudly, with silence” (Orner, 1992, p. 81).

With this in consideration, it seems to be crucial that consultants be mindful of the potential constraints — as well as possibilities — associated with the distribution of the symbolic and material resources of power, knowledge and control within the system and act to create contexts which facilitate the likelihood that organizational members will feel less constrained in speaking to their experience within the public forum of the organizational consultation. Furthermore, as social constructionist consultants with a commitment to the elevation of marginalized voices and stories within organizations it is incumbent upon us to develop creative strategies to ensure that this occurs.

Team Inquiry, Theory and Practice

Team Inquiry is an adaptation of the seminal narrative inquiry work of Michael White and David Epston (1990) within the field of family therapy to the organizational context. In particular, narrative style interviewing (White, 1995) and reflection/inquiry teams (Simons, 1997) are used as a means to engage organizational actors in the co-construction of preferred organisational stories whilst mindful of the effects of dominant practices of power upon the achievement of these preferred stories.

Team Inquiry also draws from feminist and critical post modernist organizational and management theories and is informed by the following assumptions:

- Management and organizational science is the story of the struggle for management control over production (Mills and Robbins, 1995).
- The workplace is a site of multiple competing discourses concerned with, among other things, power and control; employees and managers alike are continually engaged in shaping and reshaping the terms of these discourses.
• There are always acts of resistance, either overt or covert, on the part of employees to the imposition of control over their labor (Paules, 1991; Sprouse, 1992; Emery & Purser, 1996).

• Dominant discourses are introduced and disseminated throughout the workplace via new management practices which have real yet indeterminate effects on the lived experience of organizational actors within the workplace and beyond (Casey, 1995).

• “Mainstream” organizational structures are informed by hegemonic forms of masculinity and ethnicity which are intimately linked with hierarchical structures (Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Ferguson, 1984; Ianello, 1992; Nkomo, 1992).

• The politics of “race”, gender and social class saturate the organizational environment and cannot therefore be addressed as if “side” issues within organizations (Nkomo, 1992).

• The “brave new workplace” (Howard, 1985) is characterized by a combination of new forms of ideological control in conjunction with new forms of repressive control (Casey, 1995; Althusser, 1971). New constellations of power relationships therefore give rise to the possibility of new forms of acts of resistance, individually and collectively, on the part of organizational actors (Gramsci in Lawner, 1973).

The organizational consultant often plays a key role in the social engineering of the workplace environment, reproducing and normalizing new dominant managerialist discourses (Rose, 1990).

• However, the organizational consultant can use the site of the workplace consultation as an opportunity to “thicken” alternative organizational stories which are aligned with the preferred values, beliefs, histories and socioeconomic needs of multiply situated organizational actors.

• The above preferred needs, values, beliefs and histories are likely to be conflictual and contradictory across organizational actors. For example, white male senior executives may have needs, values, beliefs and histories which conflict with the preferred futures of white male production workers whose own values etc. might conflict with the preferred futures of Black female office workers etc.

• The Team Inquiry process can facilitate the opening of a “multilogue” not in order to produce consensus but to increase awareness of similarities and differences across organizational actors, thereby developing “cosmopolitan communication” (Pearce, 1989) viewed as more fitting within the contemporary era and increasing the pool of possible preferred future organizational stories.

• Such consultations may act as opportunities to widen the sense of personal and team agency of organizational actors with possible significant effects on their lives within and beyond the workplace.¹

¹ A fuller discussion of these assumptions is forthcoming in my doctoral dissertation.

Before going on to reflect on the formation of leadership, I should state that the language of leadership is part and parcel of the organizational context. Indeed, the language of leadership is part and parcel of the language of the modem corporation.

The Team Inquiry process is a way for participatory pedagogies and knowledges (Elder, 1986) to be shared across multiple voices.

The design of the Team Inquiry process is derived from that of the Team Inquiry process of the 1980s (Elder, 1986). The following paragraphs are a discussion of the Team Inquiry process as it relates to the organization of the contemporary corporation.

Central to the Team Inquiry process is the need to ensure that organizational actors understand the process and are capable of participating fully in it. In order to ensure that this is the case, the team inquiry process is designed to help employees understand the organizational context and to develop a sense of personal and team agency within the context of the organization.

The conference design is formulated in terms of organizational actors: managers and employees. The team inquiry process in the context of the conference is designed to help employees understand the organizational context and to develop a sense of personal and team agency within the context of the organization.

Furthermore, the conference design helps employees understand the organizational context and to develop a sense of personal and team agency within the context of the organization.

The language of the capit" refers to the capit" of the team inquiry process. However, this is not an end goal in itself.
Power, Control & Organisational Silence

A Note About Language

Before going on to explore the Team Inquiry approach in more detail, it is important to state that the language used to describe the process was “reinvented” for the corporate organizational context. Concepts of teamwork and coaching are highly valued in contemporary organizational discourse. I therefore incorporated these terms in the language of the method in order to ease the introduction of the approach into the corporate organizational context.

Team Inquiry, Design and Process

The Team Inquiry process as it relates to the co-construction of alternative definitions of leadership, takes place within a series of leadership development conferences attended by a cross-section of 30-40 managers and supervisors at a time.

The conference model, as opposed to the training model, establishes a forum (Bruner, 1986) for participation across the organization. This approach elevates the local knowledges (Elden, 1983) of organizational actors and maximizes the inclusion of multiple voices.

The design of the conference is informed by large scale participative change theories associated with the work of Emery and Purser (1996), Englestad and Gustavsen (1989) and Jacobs (1994).

Central to the Team Inquiry process is the creation of a context wherein diverse organizational actors can be “interviewed” in the presence of their community of colleagues about their experiences of leadership. It involves the following steps,

1. Selection of Interviewees

The conference design team, comprised of organizational “insiders” and diverse in terms of organizational function, gender and “race” suggest a selection of potential managers and employees who might consent to being interviewed in the context of the conference in the presence of peers, colleagues and managers (we are careful not to interview employees in the presence of managers to whom they directly report).

In order to ensure the elevation of the voices of persons from marginalized social groups and the elevation of marginalized stories from the lives of persons from dominant social groups, interviews are conducted with a selection of personnel, diverse in terms of organizational function, “race” and genre. This is a key ingredient within the Team Inquiry strategy which is explicitly designed to create conditions more likely to promote the expression of marginalized and/or silenced organizational stories. Furthermore, the elevation of such stories is considered to be a vital source of creativity within diverse organizations serving diverse consumer bases and stakeholders within a global economy (Clegg et al., 1996).

2 The language of the capitalist, post industrial economy also permeates the corporate organizational context. However, this is not an issue addressed in this article.
2. Informal Pre-Meetings with Interviewees, “Pre-tellings”

The interviewer, who is an external consultant to the organization, sets up two meetings which take place within one or two days of the conference; one with the three managers who have volunteered to be interviewed on the first day of the conference and one with the three employees who are interviewed on the second day of the conference. These informal confidential interviews offer interviewees the opportunity to (a) talk with each other across function as to their experiences of management and leadership within the organization (a rare occurrence in many companies under “usual” circumstances) (b) learn what kinds of questions they can expect to be asked by the interviewer. They offer the interviewer the opportunity to be educated as to the “organizational topography” in relation to the distribution of power and control in the organization, and how it might shape the story a given manager or employee can tell within the public domain of the conference. The pre-interviews therefore play a crucial role in helping the interviewer to understand what kinds of questions might be off-limits in the public domain and also allow for the generation of the kinds of questions which might help to create a context for bringing forth a multilogue on these taboo issues within the organization.

3. Setting Up a Context for Reflection and Inquiry

On the day of the conference participants are given an overview of the steps involved in Team Inquiry as well as a rationale as to the purpose of this seemingly strange form of interacting which they are about to experience. The purpose is explained as being to

- learn from the organization’s own designated leaders and employees stories as to what makes for effective leadership in this particular site.
- to link what is learned from these stories and experiences to the experiences of those employees, managers and leaders attending the conference.
- to provide an opportunity for employees, managers and leaders to think about their own experiences with the focused attention of peers and managers.
- to further develop the skills of listening, communication and respect which are considered to be core leadership competencies.

They are then given the following guidelines which are written up on a large flip chart for all to see.

1. Listen respectfully and without interruption to the interviewees preferred stories.  
   Listen with curiosity.
2. Take notes as you listen as to any striking comments or themes based on what you hear.
3. Write down any questions you want to ask the interviewees who will have an opportunity to respond to them later.

The questions that conference participants are asked to reflect upon while listening to employees being interviewed are slightly different than those for listening to their peers. In addition to the above instructions, they are asked to think about how the pictures of preferred leadership, conventional boundaries, or experiences associated with the questions which seem natural in everyday community as well as work context.

The interviewer takes an emergent exploration of stories working with leaders and employees associated with the conference, and has one, their stories being told is interviewed for approval of the story.

5. “Listening Tables”

All the conference participants are then put into groups of 6-8 in “ enforced intimacy” at tables to interview each other about their personal experience, as well as further questions for the interviewees for further research.

... evokes the common context we find strange and incomprehensible to grasp what is common to the ideal of the traditional hierarchy.

White, 1991, p. 12

6. “Listening Tables”

In order to facilitate better support and understanding of the methods can be used...
preferred leadership, articulated by employees, fit with their own leadership styles. This allows for employees to act as consultants to their own leaders (White & Epston, 1992) who go into the reflection/inquiry process with a more vivid sense of what makes for effective leadership from employees perspectives.

4. Interviews with Managers or Employees, “Tellings”

Interviews with both employees and managers are centered around their personal narratives concerning experiences in relation to leadership. The definition of “leadership” is left intentionally vague so as to encourage interviewees to draw from beyond the conventional boundaries of what constitutes leadership and to consult their own experiences associated with the concept. The interviewer therefore asks the interviewees questions which seek to connect leadership stories to home, family, culture and community as well as to the workplace.

The interviewer takes the interviewees backwards and forwards in time through an emergent exploration of the influences on their leadership styles/best experiences of working with leaders in order to deconstruct dominant assumptions and meanings associated with the concept of leadership. The three persons are interviewed, one-by-one, their stories both shaping and standing in sharp relief to each other’s. Each person is interviewed for approximately 15 minutes.

5. Reflection/Inquiry Tables, “Re-Tellings”

All the conference participants who have been listening to the interviews then meet in groups of 6-8 in “cross functional” reflection/inquiry teams. They sit together around tables to interview each other and reflect upon what they heard in relation to their own experience, as well as to generate new questions of curiosity to be reflected back to the interviewees for further comment. According to Michel Foucault, curiosity

... evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential. (Foucault in White, 1991, p. 39).

6. “Listening Table” Report Back or Team Inquiry Coaches, “Retellings of Retellings”

In order to facilitate feedback from the reflection/inquiry teams, at least two different methods can be used.
The “listening table” (Sax, 1997) technique involves each team taking turns to share the themes of the conversations that took place at their table. After each team shares, the following team begins by briefly reflecting upon what they heard from the previous team, building upon their insights and enriching the pool of stories.

The Team Inquiry Coach method involves each table team selecting a member who meets with the interviewer before the reflection/inquiry teams meet in order to be briefed as to their role as “keepers of the process”. This role involves their acting as guides to their table team and keeping the team “on task”. They also take notes of any themes and any particularly striking comments as they emerge in the team. Being a Team Inquiry Coach also provides a skill development opportunity as well as a greater level of participation which many participants seem to welcome.

After the reflection/inquiry table teams have met, the Team Inquiry Coaches meet in the center of the circle to be listened to by their peers, colleagues and managers. They enter into the reflection/inquiry process with each other with the interviewer modeling curiosity in their stories and encouraging TIC’s to continue to situate comments within the contexts that they emerged within teams as well as within their own experiences. Through this process, all participants become audiences to their colleagues being interviewed, retelling the stories witnessed through the multiple lenses of their own social, cultural and gendered locations. This process facilitates the gathering of stories which have been generated at the multiple sites of the reflection/inquiry teams. During this session, questions for the interviewees are identified.

6. Resumption of Interviews, “Responses To Retellings”

Subsequent to the feedback from the table teams, interviewees are given the opportunity to respond to any of the questions they heard. It is made clear that they are not obliged to answer. It is entirely up to each person to select to which questions they’d like to respond.

Throughout the “report out” process, a designated “scribe” records the emerging themes on a flip chart. This data then becomes part of the basis for the creation of a document which speaks to local preferred stories about leadership that circulate within a given organization. Organizational actors then need to make some decisions as to how best to circulate this information within the larger organization.

The Team Inquiry process with its ability to gather multiple interpretations based on common sets of data can lead to rich conversations across differently situated managers and employees. Taken-for-granted assumptions as to the “best forms” of leadership are open to challenge. For example, within one experience of Team Inquiry, different pictures of preferred leadership on the shop floor as opposed to within “white collar” areas began to emerge. These differences appeared to be intimately tied into gendered and class based differences informing working styles in differing work locations. With the stories told in the interviews acting as the “starter dough” for the small table teams to reflect upon, organizational actors are able to develop and “thicken” stories which usually have no context for expression.
Bringing it Together

The participants come together to briefly reflect upon what was learned through the process as a whole.

Case Example

All identifying information of both the organization and individuals has been changed.

The Organization

The company is a manufacturing facility, employing 1500 people. Ethnically, culturally and linguistically it reflects the very diverse city of which it is a part. 500 workers are employed in production. The overwhelming majority of these workers are male, reflective of the historical exclusion of women from this manual trade (Mills and Robbins, 1995). Office workers are better balanced in terms of gender but most occupy lower status jobs than their male counterparts.

The Consultant’s Brief

My brief as a consultant was to help with the design of a leadership development process which would engage all levels of managers and supervisors within the division. I joined together as an external consultant with a multiracial, cross-gendered and multi-functional team of 6 managers and employees from within the organization to design and develop a series of conferences. We sought to create a forum (Bruner, 1986) through which managers could generate preferred pictures of leadership rooted in personal, cultural and organizational stories as part of a process of aligning an anticipated flattened organizational structure with relational forms of leading. (Dachler & Hosking, 1995).

The kinds of challenges facing this organization are illustrative of those to be found throughout corporate America and beyond. These concern the difficulties associated with being a hierarchical, male-dominated, multi-cultural command and control based organization with inequitable distribution of resources seeking to become a functionally integrated knowledge based organization, rooted in teams within a highly competitive, global capitalist economy.

During the period of my involvement with this organization, they were experiencing a great deal of stress related to production. All personnel were stretched to their limits, some working 70 hours a week and more in order to meet production deadlines.

Team Inquiry In Action

I met with volunteer interviewees one or two days prior to the conference in which they would be interviewed in the presence of colleagues and managers.
During these "informal" interviews I became privy to the stories which managers and employees sorely needed to have heard but which they were constrained from openly discussing for fear of reprisals from senior management. For example, line supervisors recounted stories of the ways in which they resisted imposing the worst aspects of scientific management upon the shop floor workers who reported to them, stating that if their bosses were to find out, they were likely to be reprimanded. I was told that the organizational structure and the informal policies and procedures of the company were in conflict with formal ones, pressurizing people into compliance with demeaning management practices. I learned that "lean manufacturing" (Womack et al., 1990) placed a considerable burden on an insufficient number of workers and was considered by many to be a bad policy in the long run, given the amount of stress it induced in employees and the potential for an increase in life threatening production errors. I was told about personal relationships that had crumbled under work-related stress. I heard that managers were under extreme pressure to work long hours and that this set the pace for employees to follow. Employees reported that some supervisors were "like dinosaurs", never greeting them with the courtesy of even a "hello". Others spoke of being unable to talk to supervisors about their problems as they'd been warned that "there's plenty more where you came from". Women employees and managers regardless of position complained of lack of understanding of "the second shift" (Hochschild, 1989; 1997) phenomena and the unstated pressure to prioritize work over family life. An issue which stood out as a result of the almost complete silence on the subject was that of the effects of racism on the organizational culture and climate. As a white woman, I may not have been viewed as a safe person with whom to share concerns in relation to this issue. Following my assumption that the politics of race, gender and class permeate all social relations, I worked on the assumption that the silence may be indicative of the fact that this was an issue which could not be openly addressed in this context.

This is not to suggest that these organizational members were entirely negative about the organization; they spoke of varied experiences with managers and many spoke of the positive changes they'd witnessed over the years; rather, they took the opportunity of having an external consultant's attention to offer "the inside scoop" on the challenges they felt existed within the organization. Furthermore, a commitment to creative and participatory forms of leadership development was clearly demonstrated on the part of many local senior executives. They sought to support this initiative in order to bring supervisors and managers into alignment with craftworkers on the shop floor who had been a part of a highly successful participatory action research project to redesign their own education system in the light of new developments in technology.

This organizational environment illustrates well Foucault's contention that power is not located within individuals but is distributed throughout the entire social body, structuring relations between workers and supervisors, supervisors and managers, managers and executives, executives and their interactions with customers in the larger socioeconomic environment; there is no one figure head to whom one can apportion "blame" or "success" but a seemingly endless array of recursive relationships through which power is deployed. These relationships shape what formally "counts" as leadership within a system which can be articulated as such within the organization.

Against the backdrop of this, the stories of managers, supervisors, craftworkers and their clients provided a new discourse from which a new vision of the possibilities of management and the organization emerged. The preferred picture could not be contrast to some vision of the future, to which I am sure some of the people with whom I had spoken were directing their efforts. The stories of the workers, education, collaboration and what was possible within a more participatory environment provided the structure for the potential new reality. The fact was that if one is to effect change, such change must be driven by those who are doing the work. Such an approach was seen as a precondition for effective leadership.

It was hoped that by paying close attention to the details of organizational processes, the changes could be made in a sustainable way. It was hoped that the local actors to speak for the organization could change the conditions and the accounts they could tell about their work. By working on these social relations within the organization, they were given an opportunity to explore how to lead in ways which were more participatory and more sustainable.

A crucial feature in the development of the stories was the role of the managers who were responsible for conducting the workshops. At the beginning of the workshops, the managers were, in essence, the "owners" of the company, and the participants were a very high level of trust. The stories were told without solicitation, but were also representative of the organization's culture, its strengths, its weaknesses and its potential for growth. The stories were also diverse in terms of the people who told them.

Previously, I noted that a key theme in these stories was the participants' ability to speak to openly and honestly with each other about the organization. There was an openness to critique and discussion of the organization's practices and policies. The stories were told in a way that made it clear that the organization was not unchangeable, and that change was possible. This openness was facilitated by the presence of the consultant, who provided a safe space for participants to express their views and concerns. The consultant acted as a facilitator, guiding the discussion and encouraging participants to share their perspectives. This openness to dialogue and critique was essential for the development of a shared vision of the organization's future.

In keeping with these themes, there is a need for the organization to foster an environment where all voices can be heard and where the participation of all members is valued. This requires a commitment to transparency and accountability, as well as a willingness to listen and learn from one another. The stories told during the workshops provide a glimpse of what is possible when people come together to work for a common goal, and they serve as a reminder of the importance of collaboration and participation in the development of a healthy and sustainable organization.