

Professional Coaching, Plato's Cave and the Sociology of Knowledge

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In this essay we wish to apply a sub-discipline of the field of Sociology (called the Sociology of Knowledge) to the practice of professional coaching. We don't provide answers or even guidelines for coaches, but we do engage the sociology of knowledge to identify a host of critical and challenging questions to be addressed by the coach--and the coach's clients. We focus on two dimensions of the sociology of knowledge that hold profound implications for the practice of professional coaching. Three events precipitated this article on the relationship between the sociology of knowledge and coaching.

The first event was an interview which one of us conducted with Julio Olalla in an issue of the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO)* (Olalla and Bergquist, 2008). Olalla has played a major role in bringing an ontological perspective to the field of coaching, with emphasis being placed on the nature of being and the way we situate ourselves (individually and collectively) in our world.

The second event was a meeting between two of us in Oslo, Norway. During a symposium conducted by the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO), the two of us had a chance to walk and talk together on the roof of the new Opera House in Oslo (a remarkable architectural feat). We discovered that we shared much in common about the interplay between philosophy and coaching, as well as about the challenges of thinking in new ways to meet the unique features of 21st century life. The outcome of this ongoing conversation was an article (Bergquist and Eggen, 2013) prepared for the same issue of *IJCO* as the Olalla article. It was later republished in the *Library of Professional Coaching*. At the heart of this article was the allegory of the cave offered by Plato. We focused in particular on the way we (as inhabitants of the cave) are influenced by and construct our reality around the shadows cast on the walls of the cave.

The third event was a presentation made by one of us in a course being taught in Singapore. In this presentation, Plato’s allegory of those living in a cave became a central element, as it was in the previous writing of Bergquest and Eggen. However, the presentation and conversation extended beyond the cave. What happens to the person who has left the cave? Or the person who returns to the cave? How is this person received by those still in the cave? What are the implications for those who coach? Are they coaching those who dwell in the cave or the person who returns to the cave? Do coaches live in the same cave as their clients or are coaches among those who somehow live outside the cave? Do coaches dwell in their own cave and are the coaching strategies they embrace and practices in which they engage just as much shadows on the wall as the shadows being viewed by their clients? Some very provocative questions.

In seeking to integrate these three investigations, we have retained the four-fold model offered by Bergquist and Eggen. They proposed two interrelated dimensions of the sociology of knowledge. One dimension concerns a distinction drawn by Olalla between the static or dynamic nature of one’s notion about *Being*. Is “being” a noun or a verb? Are we talking about an object or about a process? The second dimension concerns the basic assumption that it is or is not possible to ultimately identify the basic nature of being—in other words, to accurately describe and validate reality. Those who believe this description is possible are called “objectivists” and those who believe it is not possible are called “constructivists.” Four different perspectives are available when one combines these two dimensions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four Ontological Perspectives

	<i>Static</i> Notion About Being	<i>Dynamic</i> Notion About Being
<i>Objectivist</i> Perspective Regarding Being	Objective and verified description of a stable reality	Screened and interpreted version of an external stable reality

<p>Constructivist Perspective Regarding Being</p>	<p>Biased and resistant descriptions of reality</p>	<p>Reality created in the interplay between two or more people and/or events</p>
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While these four perspectives are inherently of interest to those who are involved with the sociological study of knowledge, they are also directly relevant to the field of coaching and specifically to the way in which clients define their own being – their sense of self. Each of these perspectives defines one’s sense of self in a quite different manner. They do not simply involve different belief systems. They encompass different notions about the very nature of a belief system, and in this sense are profoundly different from one another.

Leadership and the Four Perspectives

Before turning to each of these four perspectives, we want to establish a base for our examination. Specifically, we offer a brief case study concerning an organization in which a set of basic assumptions (shadows on the cave’s wall) are now being challenged. One of us serves as Executive Director of The Society of St Vincent De Paul in Singapore. This is a Global Catholic Charity that focuses on helping the poor and needy. Historically, it was founded in 1833 by a group of Parisian students led by a brilliant young lawyer, named Antoine Frederic Ozanam. The Society's christening reflects the works of St Vincent de Paul who dedicated his life to serving the poor. The Society has grown, comprising more than 45,000 conferences with 700,000 active members (or Vincentians), existing in 143 countries worldwide.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul in Singapore is part of the global Vincentian family. In Singapore, the society was inducted in 1951. Currently it has nearly 700 members whose aid extends to 3,200 vulnerable and poor families. Assistance is provided by volunteers who are attached to FINs (Friends-In-Need). These Vincentian volunteers journey with their families for long periods of time. The type of assistance provided is mainly financial and befriending in nature. Due to the mission of

the society, the engagement usually entails regular home visits to ensure that assistance is rendered in a caring and dignified manner--based on Catholic social and spiritual teachings.

Evolution of the modern world has created a new challenge in adapting historical approaches. FIN issues have become more complex and challenging: aid to the poor must be mitigated beyond the current scope. FIN programs can't simply be sustained, especially in cases involving long-term assistance. This rapid change has made exploration of the family's social ecosystem an essential and vital component. Needs must be carefully assessed to facilitate the attainment of self-reliance. However, the historical precedence is one of engaging clients without an evidence-based approach or model. Within this framework, members of the organization feel that "if it ain't broken why fix it." This is quite a challenge for the Executive Director of St. Vincent DePaul in Singapore. How might this leader be assisted in working with resistant members of his organization--including the volunteers? What might be the role of a coach? We will turn to the four perspectives and suggest ways in which each perspective relates to the challenges being faced by this Vincentian leader and members of his organization.

Static Objectivism

When an ontological analysis is applied in the sociology of knowledge, there are two different perspectives regarding the nature of being and, more basically, the nature of reality as defined by a specific society or sub-unit of a society. One of these perspectives might best be called *objectivism*. The advocates for this perspective assume that there is a reality out there that we can know and articulate. There are universal truths or at least universal principles that can be applied to the improvement of the human condition, resolution of human conflicts, restoration of human rights, or even construction of a global order and community.

We are now witnessing a parallel emergence of what we might call "bio-centrism." This is an objectivist perspective defining human beings as an objective and stable reality. From this static and objectivist perspective, we begin with the assumption that our identity and our decisions are "wired in" to our neurological structures and basically pre-set at birth. The bio-centric, objectivist perspective has served us well for several centuries. It has enabled us to make great advances in medical and cultural science; however, this perspective has also created many problems with which

we now live. From a bio-centric objectivist perspective, the human body, included the brain, was (and is) perceived as an advanced machine that can be altered and repaired.

This perspective can be retraced to the central principles of modernity: determinism and progress. While there is a tendency to coach from this perspective, this is a very limited (and limiting) approach to coaching – especially when the people we are coaching base their notion of “self” and “being” on this perspective. “Being” is a given, that is determined at birth--though with some potential for improvement. In many ways, our Executive Director is living with a long-term, historically-powerful notion of what good service for humanity should look like. There is a static objectivism that defines truth and virtue. There is nothing to improve or change!

Dynamic Objectivism

While many of the critiques of static objectivism are societal products of late 20th and early 21st Century thought, there is a much earlier source: the voice of Socrates as heard through the writing of Plato. Socrates (Plato) offered a dynamic objectivism through an allegory of the cave. Let’s briefly visit this cave. It is filled with people who have lived all of their lives chained to a wall in the cave. These people watch shadows projected on the wall in front of them. These shadows are being projected on the wall from things passing in front of a fire that remains lit behind them. The cave dwellers believe the shadows are reality.

Are we all living in a cave? Do we never gain a clear view of reality, but instead view only the shadows that are projected on the walls of our cave? We live with an image of reality (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself. Plato concluded that we have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave. Plato thus speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy to be found in a static objectivist perspective regarding the world – since we can never know whether we are living in the cave or living in the world of reality outside the cave.

What about the cave in which those working in the Singapore-based St. Vincent DePaul organization live? Given the "mentality" (perspectives and frameworks) of St. Vincent DePaul members, they find it hard to consider alternative perspectives and frameworks. They are not able

to see beyond the shadows on the walls of their own cave. These Vincentians refuse to channel FINs to case workers--those who can professionally evaluate their clients (enabling the volunteers to engage their FIN familiar in a more productive and collaborative manner.) This has stifled growth of the St. Vincent DePaul Society and has made the task of managing cases more complex. Additionally, as most of the Vincentians are in their 50s, this has made it more difficult to recruit youthful volunteers who are privy to modern and sophisticated methods of helping people.

In order to circumvent this resistance, the Executive Director has embarked on numerous training programs. He has encouraged outreaching with other agencies and has been involved in personally educating the public--hoping that this will allow existing members to see value in adopting a new manner of thinking and recruiting additional helping hands. All of this is focused on fruitful engagement and outcome for the FIN. Although some members have seen the potential of this "new" approach, it is a gradual process. A radical mind-set change must eventually occur. While members of the St. Vincent DePaul organization must remain committed to the long-standing cause of their organization, they must also free themselves from the cave--so that they can witness a "new world" of professionalized public service outside this cave.

Today, most of us live in a world that is similar to that faced by our Vincentian colleagues: we live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, unpredictable and turbulent. Turning back to Plato's allegory, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. First, there is something or someone standing near the fire in the cave. Part of the fire's glow is blocked, thus limiting the shadow-images cast on the wall. The blocking feature can be a cultural or personal narrative that we absorb during our daily personal and collective lives. Narratives and perspectives block out some of the light coming from the fire in the cave. Not only don't we actually see reality, there is something that determines which parts of objective reality get projected onto the wall. Those holding the partition that blocks out some of the fire's light have themselves grown up in the cave, but may hold a quite different agenda from other cave dwellers. What is the partition to be found in St. Vincent De Paul's cave? How are members of this organization blocked from seeing the full light of the fire inside their own cave?

There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the interpreter, reporter or analyst. We actually don't have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that

are projected from the fire (which we assume is the “real” world). The cave has grown very large and we often can’t even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for the interpreter to tell us what is being projected on the wall and what the implications of these images are for us in our lives. We are thus removed three steps from reality. We believe that the shadows on Plato’s cave are “reality.” We don’t recognize that someone or something is standing between us and the fire and selectively determining which aspects of reality get projected onto the wall. Finally, someone else is situated inside the cave offering us a description and analysis.

What part of the shadow cast on the Vincentian walls is being blocked? Who is doing the blocking and why are they blocking part of the shadow? Are there political agendas, Society agendas, theological or sociological agenda? Does the Executive Director see the whole shadow or is he also viewing a partial image? What about the interpretation? Is the Executive Director of St. Vincent De Paul the interpreter? Or is someone else providing the most persuasive interpretation? Is the history of this long-standing service organization providing the interpretation? How hard will it be to overturn this long-standing and honourable narrative?

Some of the world operating inside the St. Vincent DePaul organization (and many other human service organizations around the world) may be changing. First, there are now multiple fires burning in the cave and projecting multiple shadows on the wall. The so-called grand narrative (of Western European and American origins) which defined much of our reality during the 19th and 20th Century is now collapsing. We now have multiple, conflicting narratives that make it difficult for all but the most xenophobic people in the world to see only one set of shadows. There is a second major change, with the advent of social media and reality television and with the purchase of goods and services directly from the source. We might now be moving back to a time when there are no “middle-men” or interpreters. The term *disintermediation* is being used to describe this potentially-seismic change in our societal acquisition and framing of knowledge. Are the Vincentian middle-men losing control? Is this part of the challenge our Executive Director and his coach would now face?

Regardless of the shifts now occurring in our world of knowledge, we seem to remain confused about what is “real” and often don’t trust our direct experience. We move, with great reluctance (and considerable grieving), to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us and that we need to

attend not only to the constructions, but also to the interests and motives of those who tend the fire and block images on the wall of the cave and those who offer us their interpretations. We must move, in other words, from an objectivist perspective (whether it be static or dynamic) to a constructivist perspective.

An initial question might be posed given these changes: can professional coaches assist their clients in facing these challenges to objectivism? Can coaches help their clients sort through the multiple narratives and deal with the disintermediation of images they are receiving? How might a professional coach assist the Executive Director of St. Vincent De Paul? Can Plato's cave and his dynamic objectivism provide us with the opportunity to gain insights in a coaching session about the nature of the cave? What about the world that is projected onto the walls of the cave, and the nature and agenda of the interpreters?

We should also consider whether or not to step outside the cave. Can we actually leave the cave? How does the coach assist us in this challenging endeavour? Is it safer to remain inside the cave than to venture outside without the help of interpreters? Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences? Is a coach truly being helpful if she invites us to leave the cave? Should a coach help her clients recognize ways in which they still carry the cave shadows and cave interpreters with them when stepping outside the cave? As we step outside the cave, are we likely to confront some objective reality through our experience, or is the experience itself constantly shifting depending on setting, context, interpersonal relationships and the nature of our own past experience? Are we just moving to another cave?

Imprisonment In the Cave: An Expanded Version

The sociology of knowledge pushes us to an even more challenging perspective. The allegory offered by Socrates (through the voice of Plato) is actually much more extensive than the version we just offered in this essay. Plato provides us with more detail about life inside the cave and about what might occur if one cave dweller is allowed to step outside the cave and then returns to the cave. Profound implications regarding the sociology of knowledge emerge from this expanded version--and further questions arise about the role to be played by a professional coach in addressing these implications with their client.

Inside the cave, its inhabitants (as prisoners) are chained so that their legs and necks are fixed, forcing them to gaze at the wall in front of them and not look around the cave, Behind the prisoners is the fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway with a low wall. People walk behind the wall so their bodies do not cast shadows for the prisoners to see, but the objects they carry do. Prisoners cannot see any of this behind them and are only able to see the shadows cast upon the cave wall in front of them. The sounds of the people talking echo off the shadowed wall, and the prisoners falsely believe these sounds come from the shadows.

Leaving the Cave

What happens when one of these people is unchained and leaves the cave, discovering that the world is something more than the shadows they have always assumed were reality. This single prisoner is freed, being forced to turn and see the fire and then forced (allowed) to leave the cave and confront the outside light directly. The light would hurt her eyes and make it hard for her to see the objects that are casting the shadows. She would not believe it if she were told that what she saw before was not real. Instead the objects she is now struggling to see are real.

The prisoner would be angry and in pain, and this would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms her eyes and blinds her. The sunlight is representative of the new reality and knowledge that the freed prisoner is experiencing. Slowly, her eyes adjust to the light of the sun. Gradually she can see the reflections of people and things in water and then later see the people and things themselves. Plato continues, saying that the freed prisoner would think that the real world was superior to the world she experienced in the cave. She would feel blessed for the change, pity the other prisoners, and want to bring her fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight

Returning to the Cave

Can this person come back into the cave and what would the "enlightened" person say to those still in the cave. How would they take in this radically different perspective? The cave dwellers don't know what to do with the returning unchained "revolutionary" who talks about a different reality. What happens when this person returns to the cave? Would she be considered a "philosopher" (as Plato suggests) or would she be identified as a "fool" or as a person who is "mad"? Her experiences terrify

compatriots. She realizes that she cannot remain in the cave. She would stagnate. Other cave dwellers will not change or move forward. They perceive her as dangerous.

The returning prisoner, whose eyes have become acclimated to the light of the sun, will be blind when she re-enters the cave, just as she was when first exposed to the sun. The cave dwellers, according to Plato, would infer from the returning prisoner's blindness that the journey out of the cave had harmed her and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Plato concludes that the prisoners, if they were able, would therefore reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave. As coaches, can we help our clients navigate the return to the cave? Can we even help our clients determine whether or not they should consider returning to the cave? Why not remain outside the cave? Or is this yet another cave and another limiting version of reality? These questions lead us as coaches and leaders down a path to which Julio Olalla points in his interview. It is a pathway toward constructivism and away from objectivism.

Our personal and organizational caves

There are several different ways in which to view the lives of cave dwellers. We can identify the cave as existing inside the occupant's head and heart. The cave mentality exists when people become trapped or caught in favourite ways of thinking and acting that confine individuals within socially constructed worlds and prevent the emergence of other worlds. Preconceived ideas become traps for people when they begin to hold onto their preconceived notions and biases that eventually become their reality.

The cave can also be viewed as a collective experience. An entire organization can be perceived as the cave and its members as those who dwell in the cave. Expanding on Plato's allegory of the cave, we can assume that people collectively develop unconscious mechanisms and construct realities in order to handle anxiety and desire. Organizations are created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes. People can actually become imprisoned or confined by the images, ideas, thoughts, and actions to which these processes give rise. Organizations become stuck in their traditional manner of thinking. There are rigid (though often tacitly-held) rules about how things are done. Organizational life is deemed as a mode of cave dwelling because those who work in it are set in their ways of thinking and refuse to change. Then a released prisoner (as a visionary leader) returns to the cave and describes a new, blinding reality. An organization (such as St. Vincent DePaul) is confronted with this new

reality--one that requires a new way of thinking. Members of the organization must re-assess organisational norms. They must drop traditional modes of functioning. Individually and collectively these cave dwellers must develop a new identity and new ways of relating to one another and the organization's operations.

The cave dwellers are offered an opportunity to be liberated from the cave by the prisoner who escapes and discovers the "real" world -- or at least a different world. The cave dwellers are given the opportunity to discover that the world beyond the shadows of the cave is richer, more complex and perhaps more rewarding. The prisoner has escaped TO freedom and invites her colleagues to also escape to freedom. However, does the escaped prisoner (and the other cave dwellers) soon wish to escape FROM this new freedom? (Fromm, 1941; Bergquist and Weiss, 1994) Do they long for a world (inside the cave) that seems simpler, more clearly defined and ultimately less challenging? Do they blame the escaped and returning prisoner for their new-found anxiety? Like the Executive Director of St. Vincent DePaul, does the visionary suddenly become an uninvited outsider who wants to cause pain, confusion and uncertainty? How does a coach help this visionary, but challenged, leader to work with those still dwelling in the cave?

To better frame (and gain clarity about) this set of challenging questions regarding the nature of effective coaching with leaders who are returning to the cave, we must turn away from a sociology of knowledge that is based on an objectivist perspective to one that is based on constructivism. In doing so, we return to the four-fold model we offered at the start of this essay. Specifically, we describe the two remaining options in this model: static constructivism and dynamic constructivism. These two options are closely aligned with the more fully expanded version of Plato's allegory.

Static Constructivism

While dynamic objectivism has proved to be challenging for many philosophers, scientists and other thought leaders, social constructivism has offered Western thought an even greater challenge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Advocates of social constructivism believe that we construct our own social realities, based in large part on societal inventions – the traditions and needs of culture and the social-economic context in which we find ourselves. There are no universal truths or principles, nor are there any global models of justice or order that can be applied in all settings, at all times,

with all people. While this constructivist perspective on the sociology of knowledge is often considered a product of late 20th century thought (at least in the Western world) the early versions of social constructivism can be traced back to the anthropology and sociology of the early 20th century. Reports from these disciplines documented radically different perspectives operating in many nonwestern societies and cultures regarding the nature of reality and ways in which members of diverse communities view themselves and their interpersonal and group relationships.

This initial version of constructivism is essentially static, for these social constructions are based on deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions of specific societies and cultures. There are widely divergent communities that espouse their own unique ways of knowing. These communities may consist of people who are living together or people who are working together. Organizations like St. Vincent DePaul create their own culture and their own constructions of reality. This is particularly the case when an organization (such as St. Vincent DePaul) has existed for many years--and has been a source of much needed human services. Specific ways of knowing are based on and reinforced by the community and do not allow for significant divergence among those living in the community. Furthermore, while these ways of knowing may themselves change over time and in differing situations, such changes are gradual and often not noticed for many years.

We thus find a constructivism that is static and a process of coaching that focuses on surfacing these stable, but often unacknowledged and very powerful, societal assumptions and beliefs. It is the role of the coach to challenge these assumptions and beliefs, and help clients trace out the implications of these societal constructions for their own actions as members of these societies and cultures. As quasi-anthropologists and sociologists, professional coaches should understand something about the culture of their society – or of a specific organization. One of us (Bergquist and Brock, 2008) co-authored a book chapter in which six unique cultures were described that exist in most contemporary organizations. Each of these cultures has its own stable construction of reality and is resistant to change. Coaches themselves dwell in one or more of these six cultures, hence have their own biased perspectives that are created by and reinforced within these cultures. Thus, it is critical for coaches to not only help their clients become aware of their social constructions, but also become aware of ways in which they as coaches construct their own realities.

Dynamic Constructivism

While the objectivist perspective was prevalent during the modern era, and is still influencing our notions about “being,” the static constructivist perspective has often played a role as counter-point in late 20th century social discourse. This static constructivism has been a source of many challenges that have upset a modernist stance on the sociology of knowledge. The static constructivists have encouraged or even forced many of us to move from an absolute set of principles to a more situation-based relativism. Even greater challenges, however, are present. A dynamic constructivism moves well beyond the stability of broad-based societal and cultural perspectives. The emergence of a dynamic constructivist perspective represents a revolutionary change in the true sense of the term.

Language, narratives and self

Story and performance are hallmarks of dynamic constructivism. We live in a world of constructed realities that are constantly shifting and populated by language, semiotics and narratives. Language is no longer considered simply a handmaiden for reality, as the objectivists would suggest, nor does it construct a permanent (or at least resistant) reality, as the traditional social constructivists would argue. Furthermore, language is not a secondary vehicle we employ when commenting on the reality that underlies and is the reference point for this language. Dynamic constructivists take this analysis one step further by proposing that language is itself the primary reality in our daily life experiences. Language, originally and primarily relationship-based, assumes its own reality, and ceases to be an abstract sign that substitutes for the “real” things. Our cave is filled with language and conversations. With its very long history and heritage, an organization such as St. Vincent DePaul is particularly filled with language and conversations (echoing through the cave from many generations). This is reality – there is nothing outside the cave (or perhaps the cave doesn’t even exist).

While objectivism is based on the assumption that there is a constant reality to which one can refer (through the use of language and other symbol/sign systems) and static constructivism is based on an assumption that there is a constant societal base for our constructions of reality, dynamic constructivism is based on the assumption that the mode and content of discourse and the relationship(s) that underlie this discourse are the closest thing we have to "reality." We are

constantly reconstructing our reality because this reality is based on the specific relationship through which we are engaged via our discourse. We are not confined to Plato's cave, because the relationship and the discourse is itself reality – it is not just a reflection of reality. Consequently, the process of coaching becomes a powerful (even critical) process, for it can alter reality for both the client and coach.

Societal narratives of our time and our self

We are often distant from many of the most important events that impact on our lives. We live in a complex, global community and have many connections to a vaster world. Our colleagues in the St. Vincent De Paul organization no longer can operate in isolation from the changing world around them. Vincentians must address the challenges of this changing world. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Executive Director is looking for some younger volunteers and is seeking to link with other agencies in Singapore and elsewhere in the world.

Most importantly, we may no longer have direct experience of nor can we have much influence over this world. If there is a cave, it has grown much larger than Plato might have imagined---or the cave might no longer even exist. The only access we have to this vast world is through language and narratives. As a result, we often share narratives about things and events rather than actually experiencing them. Language itself becomes the shared experience. This perspective does not differ greatly, on first review, from that offered by Plato. The narratives may be considered nothing more than second-hand conversations about images on the cave's walls or just the echoes that cave dwellers believe come from these images. Yet, there is a difference, for the narratives and conversations are not just ABOUT experiences, they ARE themselves experiences.

This sense of a constructed reality that is reinforced by narrative and conversation is a starting point for dynamic constructivism – just as it is a starting point for static forms of constructivism. The key point with regard to a dynamic constructivism is that each specific conversation is itself a reality. Shared narratives and language are where we actually meet with other people and our society. From this perspective, our stories about self constitute our fundamental sense of self. They are the building blocks of our identity.

Perhaps our stories about self are everything we mean by the term “self.” This would suggest that our stories about childhood, about major adult accomplishments, and about difficult lifelong disappointments may be the basic building blocks of self-image – whether or not they are accurate. Contemporary coaches like Julio Olalla and David Drake (Drake, Brennan & Gørtz, 2008) emphasize the role of narrative for a good reason: narrative is a very powerful and influential tool. We are profoundly impacted by two often unacknowledged (or even unseen) forces in these narratives. First, we are influenced by the broad-based social constructions of reality which are conveyed through the stories of the society and organization in which we find ourselves. This is the contribution made by static constructivists. Second, we are influenced by a more narrowly-based personal construction of reality that is conveyed through stories we tell about ourselves (and perhaps stories that we inherit from and about our family and immediate community). This is the contribution made by dynamic constructivism.

We can expand beyond the dynamic construction of self to the dynamic construction of reality in groups and organizations. More than ever, our work groups and organizations are based on and dependent on these dynamic interpersonal conversations and shifting, context-based narratives. Most people, resources and attention in present-day work groups and organizations are devoted not to the direct production of goods or direct provision of services, but instead to the use of verbal and written modes of communication about these goods and services. Given these conditions, story-telling and narrative are central to 21st century leadership. Stories are the lifeblood and source of system maintenance in both personal and organizational lives. The construction of stories about person, group and organizational successes and failures is critical to the processes of change and transformation at any of these three levels.

Several questions arise from this dynamic constructivist sociology of knowledge. In what way(s) do the personal, group and organizational narratives and images influence or alter one another? Is there a shift in the work group or organization’s narrative when a new manager is hired, or when the team or organization itself is restructured? What happens when the Executive Director of a human service agency, such as St. Vincent DePaul, begins to advocate change and begins to conduct training programs that encourage a changing perspective on work in the organization? From the perspective of the coach, there should be major concerns with regard to the nature of

narrative and the identity that is being conveyed in particular by the person receiving coaching services.

Conclusions

So what does this all mean? The sociology of knowledge provokes many questions, but might not be fully satisfying in that it provides very few answers. As participants in the profession of coaches, we must find the answers ourselves. The movement from an objectivist to a constructivist ontology and from a static to a dynamic ontology requires commitment and courage – particularly courage. Our sense of self and reality is always in flux. How do we live with this uncertainty? The remarkable theologian, Paul Tillich (2000) has written about the existential (and theological) “courage to be” – the courage needed to acknowledge one’s being and one’s becoming in the world. If human beings are minds, and not just brains, then they are also inherently spiritual in nature or at least there are spiritual demands being made on them as they confront the challenging universe in which they live. Either our cave is expanding or we are forced to leave it and perhaps return as a leader who challenges the existing mind-set. Or perhaps the caves no longer even exist (if they ever did). There is only narrative and dialogue -- not a permanent reality.

As courageous, spiritual beings, we have the capacity to reflect on our own experiences and to place these experiences in space and time. This is the human challenge, the human opportunity and the human curse of transcendence. Our sense of a constantly reconstructed universe, based in our interactions with other people, leads us inevitably to a sense of bewilderment. At a more immediate level, we are confronted as leaders and coaches with the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of contemporary life. How does one find the courage to stand in the face of this “awe-full-ness”? And more to the point, what is the role to be played by coaches in assisting their clients (as well as facing their own personal challenges)? There is much work for us to do in this regard -- as stewards of this profession we call coaching.

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