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Constricted and Constructed Potentiality: An Inquiry Into Paradigms of Change

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In this essay, we identify and explicate two paradigms for generating change. In the conventional paradigm of constricted potentiality, change agents focus on tangible material conditions and use persuasion, directed externally, to change those conditions and thus improve their internal states. In the alternative paradigm of constructed potentiality, individuals focus on symbolic resources and use interpretation to change their own internal states, which then influence material conditions. We conclude with responses to questions and concerns often raised about the paradigm of constructed potentiality.

Keywords: Change; Interpretation; Paradigm; Persuasion; Social Construction

When individuals perceive "a thing which is other than it should be" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6), they communicate in an effort to change it. Whether making an argument in a public policy debate, attempting to strengthen a group's commitment to a cause, seeking to understand another's perspective in an intimate relationship, or trying to solve a problem in a community, individuals engage in communication to generate some kind of change. They want something or someone to change in response to

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their perception of an exigence of imperfection of some kind—a "defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). The perceived presence of the exigence generates feelings of frustration, discomfort, sadness, or anger and, in response, individuals use communication in various ways to dissipate such feelings and to reestablish a feeling of well-being. Change occurs, then, when communication functions to remove a perceived imperfection and the accompanying feeling of discomfort it generates.

The communication discipline offers a variety of communication mechanisms for addressing exigences and thus alleviating the negative feelings that accompany them. They range from techniques of argumentation (e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) to interpersonal theories such as compliance gaining (e.g., Marwell & Schmitt, 1967; Wilson, 2002) to theories of persuasion such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to critical theories that facilitate emancipation by uncovering oppressive power arrangements (e.g., Pollock & Cox, 1991; Pryor, 1981; Slack & Allor, 1983; Tyson, 2006). Although marked by surface variability, these theories and strategies share an underlying unity: They embody one perspective on change—one conception of the process by which change occurs—and a particular set of options for producing change. In other words, many of the theories and strategies of change articulated in the communication discipline derive primarily from one paradigm.

Our first objective in this essay is to explicate the assumptions and features of the paradigm that provides the context for most of the change efforts sanctioned by the communication discipline. We have chosen to label this paradigm the *paradigm of constricted potentiality* because the potential for change is limited or constricted by the tangible material conditions on which communicators focus.[1] Our second objective is to propose and describe an alternative to the paradigm of constricted potentiality. Derived largely from disciplines and traditions other than the communication field—but visible as well in some pockets of our field—this is a paradigm we have labeled the *paradigm of constructed potentiality*. Its primary route to change is through a focus on the unlimited symbolic resources constructed by change agents.

Our interest in articulating an alternative paradigm for conceptualizing change is twofold. We believe that the dominant, conventional paradigm of how change happens limits the options available to theorists and change agents. As useful and valuable as it is, this paradigm has become so normalized and accepted that it functions as a terministic screen (Burke, 1965, 1966), directing attention to change mechanisms that align with the paradigm and away from other means by which change happens. Until an alternative paradigm is articulated, it cannot take its place in the discipline on equal footing with that of the paradigm of constricted potentiality. Because we believe that more options exist for accomplishing change than those offered in the paradigm of constricted potentiality, we seek to expand the communicative toolbox for understanding and strategizing how change happens.

A second reason we have chosen to describe and contrast the two paradigms is that we suspect that some debates in the communication field are the result of theorists working within different paradigms. Examples include debates over the role of

material conditions and symbols in creating reality (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Cloud, 1994; Condit, 1997a); the relationship between agency and communication (e.g., Foss et al., 2007; Gunn & Cloud, 2010); invitational rhetoric (Bone et al., 2008; Foss & Griffin, 1995; Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009); and the utility of individual or collective action for creating change (Cloud, 2006, 2008; Elshtain, 1982; Fox-Genovese, 1991; Loeb, 1999; Martin & Varney, 2003; Swartz, 2004a, 2004b). If scholars involved in debates such as these find a concept, theory, or position illogical or absurd, the reason may be that it derives from a different paradigm from the one in which they have been trained or prefer to operate. Explication of an alternative model of change, then, may provide theoretical clarity about the assumptions guiding the positions of communication scholars who are theorizing within different paradigms.

Our discussion of the two paradigms proceeds in five steps. We begin by explaining the initial symbolic choice made by change agents that impels them into one paradigm or the other—a focus either on the material or the symbolic. We then explicate the nature of the conventional paradigm that results from the choice to focus on the material—the paradigm of constricted potentiality. Following a discussion of the influences that suggested to us the existence of an alternative paradigm, we explore the nature of the paradigm of constructed potentiality, in which the focus is on the symbolic. We conclude by addressing possible questions or concerns readers may have as they engage the less familiar paradigm of constructed potentiality.

Gateway to the Paradigms: Choice of Focus

When potential change agents identify an exigence they feel compelled to address, they make a key decision: They target either material conditions or symbols as the primary constituent components or resources with which they will work to generate change. They make this decision in a dialectical context in which material conditions and symbols "are inherently interwoven" (Hikins, 1990, p. 63) and "interact in dazzling ways" (Condit, 2008b, p. 403).[2] This choice to focus on one or the other may be the result of a particular worldview, personal preference, perceived constraints, past experience, the perceived difficulty of the change effort, or any number of factors.

The entailments of the decision concerning focus of attention are significant. When the material is selected as the focus of attention, potential change agents enter and employ the resources of the paradigm of constricted potentiality. When the symbolic is selected as the focus of attention, communicators are propelled into the paradigm of constructed potentiality. As a result of this choice, equally legitimate but substantially different strategic options and outcomes are available to change agents. We turn now to an explanation of the first paradigm, which aligns with an initial decision to focus on material conditions.

Paradigm of Constricted Potentiality

Change agents who choose to privilege the material in the symbolic-material equation work within the paradigm of constricted potentiality.[3] To address the exigence

they perceive, they focus their efforts on the material features of the world—those components that already exist and that are available to them through sensory interaction. These material conditions are not unlike the inartistic proofs of classical rhetoric—elements that already exist and that must be discovered by communicators. They include people, places, systems, organizations, events, documents, and artifacts as well as structures such as laws, regulations, and traditions.

Because the components available for generating change are those that exist or are already present in tangible form, they are fixed, limited, and capable of being depleted. "Only so many pieces of the pie" are available to individuals as resources because the pie is constructed of what already exists (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 19). Because the potentiality for change is constricted in this paradigm, we have chosen to label it the *paradigm of constricted potentiality*.

Because communicators operating in the paradigm of constricted potentiality have as their available resources finite elements, they compete with others for those resources, a competition that makes "antagonistic interests (material stakes in a conflict)... undeniable features of society" (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009, p. 222). In the zero-sum approach that characterizes the paradigm of constricted potentiality, resources accrue to one individual only at the expense of another, with changes in the distribution of resources benefiting some by harming or depriving others. Similarly, a change in conditions in line with one individual's vision means that someone else's vision for those conditions cannot be realized. The world becomes a place in which individuals battle over scarce resources to create the changes they desire:

> Change is not initiated on an inert society.... More than one sculptor is chiseling the marble. Some other builder is trying to build on the same lot or at least to alter the structure you want to create. In short, initiating change is... a kind of warfare. (Lindblom, 1997, p. 265)

Tannen (1998) calls the resulting battleground the *argument culture*, marked by "a pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue, and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight" (p. 3).

Strategy for Change: Persuasion

Change agents who choose to operate in the paradigm of constricted potentiality employ persuasion—the effort to reinforce or transform beliefs or behaviors—as the means to accomplish change. We do not need to outline strategies of persuasion for our readers, who are well aware of the plethora of theories about the nature and function of persuasion. What we want to emphasize is that the persuasion that is theorized and practiced in the paradigm of constricted potentiality is a consequence of the choice to focus on the resources that are available in tangible form. Persuasion is regarded as the fairest and most civil way to deal with the competing demands that follow from finite resources. The perception that persuasion is required to address exigences when the material is the focus of attention is aptly captured in the assertion that "to refuse persuasion is to refuse participation in real-world encounters marked by material and antagonistic interests" (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009, p. 221).

Route to Change: Prescribed

In the paradigm of constricted potentiality, change agents specify exactly how a desired change should be accomplished. They prescribe the way in which the exigence should be removed and the precise steps that should be taken to remove it. Such specificity is an entailment of persuasion, which requires a claim or thesis to be argued and supported:

> Every "speech" is a miniature predictive model of the "changes" which it recommends. Every "speaker," in other words, creates a picture of the world in the suggestion that "audience" perceives reality through the terms and with the resources of "speech." (McGee, 1982, p. 43)

Invention, then, in the paradigm of constricted potentiality is directed at developing and supporting a specified plan for using resources currently in existence to bring about change.

Focus of Efforts: External

In the paradigm of constricted potentiality, persuasive strategies are focused externally as individuals seek to change those they perceive as the cause of or the solution to the problematic exigence. Those who are the targets of change efforts are those who are perceived as directly responsible for an undesirable condition or system, those who are seen to be representatives of it, or those who have the capacity to pass laws and implement policies that could effect the desired changes. Potential change agents thus seek to influence those who "operate as the agents of desired improvements" (Bandura, 1997, p. 17). They direct their persuasive efforts at altering "reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes [a] mediator of change" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 4). A few examples illustrate the basic effort involved in such attempts to persuade others to create change:

> People try to get those who wield influence and power to act on their behalf to effect the changes they desire. Children pressure parents to get what they want; employees work through intermediaries to alter organizational practices; and the citizenry tries to shape its social future by influencing the actions of its governmental representatives and other public officials. (Bandura, 1997, p. 17)

Persuasion is used in the paradigm of constricted potentiality not only to address those who are seen as capable of changing undesirable conditions but to influence another audience as well. Change agents must persuade those around them to agree with their vision for the world—"they strive to make [their] individual perspectives embraceable by others" (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1986, p. 108). Because they are trying to make the material world match their own personal desires, they must secure the participation of others in their vision for the world. Indeed, one definition of social change features this idea of persuading others to align with a personal vision:

> Thus we conceptualize social change as linked primarily to raising public awareness of a greater truth and then measuring how many of our compatriots within the

> public sphere have moved toward the awareness of what we believe in and how many are willing to act on it. (Lederach, 2005, p. 87)

The persuasion used in the paradigm of constricted potentiality, then, is designed to influence both those who can change an undesirable condition and those who hold views different from the change agent about how the world should look.

Outcome of Efforts: Change in Material Conditions

Individuals seek change to alleviate the discomfort caused by what they perceive to be an undesirable exigence. In the paradigm of constricted potentiality, that discomfort is eliminated when individuals are able to change material conditions. In other words, to be effective change agents in this paradigm, individuals' persuasive efforts must have effects on material outcomes such as battles won, institutions reformed, policies changed, and behaviors modified. In McGee's (1982) words, "'Change' is an alteration of circumstance, moving from having less money to having more money, from having less influence to having more influence, from being lonely or forgotten to being part of a group and accounted for" (p. 33).

But material conditions do not always change in response to persuasive efforts (e.g., Condit, 1997b; Johnson, 1990; Morley, 1980). In such cases, an alternative means for evaluating success is available in the paradigm of constricted potentiality: the degree of perseverance and tenacity exhibited by the change agents. If individuals are judged to be fully engaged in the struggle to produce change and show unflagging dedication and commitment to a cause, they are seen to be meeting their obligations as responsible change agents, even if they do not succeed in generating changes in material conditions.

While a change in material conditions is the primary expected outcome of persuasive efforts in the conventional paradigm, there is another possible outcome as well: A changed psychic state for the change agents. When external circumstances change for the better, individuals expect to feel better. Johnson (1987) provides examples of the anticipated connection between material conditions and improved internal states in this paradigm: "'If I had more money, I'd feel more secure.' 'If this street were better lighted, I'd feel safer.' 'If people praised me more, I'd feel more competent.' 'If the mushroom cloud weren't hanging over me, I'd feel more hopeful'" (p. 306). Once material conditions change, individuals in this paradigm assume they will feel better and no longer will feel the discomfort that the exigence generates.

A transformed internal state is expected as well from dedicated efforts to produce change, even if those efforts are unsuccessful. The effort to change material conditions often results in feelings of importance, pride, value, and even righteousness for change agents themselves. Gregg's (1971) exploration of the ego-function of protest suggests that such activity "can become the covering activity that conveys a sense of importance, power, exhilaration, and danger," generating "feelings of ego-enhancement, ego-affirmation, and even ego-superiority" (p. 84). Gearhart (1995) notes that her protest activity provided her with a sense of identity that

was important to her: "What if I keep playing this game . . . only because without the game I would have no identity? What would I do if I did not have my crusade? Who would I be" (p. 8)? Thus, even if material conditions do not change as a result of communicators' efforts, the resulting impact on identities and feelings can be sufficient to relieve the tension generated by the exigence.

The desired mental state that is anticipated when external conditions change is not, of course, guaranteed. Internal change may not occur for a variety of reasons. One is that change agents simply may not be ready or willing to change their attitudes, feelings, or identities even if external conditions change. Consequently, when individuals move to a nicer apartment, convince legislators to pass a law, or persuade an organization not to hold a convention in a state that has passed a particular law, for example, these altered conditions may not mean that they feel better. In other words, changing material conditions for the better does not guarantee an improved psychic state, despite the expectation that altered external conditions will have this result.

In summary, the paradigm of constricted potentiality provides a useful perspective on how some types of change happen. This paradigm is characterized by a focus on tangible material conditions as resources and targets, with possibilities for change necessarily limited because of the finite supply of those resources. Change occurs in this paradigm through persuasion, and change agents seek to create an external, shared world by asking others to adhere to specific proposals for change. In this paradigm, the perceived exigence and the negative feelings it generates are eliminated by changing the material, which then is expected to relieve individuals' feelings of discomfort and restore their sense of well-being.

Glimpses of an Alternative Paradigm

As we presume is the case with most of our readers, we were thoroughly schooled in the assumptions and strategies of the paradigm of constricted potentiality. We took for granted its assumptions; employed its strategies; and sought to develop theories to explicate, reinforce, and extend it. Over the past decade, however, we began to notice that some of the strategies and practices we had been taught seemed inadequate to account for some instances of change we encountered and seemed to derive from a different set of assumptions about how change happens.

Continuing debates concerning the relationship between the material and the symbolic—the initial focal point in a change effort—provide glimpses of an alternative paradigm about change in our field. The conversation around the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968), for example, raised the question of whether rhetorical exigences are constructed by external material conditions or are constructed linguistically by communicators (e.g., Vatz, 1973). Similarly, the development of the notion of rhetoric as epistemic (Farrell, 1976; Scott, 1967) and the controversy that resulted (e.g., Cherwitz & Hikins, 1986) also suggested dramatically different assumptions about the role of materiality and symbolicity in the process of coming to knowledge.

Other glimpses of an alternative paradigm came from communication theories in which the symbolic is privileged over the material in communicative efforts. These

include the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956); explication of the philosophical schools of relativism and idealism (Brummett, 1990; Lyne, 1990); and Fisher's (1987) articulation of the narrative paradigm in contrast with the rational-world paradigm. Also pointing to the primacy of symbolicity are Berger and Luckmann's (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality*; Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1953); and the social construction movement in the communication discipline (Gergen, 1994; Harré & Secord, 1973; Leeds-Hurwitz & Galanes, 2009; Pearce, 2007; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Shotter, 1997).

Feminism also provided us with the impetus to engage with alternative forms of communication that did not fit the conventional paradigm for change in our discipline. When we coauthored a book on feminist rhetorical theories (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2006), we encountered in the work of theorists such as Sonia Johnson (1987, 1989, 1990, 1991); Sally Miller Gearhart (1979, 1982, 1995); Gloria Anzaldúa (1983, 2002); Starhawk (1987, 1988); and bell hooks (1990, 1993, 1994a, 1994b) approaches to change that were not sanctioned and sometimes not even acknowledged by adherents to the conventional change paradigm. We discovered that, although these theorists had been traditional activists who relied on persuasion to accomplish change, most had come to adopt dramatically different approaches to change, either supplementing traditional change strategies with new ones or abandoning persuasion altogether.

When we theorized invitational rhetoric, derived from feminist theory, we also began to question the strategy of persuasion privileged in the conventional paradigm (Foss & Foss, 2011; Foss & Griffin, 1995). Although invitational rhetoric is not designed to change others, it does involve the kind of change that results from understanding another person better. Theorizing invitational rhetoric encouraged us to question the idea that all communication is persuasion and that no options apart from persuasion are available for communicators.

The notion that change can happen through communication options other than persuasion also was suggested by theorists and practitioners of various forms of dialogue. Makau and Marty (in press) define dialogue

> as a *process of communicating with others—a sincere and mutual exchange involving speaking, listening, and responding.* Dialogic communication emphasizes interacting *with* one another—rather than to, at, or for—to facilitate an exchange of views and to highlight the co-construction of meaning. (chap. 4)

Dialogue is operationalized in various ways in the communication discipline, including the process of alternative dispute resolution, which broadly refers to a variety of alternatives to the legal system for resolving disputes. This method of dispute resolution seeks to "resolve conflict in a nonadversarial way" (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007, p. 18) and privileges communication in which individuals seek "to be understood, rather than to prevail or win" (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007, p. 228). Scholars and practitioners who use communication to foster democratic practices provide another example of dialogue in action. Rather than representative democracy, which privileges persuasive forms of communication such as argument, advocacy, and

debate, these individuals work to implement participatory democracy, which emphasizes the value of multiple perspectives, identification of connections among differing positions, and dialogue that generates "new possibilities for meaning and action" (Barge, 2006, p. 520).

These and other glimpses into alternative ways of producing change led us to this current project. To articulate and explicate an alternative to the paradigm of constricted potentiality, we revisited and distilled the pieces of the new paradigm evident within the communication discipline. We also reviewed literature in other disciplines and fields such as psychology, counseling, peace studies, conflict resolution, feminist theory, and quantum physics that we speculated might conceptualize change differently from the paradigm of constricted potentiality. We surveyed Native American, African, and Asian philosophies as well as various religious and spiritual practices, seeking to understand and explicate the shared tenets of an alternative conception of how change occurs. Our exploration uncovered a different paradigm—what we are calling the *paradigm of constructed potentiality*—that is not as well known in the communication discipline but that can explain and facilitate a different route to change from the one outlined in the conventional paradigm. We turn now to a description of this paradigm.

Paradigm of Constructed Potentiality

Potential change agents align with the paradigm of constructed potentiality when they choose to privilege symbolicity as they engage the dialectic between materiality and symbolicity. To address a perceived exigence in this paradigm, individuals focus on symbolic resources as the elements available for use in the change process. Symbolic resources are not unlike the artistic proofs of classical rhetoric in that they are invented by communicators. They include spoken, written, and visual symbols as well as the thoughts, interpretations, perceptions, and meanings represented by the symbols. Symbolicity, then, is the reality created by humans' "symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing" capacity (Burke, 1989, p. 163).

Because of the nature of symbolicity, unlimited resources are available to communicators in the paradigm of constructed potentiality. Individuals never run out of new ways to configure and construct symbols because "there is much ongoing originality in humans' constructions of their experience in relation to their world" (Greenberg & Rhodes, 1991, p. 41). Communicators are always capable of generating new words and thus new concepts, perspectives, and options. As Vaughan (2002) explains, "Language ... constitutes a basic abundant supply of word-gifts .... Due to the facility with which we speak, we are in the position of having a limitless supply of gifts to give" (p. 107). Every moment is ripe with linguistic opportunity in that communicators can choose a different word, a different metaphor, and a different story, each of which makes available another set of resources and options. The potential for change in the paradigm is constructed or invented, then, because it continually is being created from symbolic resources. Inherent in a focus on the symbolic is the "potential to create all possible experiential realities" (Combs & Holland, 1996, p. 91).

Strategy for Change: Interpretation

The communication strategy that characterizes the paradigm of constructed potentiality is interpretation—"the process by which an individual assigns meaning to data in light of some present concern" (Harper, 1979, p. 193). Interpretation is an automatically occurring process, of course, because individuals are always interpreting the sensory data, feelings, and ideas they encounter. We conceptualize interpretation, however, as a conscious and deliberate assignment of meaning to data in such a way as to dispel feelings of discomfort called up for the interpreter by the exigence. The process of interpretation changes how conditions are perceived, thus dispelling the tension related to the exigence.

If individuals are experiencing negative feelings as a result of an exigence they choose to perceive, the strategy of interpretation can be used to make another choice about what to perceive, how to interpret that perception, and how to frame that interpretation symbolically to transform those feelings. Another interpretive option is always available; the fact that individuals are able to create one interpretation "is evidence that they can create another" (Foss et al., 2007, p. 225). As Zander and Zander (2000) explain, "Once you have begun to distinguish that *it's all invented*, you can create a place to dwell where new inventions are the order of the day. Such a place we call 'the universe of possibility'" (p. 17). "The life you thought inevitable, unalterable, and fixed in some foundational reality is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication," asserts Anzaldúa (2002), "so . . . since it's all made up, you can compose it anew and differently" (p. 558).

Admittedly, the use of interpretation as a key communication strategy may be difficult to accept in cases in which the need for change seems particularly critical—when individuals face material conditions such as hunger, imprisonment, torture, acute pain, debilitating illness, or sexual abuse. But even in these situations, individuals have choices about how to perceive conditions, as Chidvilasananda (1999) asserts: "You are the one who has the power to decide how you want to look at things, which way you want to turn your head. . . . You hold the reins. You have a choice" (p. 4). Certainly, such situations might be ones in which individuals would choose to use strategies from the paradigm of constricted potentiality, but, in many cases, those strategies are likely to be less effective at enabling individuals to survive. Using persuasion to try to convince a torturer to stop is not likely to be effective in either stopping the torture or ending the pain being experienced; using interpretation to focus on something other than the pain may be what enables the person to bear it. Choosing particular interpretations may allow individuals to discover alternatives for surviving and even for acting that they would not see if they chose as their interpretation the hopelessness or painfulness of a situation. "Very many things human beings have to or want to do are made harder, even excruciatingly costly, by deprivation or oppression," but the issue "is how well one responds" to "the distinctive mix of circumstances thrown our ways and commitments and attachments we make under those circumstances" (Walker, 1997, p. 76). Gilbert (2006) concurs:

> I can choose how I'm going to regard unfortunate circumstances in my life—whether I see them as curses or opportunities (and on the occasions when I can't rise to the most optimistic viewpoint, because I'm feeling too damn sorry for

myself, I can choose to keep trying to change my outlook).... And most of all, I can choose my thoughts. (p. 177)

Taylor (2006) succinctly summarizes the link between undesirable material conditions and interpretation: "To experience pain may not be a choice, but to suffer is a cognitive decision" (p. 183).

Nusseibeh (2007) provides an example of how the interpretive process can operate under oppressive or unfortunate conditions—in his case, imprisonment and torture. Freedom, he says, is "something that you exercise, and you exercise it even in jail, you exercise it even under occupation." He elaborates:

> You normally think that if you go to jail or if you'll [sic] sitting inside a cell, or if you're being interrogated by an interrogator, that you are the underdog, that you are in chains, that the chains are placed on you by the other party. But...people who had been through this experience, they very often felt free in many ways much more than, for example, the interrogator, simply because they believed in what they were doing. And, in fact, the person that was in power, very often was the person who was being interrogated simply and so far as they maintain mastery over themselves. (n.p.)

Another example of how choice of interpretation can sustain individuals in difficult circumstances comes from the earthquake in Haiti in January of 2010. Buried in the rubble was violinist Romel Joseph (2010), who found himself "completely surrounded by concrete." He realized he could not escape on his own, so he chose not to panic and to "mentally take myself out of the space where I was." He did this by keeping himself on a strict schedule, spending part of each hour in prayer and meditation and the rest of each hour "rehearsing his favorite classical music performances in his head, note by note." He "played through concertos and symphonies in his mind for 18 hours" until he was rescued.

Certainly, external conditions still are likely to impinge on individuals after they change their interpretation of those conditions. They still may be hungry or still may be imprisoned, and an altered interpretation typically does not immediately or necessarily transform those conditions. What changes as a result of changed interpretations are the individuals themselves who are doing the interpreting. By changing their interpretation of the situation, they can make the situation into something they find easier to tolerate or even something they no longer perceive as negative. Hunger strikers, for example, still feel hunger, but their interpretation of that hunger as protest makes that condition tolerable or even highly valued. Even those who do not experience hunger in a context of choice are likely to find that, if they interpret their hunger as a temporary condition, a motivation to seek new resources, an opportunity to create a different means of livelihood, a test of their own skills and capacity, or any number of other options, possibilities are more likely to unfold for them for securing food than if they focused their attention solely on their hunger.

Focus of Efforts: Internal

Interpretation as a change strategy has a different orientation from the external orientation of persuasion in the paradigm of constricted potentiality. Because

interpretation is an act of self-change, it is directed internally. The objective of change efforts is to dispel the discomfort or suffering experienced in response to a perceived exigence. In the strategy of interpretation, the communicative work necessary to dispel tension is done by the individual and directed at the self. The objective of interpretation, then, is substantially different from the reason for which communicators engage in persuasion. Rather than using communication to create a common world that others are expected to share, change agents in the paradigm of constructed potentiality use interpretation to alter their own mental and emotional states.

Outcome of Efforts: Self-Change

Change agents address a perceived exigence of imperfection not by requiring that external conditions change but by choosing an interpretation that moves them closer to a state of well-being, contentment, or ease in spite of those conditions. Their aim is to "feel content no matter what happens" (Chidvilasananda, 1999, p. vii). Instead of holding other people or material conditions responsible for their well-being, they assume responsibility for generating well-being themselves. As they move through experiences, choosing interpretations, communicators operating in this paradigm ask themselves, "Does this interpretation move me closer to or farther away from a sense of well-being?" or "Does the communication in which I am engaging relieve or heighten my discomfort with an exigence I have identified?" The primary outcome in the paradigm of constructed potentiality thus is a transformed self—an improved mental and emotional state in which the tension prompted by the perception of the exigence lessens or disappears.

Although self-change is the primary outcome of change efforts in the paradigm of constructed potentiality, a transformed internal self does affect material conditions. Such external changes are inevitable outgrowths of internal changes because "thought forms have a certain power to bring external realities into existence" (Combs & Holland, 1996, p. 33). Lyne (1990) suggests the impact of new interpretations on external realities: "If I say it is possible that war will occur, it means the matter is in principle undecided. Possibilities are real options, not illusions. The capacity to envision something can enable us to bring it about or prevent it" (p. 166).

The link between internal transformation and changes in external conditions is not a direct one. Although adoption of a new interpretation and a changed internal state certainly are likely to affect material conditions, there is not a causal link between a particular interpretation or a particular mental state and specific outcomes in the material world. The exact nature of those outcomes cannot be predicted or determined from an individual's internal state.

Transformed internal states impact material conditions in a number of ways. One is simply that individuals may come to see an exigence as less of a problem than they did before. When they reinterpret an exigence, they may find it is no longer very compelling, and they no longer want to focus their time and energy on it. Kabat-Zinn (2009) provides an example of this type of outcome from a transformed mental state in his description of an elderly man with severe pain in his feet who participated in a

program of meditation: "That first day he told the class that the pain was so bad he just wanted to cut off his feet." At the end of the program, he said "the pain hadn't changed much but that his attitude toward his pain had changed a lot.... His feet were less of a problem" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 9). The Dalai Lama (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998) provides an explanation for why a change in interpretation can diminish the perceived severity of such problems:

> It seems that often when problems arise, our outlook becomes narrow. All of our attention may be focused on worrying about the problem, and we may have a sense that we're the only one that is going through such difficulties. This can lead to a kind of self-absorption that can make the problem seem very intense.... But if you can make comparisons, view your situation from a different perspective, somehow something happens. (pp. 173–174)

A second reason why a changed self may affect external conditions is that a changed interpretation opens up opportunities for discovering resources and for innovating that were not available to the change agent before. When communicators transform themselves by adopting a new vantage point, their material resources appear to be more abundant than they did previously. They may discover people in their environment who direct them to previously unknown resources, for example, or might themselves devise a solution to a problem that was not available to them before. Their perception of the availability of a greater number of resources provides more options for them to use to alter their conditions: "When your mind changes, new possibilities tend to arise.... Your thinking expands in scope" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 154).

Asset-Based Community Development is an example of the process of discovering and employing resources that were not initially conceptualized as resources. A worldwide movement designed to reframe conditions formerly seen as problems into assets, this approach uses the skills of a community's citizens, including young people, disabled people, artists, and thriving professionals, as well as the resources of its formal institutions such as businesses, schools, libraries, parks, and social service agencies, to construct community assets available for use in imaginative ways (Cunningham & Mathie, 2002). A change in interpretation allows for the observation and use of resources that initially were not even perceived.

There is yet a third way in which a changed self may affect material conditions, and that is simply that "directed human intention," embodied in the symbolic activity of interpretation, "can have robust effects in physical reality" (Tiller, 1999, p. 33). We note just a few examples here to suggest the range of studies that support this claim. Athletic mental rehearsal, when athletes imagine a sports event as though they actually are competing, has been found to work just as well as physical practice for refining patterns and timing (Hinshaw, 1991–1992; Swets & Bjork, 1990). More dramatic is a study that showed that a placebo for Parkinson's disease alters the firing patterns of haywire neurons just as the real drug does (de la Fuente-Fernández et al., 2001). In addition, women who believe they are prone to heart disease have been shown to be nearly four times as likely to die as women with similar risk factors who do not hold such fatalistic views (Reid, 2002). Similarly, those who believe they

are poor have dramatically higher disease risks and shorter life spans than do people with the same resources and the same access to health care who do not see themselves as poor (Sapolsky, 2005). Studies also have shown the impact of thought and symbol use on physical conditions outside of the body; in one, focused intention through meditation altered the molecular makeup of water (Pyatnitsky & Fonkin, 1995).

As strange as such findings seem from the perspective of the paradigm of constricted potentiality, they represent just a few examples of the impact of symbols on material conditions that may occur as a result of self-change and transformed interpretations in the alternative paradigm. Although scientists do not yet agree on an explanation for what causes such effects, the existence of such examples suggests that these kinds of effects may and do occur.

Route to Change: Unspecified

In the paradigm of constructed potentiality, communicators do not lay out the particular means by which a desired change will occur. Specific proposals, typical of change efforts in the paradigm of constricted potentiality, close off options, eliminating all possibilities except for the one described. Even when opportunities present themselves that might be highly desirable, easier, and more efficient than what they have planned, individuals may not recognize them as solutions simply because they committed themselves previously to a particular plan.

In contrast to the paradigm of constricted potentiality, in which communicators "set a goal and strive for it," in the universe of possibility that characterizes the alternative paradigm, communicators "set the context and let life unfold" (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 21). Individuals stand "in the great space of possibility in a posture of openness, with an unfettered imagination for what can be" (Zander & Zander, 2000, p. 19). They deliberately cultivate improvisation as a response to the rich array of abundant symbolic resources available to them. When communicators stay open, routes to change emerge as possibilities they never could have imagined. They certainly can and will be inspired into particular plans of action, but they do not initiate change efforts with such plans already developed.

An openness to possibilities and the eschewal of the development of a plan that specifies the means by which change occurs do not mean that coordinated social action cannot or does not happen in the paradigm of constructed potentiality. Routes to change that emerge from a posture of openness may include encountering others who serve as resources, who offer ideas for accomplishing an objective, or who engage in actions that are useful to its accomplishment. These collaborators, however, are not cooperating because an individual has laid out a plan and persuaded them to participate in it. Instead, the collaborators' own actions, taken on behalf of their own objectives, happen to align with the objectives of the individual who recognizes them as resources.

Sample Strategies

Many strategies can be identified that embody the strategy of interpretation in the paradigm of constructed potentiality. We describe three representative strategies

here—reframing, appreciation, and enactment—to illustrate how the communicative option of interpretation can be operationalized. Each of these strategies provides an interpretation of a situation that in some way alters the exigence, thus allowing individuals to return to a state of well-being and contentment. We are choosing to explain these strategies in more detail than we did the strategies of persuasion of the conventional paradigm because our readers are less likely to be familiar with them.

Reframing

Reframing is the process of shifting perspective to view a "situation from a different vantage point" (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998, p. 172). It is the selection of some elements of a perceived reality such that attention on one particular interpretation of a condition, object, or person is transferred to another. Communicators are always selecting interpretive frames for their experiences, and reframing involves the selection of new frames to transform an exigence into something benign and harmless. As Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) explain, reframing

> means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning. (p. 95)

The result of reframing is the drawing of "a different frame around the same set of circumstances," according to Zander and Zander (2000), so that "new pathways come into view" (p. 1).

Framing and reframing, of course, are not new concepts in the communication discipline. They have roots in Bateson's (1972) and Goffman's (1974) explications of framing—the notion that interpretive schemas constitute central elements in the belief systems of individuals and affect how they view the world. Consequently, the type of framework employed "provides a way of describing the event to which it is applied" (Goffman, 1974, p. 24). Also an established concept in areas such as politics, media studies, medicine, advertising, and marketing (e.g., Feldman, 2007; Lakoff, 2004; Tannen, 1993; Volkmer, 2009), framing theory suggests that frames enable individuals to reconstruct reality, shifting attention to one thing rather than another by creating a different frame for an idea or event. Burke's (1984) frames of acceptance and rejection and the study of metaphor (e.g., Black, 1962; Ivie, 1982; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Osborn, 1967) also serve as reminders that any chosen label serves as a structuring principle, focusing attention on particular aspects of a phenomenon and concealing others.

An example clarifies the ways in which reframing functions in the paradigm of constructed potentiality. Futurist thinker Irvin (2004) heralds the "arrival of the thrivals," by which he means

> manifestation of a profound but subtle shift in awareness within the American black community and blacks worldwide: a shift from the consciousness of *survival* to that of *thrival.* For blacks, *thrival* represents . . . a transition from seeing oneself

> and one's community as being the victims of history and oppression. Thrivals have moved from living in a survival mode, fighting for basic human rights, to embracing a new worldview—a renaissance where succeeding generations...see themselves as forces capable of *shaping* the future rather than being *shaped* by the forces of the future. (p. 16)

Irvin points out that this new attitude was not caused by an improvement in material conditions:

> It would be a mistake, however, to describe thrivals as somehow being middle class, upper class, or elite, or even to use the distinction of economic class as a marker. Thrivals represent something much more, indeed a large and growing movement among various black peoples that transcends class. (p. 19)

Rather than economic class, what unites the thrivals is a reframing of a history of oppression as a gift that "aids them in their drive to succeed in the future" (Irvin, 2004, p. 20).

The Dalai Lama (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998) provides another example of reframing in his interpretation of his exile from Tibet:

> For example, in my own case, I lost my country. From that viewpoint, it is very tragic—and there are even worse things. There's a lot of destruction happening in our country. That's a very negative thing. But if I look at the same event from another angle, I realize that as a refugee, I have another perspective. As a refugee there is no need for formalities, ceremony, protocol. If everything were status quo, if things were okay, then on a lot of occasions you merely go through the motions, you pretend. But when you are passing through desperate situations, there's no time to pretend. So from that angle, this tragic experience has been very useful to me. Also, being a refugee creates a lot of new opportunities for meeting with many people. People from different religious traditions, from different walks of life, those who I may not have met had I remained in my country. So in that sense it's been very, very useful. (p. 173)

Appreciation

Appreciation is another interpretive strategy that helps change agents select interpretations that are more likely to produce internal well-being. Nelson and Calaba (2003) define the energy of appreciation as consisting of two dimensions. The first is an element of gratitude, which is a receptive kind of energy that is grateful after something good happens. The second is an element of valuing, an energy in which a deliberate choice is made to focus proactively and before the fact on appreciating something or someone. Hyde (2006) describes the process of appreciation, which he refers to as *acknowledgment*, in explicitly communication terms: The "act of acknowledging is a communicative behavior that grants attention to others and thereby makes room for them in our lives" (p. 1). It is a conscious process of creation, a mindfulness that "functions to transform space and time" (Hyde, 2006, p. 7). The process of appreciation involves focusing attention on those aspects of a condition or person that are positive and productive, thus transforming the exigence so it is no longer a problem or a defect that must be addressed.

Positive aspects always can be found not only because every phenomenon "has different aspects" (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998, p. 173) but also because symbol use provides infinite opportunities for framing. The Dalai Lama provides an example of finding positive aspects in a person who has provoked someone to anger:

> If you look from a different angle, then surely the person who caused this anger in you will have a lot of other positive aspects, positive qualities. If you look carefully, you will also find that the act which has made you angry has also given you certain opportunities, something which otherwise would not have been possible. (Dalai Lama & Cutler, p. 175)

The method of appreciative inquiry in organizational development is another example of appreciation in practice. Appreciative inquiry is based on the notion that the energy of the "positive present" (Elliott, 1999, p. 3) can be used to change an organization. The process begins by focusing on what is working well for an organization and building on those strengths rather than focusing on problems and deficits: "It aims to uncover and bring forth existing strengths, hopes, and dreams: to identify and amplify the positive core of the organization" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 15). Appreciative inquiry does not mean that conflicts, problems, or difficulties are never addressed; they simply are not used as the basis for creating organizational change.

Writer Alice Walker (2006) offers another example of appreciation that demonstrates its potential as a strategy of interpretation. She recounts a ritual practiced in the Babema tribe of South Africa when a person acts irresponsibly or inappropriately:

> He is placed in the center of the village, alone and unfettered.... Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time, about all the good things the person in the center of the circle has done in his lifetime.... The tribal ceremony often lasts several days. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe. (pp. 203–204)

Instead of focusing on the person's unwanted or undesirable behavior, the community appreciates the person, choosing to see his positive qualities.

Enactment

Interpretation also can assume the form of enactment, which is the process of acting in alignment with a selected interpretation. Johnson (1989) summarizes this rhetorical strategy as "live today as you want the world to be" (p. 251), an admonition not unlike Gandhi's (2009) often-quoted "we must become the change we want to see" (p. 98). Hooks (1994a) defines enactment as the "lived practice of interaction" (p. 241) or the process of making evident to all observers one's ideological commitments. The Native American dictum that "what we do, how we act, is as important as any truth and any fact" (Burkhart, 2004, pp. 16–17) is also a description of enactment.

In enactment, individuals act out or embody the interpretation they have chosen of a situation, even—and especially—when the external material conditions do not

support that interpretation. Individuals behave as if the exigence has changed, refusing to give it attention and thus power. In the strategy of enactment, the exigence does not have to change for individuals to act and feel differently. Employing enactment, they feel in the present how they believe they would feel if the exigence were removed: "We *do now* what we want to be doing in the future, we *be now, feel now* how we thought we would be and feel only in some future time" (Johnson, 1989, p. 39). Enactment affirms and reinforces a particular interpretation and makes it part of the change agent's psyche or internal state.

Chidvilasananda (1999) provides an example of how enactment looks in practice. She uses the situation of a difficult interaction to illustrate the strategy: "Instead of waiting for the other person to reveal love,... be the embodiment of love. Instead of waiting for the other person to come to terms with his or her anger, you step forward and be the messenger of peace" (p. 53). She concludes: "Allow your auspiciousness to permeate your world" (p. 53).

The members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in their sit-ins at lunch counters and in voter-registration drives in the South in the early 1960s, provide another example of enactment. These students "attempted to live 'as if' segregation did not exist" (Hogan, 2007, p. 3), innovating "*concrete* ways to throw over an entire array of deferential behavior and ideas" and claiming "the respect and dignity that segregation systematically denied them" (Hogan, 2007, p. 23). They experienced a "freedom created by their own actions, freedom in that very moment.... It was freedom inside, freedom as an inside job" (Hogan, 2007, p. 255). In acting as if the freedom they desired for the world already had manifest, they reinforced their interpretation of conditions as no longer oppressive for them.

In summary, in the paradigm of constructed potentiality, individuals focus on symbols as their targets and resources, thus making possible infinite options for change. The negative feelings generated by the exigence are dispelled when individuals change themselves by changing their interpretations, using strategies such as reframing, appreciation, and enactment. Although the desired outcome in this paradigm is a changed self, that change affects material conditions in various but unspecified ways.

But What About ... ?

We suspect that some of our readers are intrigued by the paradigm of constructed potentiality but have questions about various aspects of it. In this section, we attempt to address the key questions we are asked when we talk about the new paradigm. We hope to alleviate the concerns of those who might be interested in exploring the paradigm of constructed potentiality as an option for creating change but who are struggling with some of these very legitimate questions. The six concerns we will address are that the paradigm denies reality, is incapable of generating social change, is accessible only to the privileged, blames the victim, encourages apathy toward the suffering of others, and fails to address the inevitable collision among interpretations.

Before we address these concerns, we want to note that, in some cases, the best answer to a question or concern about the paradigm of constructed potentiality is to recommend that the change agent operate instead within the paradigm of constricted potentiality. The paradigm of constructed potentiality should not be used exclusively as the route to change, just as the paradigm of constricted potentiality should not be. Both are legitimate means of accomplishing change, and both are useful frameworks available for activists and scholars engaged in and theorizing about change. Change agents have the option of moving back and forth between them, variously choosing the strategies that each paradigm sanctions to address particular situations.

In fact, we suggest that to operate exclusively in either paradigm is impossible and undesirable. If a manager or department chair seeks additional resources from a supervisor or dean, a conventional strategy of persuasion might be precisely the strategy that would be required to accomplish the desired change. If an organizational member wants to bring a recalcitrant colleague into the organization's community, strategies from the paradigm of constructed potentiality might more easily accomplish that change. Change agents can and should select from both paradigms which strategy to use with each opportunity for change they encounter or construct.

The Paradigm Denies Reality

Some critics argue that change agents who engage in the strategy of interpretation are denying reality or are not being honest about what is happening in the world when they focus on a chosen interpretation rather than on the material conditions in front of them. We acknowledge that, when something "is conceptualized as the member of a given class, it is extremely difficult to see it as belonging also to another class" (Watzlawick et al., 1974, p. 99). In other words, when something consistently is considered or cast into the "problem" category, seeing it as anything but problematic can be difficult: "This class membership of an object is called its 'reality'; thus anybody who sees it as the member of another class must be mad or bad" (Watzlawick et al.,1974, p. 99).

But communicators are always denying some potential realities in the very act of choosing the words they speak and write. Because an infinite number of subjects are possible to talk about, individuals always must select some and not others. As Condit (2008a) notes, "Any statement about the world is necessarily incomplete. No symbol system (neither mathematics nor natural language nor symbolic logic), can re-present all of the material relations of any bit of material reality" (p. 42). When individuals think and speak about strawberries, for example, they are not thinking and speaking about cherries. When they think and speak about war, they are not thinking and speaking about peace. When they think and speak about the sexual abuse a woman suffered as a child, they are not thinking and speaking about her accomplishments. Thus, individuals always are denying the reality of some aspects of the world when they communicate. Furthermore, there is nothing inherently superior about choosing, from all of the infinite possibilities available, those subjects and aspects of subjects that are negative and problematic.

The Paradigm is Incapable of Generating Social Change

Another concern that is raised regarding the paradigm of constructed potentiality is that if change happens in this paradigm, it does so only at the individual level. Social change cannot result from this paradigm, some assert, because changing the way individuals think and talk about the world is not sufficient to transform it. Hanchard (2006) articulates this objection when he states that "individual acts of resistance to status quo machinations of power are the equivalent of flipping a middle finger to the hangman before a descent into the gallows at the end of a noose" (p. 32). Others label the options employed in this paradigm *therapeutic rhetoric,* a type of rhetoric that encourages "citizens to perceive political issues, conflicts, and inequities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration." This kind of communication, such critics suggest, "offers consolation rather than compensation, individual adaptation rather than social change" (Cloud, 1998, p. 3).

Many theorists note, however, a connection between internal and external change and suggest, in fact, that external changes not only are the outcomes of internal changes but that internal changes are required as catalysts for external changes. Fish (1989), for example, observes that if a community changes outside, the reason is because it already has changed inside—"the boundaries of outside/inside will have been redrawn, and redrawn *from the inside*" (Fish, p. 148). Anzaldúa (1983) also sees larger social change as the result of individual change because self-change involves "going deep into the self and expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society" (p. 208).

A growing number of activists have come to understand the importance of self-change for creating larger societal change. In this view, those who wish to be agents of social change first must exhibit the desired changes themselves; otherwise, they cannot hope to create such changes in the external world. Thich Nhat Hanh (2007) observes that

> there are a lot of activists around us who are not peaceful, not happy, and so what they do causes more trouble. This is why what we want to do is to *be* in such a way that peace and compassion are possible in every moment. Words and actions coming from that foundation can be only helpful. (pp. 90–91)

Roberto Vargas (2008), a consultant on community decision-making and activist in many community-advocacy organizations, concurs:

> As activists and people who care deeply about others, we want our society to work for all.... [But] in our passion to make a difference, we often become so focused on our cause that we miss a key principle essential to advancing our vision. The change we desire in the world begins within ourselves and our networks of family and friends. (p. 9)

André Carothers, a Greenpeace activist for over 20 years, also came to realize that "real social change depends as much on helping activists change from the inside as it does campaigning for change 'out there' in the world" (Olson, 2003, p. 65).

Hanchard (2006) provides one explanation for the impact that individual acts can have on the larger society. He challenges the dichotomy between individual and collective acts and proposes a middle kind of activity that he terms *political coagulation,* which "occurs within micropolitical situations when individual political actors assume positions of ephemeral power that enable them to exert influence upon the outcome of a particular encounter, transaction, or exchange" (pp. 34–35). These coagulates "infuse a relatively self-contained instance with their own notions of justice, equality, and redress" (p. 35) and "can have macropolitical consequences even if the political behavior does not assume collective form" (p. 17).

Yet another explanation for how social change can result from small individual acts is the phenomenon known as the *butterfly effect* or *sensitive dependence on initial conditions*—the idea that a "small effect can have significant consequences" (Cambel, 1993, p. 1). Meteorologist Edward Lorenz (1993), who identified the butterfly effect, discovered in his modeling of the weather that "a nearly imperceptible change in a constant will produce a qualitative change in the system's behavior" (p. 69) and that "small initial differences will amplify until they are no longer small" (p. 102). Thus, "the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil today may make the difference between calm weather and a tornado in Texas next month" (Kellert, 1993, p. 12). Hawking (1993) provides another example of the butterfly effect:

> If the density of the universe one second after the big bang had been greater by one part in a thousand billion, the universe would have recollapsed after ten years. On the other hand, if the density of the universe at that time had been less by the same amount, the universe would have been essentially empty since it was about ten years old. (p. 150)

Contrary to expectations, then, a very small change in a cause can drastically alter an effect, an idea captured in the "familiar bit of verse that begins, 'For want of a nail, the shoe was lost,' and progresses from the shoe to the horse to the rider to the battle to the kingdom" (Lorenz, p. 113).

Former *Washington Post* reporter and staff writer for *The New Yorker* Malcolm Gladwell (2000) offers yet another explanation for how individual change creates larger societal changes, an explanation derived from his analysis of dramatic societal changes in American society. He discovered that a "small number of people" in a "small number of situations" start "behaving very differently, and that behavior" spreads to people "in similar situations" (Gladwell, p. 8). Each transformation, no matter how small, gains strength because it is connected to other changes. Gladwell (2000) gives the label *the Tipping Point* to "that one dramatic moment...when everything can change all at once..." (p. 9). He admits, however, that the idea "that little changes can somehow have big effects" is troubling for many people:

> As human beings we have a hard time with this kind of progression, because the end result—the effect—seems far out of proportion to the cause.... We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly. (pp. 10–11)

The "world of the Tipping Point," in other words, "is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is—contrary to all our expectations—a certainty" (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 13–14).

The Paradigm is Accessible Only to the Privileged

Another concern raised regarding the paradigm of constructed potentiality is that it is available for use only by the privileged. This view suggests that the paradigm works for the small group of individuals "who have enough money and power" (Schulte, 2005, para. 10), but it cannot work for the "masses of women and men who do not have access to the 'mainstream' of political and economic life" (hooks, 1996, p. 63).

The view that someone must be privileged to make use of the alternative paradigm, however, is predicated on the notion that privileged persons' capacity to create change always or necessarily derives from their money or power. That well may be the case in the paradigm of constricted potentiality because of the finite and contested nature of the resources available in that paradigm. In such a world, money and power often *are* useful in accomplishing change. But ownership of a specific amount of resources or attainment of a particular status is irrelevant in a world characterized by unbounded symbolic abundance and in which change is generated through individual interpretation. In the paradigm of constructed potentiality, money is not required to change an interpretation of a situation. People with money *can* generate change, but so can people without it. In the paradigm of constructed potentiality, in fact, access to abundant financial resources may mask the many options available for creating change through interpretation if only options that require financial investment are seen as possibilities.

The claim that individuals must be privileged to operate within the paradigm of constructed potentiality also is refuted by studies that disrupt the conventional notion that wealth and power are key to changing life conditions. The Dalai Lama (1999) notes the lack of a connection between material wealth and the capacity to achieve happiness:

> I must admit that I thought wealth would have gone further toward reducing suffering than is actually the case. I expected that with physical hardship much reduced . . . happiness would be much easier to achieve than for those living under more severe conditions. (p. 6)

He notes that many people "think if you are rich, you will have plenty of money and then they suppose all their problems are solved. Or if you have power, then no problem. That is not the case. Rich people, powerful people, very famous people have been mentally very unhappy (Dalai Lama & Ekman, 2008, p. 3). The revelation of Tiger Woods' many mistresses provides an example; a man who clearly fits the profile of the privileged in that he is male, wealthy, and at the top of his profession is in symbolic slavery to sex, and he is not able to release himself using the conventional resources of privilege at his disposal.

Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) offer dramatic testimony that even such extreme and unexpected life events as winning hundreds of thousands of dollars or losing the ability to walk exert surprisingly weak effects on people's happiness and no effects at all on predictions for their future well-being. Lyubomirsky (2001) proposes that "the reason that such variables as wealth and health have such counterintuitively small effects on people's happiness is that a diverse set of psychological processes moderates the impact of events, life circumstances, and demographic factors on well-being" (p. 240). She explains these findings with the observation that life circumstances or events are not objective, and "people do not experience events or situations passively. Rather, all life events are 'cognitively processed'... construed and framed, evaluated and interpreted, contemplated and remembered" (p. 240).

The Paradigm Blames the Victim

For others, a problem with the paradigm of constructed potentiality is that it appears to blame the victim—it assigns responsibility for negative events or conditions seemingly beyond human control to the individuals who experience them. The condition of victimage, however, derives from the interpretative choices made by communicators and not from conditions themselves. If someone chooses to maintain a focus on a material condition or a past event (a rape, for example), the focus on the event is what victimizes her and keeps her suffering. If she talks often about the rape, attends support groups for years to deal with it, and refuses to develop healthy intimate relationships because of it, she is indeed a victim—a victim of the story she continues to tell herself. Hernández-Ávila (2002) questions why some individuals continue to choose an interpretation that makes them into victims:

> Once we learn to name it, once we gain command over it by releasing it through our tongues/hands/pens/creative forces/work, through our loving, why do we have to hold on to it? Whose game is this? Whose interests are being served by us holding on to disgraceful, horrifying memories in such a way that we replay over and over, going back to the place of defeat, going back and matching our energy to the actual experience again and again? (p. 534)

In contrast, in the paradigm of constructed potentiality, individuals acknowledge that although they cannot change an event they experienced in the past, they can choose to tell a different story about it. As they choose an alternative interpretation of that event, they reassert their control over their experience of it:

> People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I dont [sic] believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances that they want, and, if they cant [sic] find them, make them. (Shaw, 2005, p. 121)

These individuals recognize that their power is in the present and that they have the interpretive capacity to view situations and conditions experienced in the past and the present as they choose—they are not victims unless they chose to construct

themselves as such. The paradigm of constructed potentiality, then, empowers individuals to take charge of the interpretations they place on life's experiences.

The Paradigm Encourages Apathy Toward the Suffering of Others

Some suggest that participation in the paradigm of constructed potentiality ignores the human suffering that can result from difficult and horrendous real conditions that cause suffering that can and should be prevented. The starting point for this concern is often a recounting of egregious material conditions that should not be ignored because they cause many to suffer. Gehrke (2008) provides an example of this claim:

> One is confronted by the urgency of the problems before us every day, regardless of one's political or philosophical inclinations: the recurrence of State-sponsored violence, the starvation of millions of people, the poisoning of the planet, the despair and ennui of the lives of so many, the perpetual looming promise of nuclear, chemical, or biological catastrophe, the unyielding brutality of poverty, the viciousness of mundane daily life, and the list goes on until one is all-but-suffocated beneath this foul heap. (p. 129)

The strategy of interpretation, these critics suggest, does not have sufficient power to address such exigencies and thus allows people to suffer.

We certainly do not want others to suffer and would like conditions that people believe are causing them to suffer to change. In situations when change agents identify people who are, for example, hungry, homeless, or ill, they may want to employ the strategies and resources of the paradigm of constricted potentiality to secure food, shelter, or medical care for them. These situations may be exactly the kind that persuasion can address with particular efficacy.

Responding with strategies from the paradigm of constricted potentiality, however, is not the only option for dealing with the suffering of others. Another is to eschew the act of naming an experience for another—refusing to assume that another person is suffering simply because individuals observing a particular condition interpret it as one that would cause *them* to suffer. When change agents do not assume that they have the authority to name experience for another, they acknowledge that material conditions can be interpreted in multiple ways and that what they themselves might interpret as an experience of trauma may not be experienced that way by others.

Kristof (2009) exemplifies such differences in perspectives in his description of families who live in shacks in a garbage dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. While he acknowledges the good intentions of those who favor labor standards in trade agreements "to fight back at oppressive sweatshops abroad," he argues that "the central challenge in the poorest countries is not that sweatshops exploit too many people, but that they don't exploit enough." He urges those concerned about the suffering of these people to "talk to these families in the dump, and a job in a sweatshop is a cherished dream, an escalator out of poverty." In conditions in which the alternative is pulling a rickshaw in the hot sun or scavenging in a dump, he asserts, working in a factory is not at the bottom of "the hierarchy of jobs in poor countries" (p. D3).

What many would label *suffering*, then, is not seen as suffering by the individuals themselves who are experiencing the condition in question.

For others, the issue concerning suffering is the guilt they feel when they are focusing on what generates well-being for themselves when others are suffering. They believe that, in such instances, to feel happiness and joy "is somehow wrong or shameful or at least selfish" (Spangler, 2003, para. 9). In the paradigm of constructed potentiality, however, to feel anger or despair in response to suffering is not viewed as helpful to others:

> But does my anger or fear or hatred or despair or depression remedy the world's pain?...We may think of joy as selfish, but anger, fear, hatred, and certainly depression and despair are infinitely more selfish and self-involving. Joy is a quality that by its nature reaches out to more than just ourselves. It enlarges us, expands us, gives us a reason to keep on living and striving. (Spangler, 2003, para. 9–10)

Spangler concludes:

> So do I have a right to be joyful? In a world of war and despair, do I have a right not to be? Shall I deny the world the gift of a buoyant heart and mind that can attune to the powers of spirit, the powers of love, the powers of the sacred, and the power of humanity to change and to grow? (para. 13)

The Paradigm Fails to Address the Inevitable Collision Among Interpretations

Another question raised about the paradigm of constructed potentiality is that, because each individual has a particular vision of "what is necessary, noble, and good" (Pearce, 1989, p. 32), interpretations and external conditions are likely to impinge on those of others with different perspectives. Inevitably, "incongruent interpretive communities come into conflict" (Stewart et al., 2007, p. 39) as individuals find themselves "involved in patterns/relationships/episodes not of [their] choosing, sometimes beyond [their] comprehension, and often contrary to [their] intentions" (Pearce, 1989, p. 167). The question raised by the paradigm of constructed potentiality, then, is how individuals can "communicate successfully with those whose vision and understanding of the world differ" from theirs (Bodhi, 2009, p. 1).

The collision of interpretations and consequent distinct material worlds can be addressed through various forms of reframing. Individuals can reframe what others have created, seeing those creations not as problems or obstacles but as resources. If another's material conditions impinge on an individual's interpretations and material conditions, that person has the opportunity to reframe the ostensible undesirable condition, as can be done with any condition. Instead of interpreting others' structures as obstacles to personal well-being, the individual can choose to see them from a different vantage point—perhaps as resources to use, as an opportunity to consider other perspectives, or as an opportunity to develop certain skills. Another's material creation impedes interpretive creativity only if individuals allow it to function as an impediment through their responses to it.

A second way in which reframing can address the issue of collision of interpretations is that others' interpretations and the resulting material conditions provide data for change agents to use in selecting their own interpretations. Others' perspectives can be seen as beneficial rather than detrimental to individuals' thinking because they provide diverse ideas about how to interpret conditions. As those different perspectives allow novelty to arise, they expand change agents' options for interpretation, fostering individual creativity. As Deetz (1997) explains, "The very capacity to escape the fixity of one's own views and homogeneous community is through seeking the other—that which is different and cannot be denied. Without that, communication is reduced to the reproduction of already possessed meanings" (p. 130). Even exposure to perspectives that are repugnant or distasteful reminds change agents that they have choices about how to interpret conditions.

Mediation and conflict resolution as they often are practiced in the communication discipline also provide models for dealing with the ostensible collision of individuals' interpretive and external worlds. Rooted in classic works such as *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (Walton & McKersie, 1991) and *Getting to Yes* (Fisher et al., 1991), the practices of conflict resolution are based on the idea that a focus on desires and interests instead of external structures, including particular positions, is a highly productive and effective way for people to achieve differing goals. Known under a variety of labels—*principled, win-win, interest-based,* or *collaborative negotiation*—this approach is a variable-sum form of interdependence designed to produce mutual gains:

> The people negotiating no longer try to prevail over one another; instead, they conduct their negotiations intending for everyone's interests to be met. The negotiators concentrate not on their competing positions but on the goals and interests they are trying to achieve. They are working together to create mutually satisfactory solutions instead of competing for gains. (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007, p. 118)

In this mode of conflict resolution, people focus not on competing positions but on their own interests, allowing them to have their goals met while also allowing others to do the same.

The theory of coordinated management of meaning, developed by Pearce and his colleagues (Pearce, 1989; Pearce, 2007; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) provides another response to the question of colliding interpretations and the resulting material conditions created. This theory explains that groups or individuals who have "different, even incommensurate, social realities" (Pearce, 1989, p. 169) can work toward "coordination rather than coherence" (Pearce, 1989, p. 94). That is, communicators can coordinate their actions even if they do not share the same meanings for an experience. Instead of determining which meaning, perspective, or story is "right," differences are seen as "real, legitimate, and (usually) valid ways of being human" (Pearce, 1989, p. 194). Individuals focus on "finding a frame in which *both* sets of stories can be seen in their own terms and the interaction between them can be described" (Pearce, 1989, p. 202). This task, Pearce (1989) explains, "is an impressively complex one; it involves understanding the other, making oneself

understandable by the other, and creating, if necessary, a new vocabulary in which 'translations' can occur" (p. 189). Scholars and practitioners known as *cosmopolitan communicators* have applied and extended Pearce's (1989) work, providing theoretical discussions and applications of the means by which coordination can be achieved among individuals' perspectives and actions (e.g., Appiah, 2006; Arnett, 2008; Christians, 2003, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Herzig & Chasin, 2006; Roberts & Arnett, 2008).

Concluding Thoughts

We began this essay by suggesting that perception of an imperfect exigence is the starting place for change efforts. When individuals feel discomfort or tension as a result of the perceived exigence, they engage in communication to address it. The communication strategy they use depends on an initial choice concerning focus of attention. In some cases, change agents focus on the material aspects of the world and thus see their primary resources as the material conditions around them. The strategy of persuasion is used to change these material conditions, which then may result in transformation in change agents themselves. The feeling of suffering dissipates because the exigence itself is removed. In other cases, change agents focus on the symbolic resources available to them. They see interpretation, directed at themselves, as the appropriate means for addressing the exigence. Interpretation produces changes in the internal states of individuals, which then influence material conditions. In this case, the feeling of suffering that initiated the change process is relieved by changes in individuals' mental and emotional states.

Although our description of the two paradigms focuses on and even sometimes amplifies the differences between them in order to contrast them, the paradigms are not as distinct as our description suggests. We have explicated them as separate and even oppositional paradigms, but they are more accurately conceptualized in dialectical relation to one another, with the paradigms merely accomplishing change in two different ways. The paradigm of constricted potentiality, rooted in materiality, is designed to change external material conditions and, in the process, to improve people's internal psychic states. The paradigm of constructed potentiality, rooted in symbolicity, is designed to change internal psychic states and, in the process, to improve people's external material conditions. The direction of the change efforts varies as one flows from the outside in and the other from the inside out.

Although both paradigms provide effective strategies for generating change, the options available for change in the communication discipline have been limited by the communication discipline's nearly exclusive embrace of the paradigm of constricted potentiality. The alternatives offered in the paradigm of constructed potentiality have been largely undeveloped—unseen, ignored, or perceived as flukes or exceptions—because of the hegemony of persuasion and the paradigm from which it derives. We hope that this essay encourages consideration and application of the paradigm of constructed potentiality by scholars and practitioners in the communication discipline. The result, we believe, will be an opening up of new possibilities for

understanding change processes and a greater array of options available for transformation through communication.

Notes

[1]   Our use of the term *constricted* is descriptive and is meant to convey simply that options are bounded or limited by what currently exists. The term is not intended to suggest that the paradigm of constricted potentiality is less useful or valuable than the alternative paradigm.

[2]   We acknowledge that, within the communication discipline, some scholars privilege either the material or the symbolic in assigning responsibility for the creation of reality. Cherwitz and Hikins (1986) summarize the two positions in this way:

> Some scholars have argued that there is no knowable reality independent of our perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values. It is argued that communication functions to define, create, shape, maintain, and transmit a reality distinctively constructed by humans. This implies that reality itself is linguistic and intersubjective—a product of symbolic interaction.... A competing view argues that reality, including perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values, exists wholly independent of us and is knowable. Rhetoric, according to these theorists, performs the dual functions of propagating and discovering truth. (pp. 11–12)

Our intent in this essay is not to settle the debate of whether there is a reality independent of human thought and symbol use. For our purposes here, what is important is that each act designed to produce change is initiated through the communicator's choice to focus either on the material or the symbolic in the context of a dialectical relationship between the two. In this view, "people can never get outside the constructions and conventions of discourse" and "neither can we construct ourselves outside the materiality of everyday life" (Selzer, 1999, p. 9).

[3]   We are aware of the extensive debate concerning the relationship between rhetoric and materiality in the communication discipline, but our intent is not to contribute here to any of the three major strands of this debate—one that considers "the material conditions of discourse, another that focuses upon a lived-in body as a condition and consequence of rhetoric, and still another that understands rhetoric as itself material" (Blair, 2001, p. 288). Among those who have contributed in various ways to this debate are: Biesecker & Lucaites (2009); Blair (1999, 2001); Cheney & Ashcraft (2007); Cloud (1994); Condit (1997a, 2008b); Dickinson (2002); Greene (1998); McGee (1980, 1982); McGuire (1990); McKerrow (1989); Rogers (1998); Selzer (1999); and Wood & Cox (1993).

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