

Is Gergen's "Relational Being" Relational Enough?

Brent D. Slife

Brigham Young University

Frank C. Richardson

University of Texas

Author Note

Brent D. Slife, Brigham Young University.

Frank Richardson, University of Texas, Austin.

This paper was originally presented insert date at the 118th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in San Diego. The presentation was part of a symposium entitled "Exploring and Critiquing Ken Gergen's Book *Relational Being*."

Correspondence should be addressed to: Brent D Slife, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602. E-mail: slife@byu.edu.

Abstract

Gergen's book is, in our view, a wonderful contribution, attempting, as he does, to be relational both in content and in style. Nevertheless, his social constructionist underpinnings raise for us a few friendly questions. These questions revolve around four basic issues: (a) an extreme form of co-active freedom is evident in Gergen's work; (b) this extreme freedom minimizes other aspects of the natural, temporal, and moral context of meaning-making; (c) this minimization implies that Gergen has not overcome dualism; and (d) this residual dualism renders human meaning-making almost arbitrary.

Is Gergen's "Relational Being" Relational Enough?

Ken Gergen's new book is learned, literate, humane, and engaging—all in all, we believe, an important contribution to theoretical psychology and social theory. A prominent feature of the book is Gergen's (2009) ability not only to write about relationality, but also to write about it in a rigorously relational manner. The text incorporates "multiple voices" (p. xxv) set side-by-side in lively interaction with one another, including the author's scholarly voice, apt quotations from other texts, accounts of personal experiences of the author and others, witty cartoons, expressions of art, poetry, and photography, and the persuasively rendered voices of imagined critics. This approach both helps clarify his own viewpoint and credibly connects his rather subtle theorizing with everyday life or lived experience.

Gergen (2009) does identify relational ideas and insights in other sources of social theory and philosophy over the last century or so. However, he claims—with some justification, we believe—that he elaborates a relational perspective in a more radical and consistent manner. This elaboration will help psychologists, he suggests, to more effectively escape the prison of the modern self. It enables him to give a convincing account of what he calls "relational responsibility" (p. 341), which he feels allows us to preserve much of what we value about freedom and responsibility in modern times without reverting to the limiting and damaging features of "bounded being."

We also believe Gergen is correct that part of the reason for these limits and damages is the nonrelational dualism of subjectivity/objectivity, mind/body in Western culture. We have noticed, as has Gergen, the recent almost summary rejections of dualism across a diversity of fields and modes of inquiry, from neuroscience to philosophy (Slife, Reber, & Faulconer, in press). In neuroscience, for example, Noë (2009) is clear that the last 25 years have led a

growing number of neuroscientists to abandon the Cartesian dualism of mind and body for “an embodied, situated approach to mind” (p. 186) in which “we are dynamically coupled with the world, not separate from it” (p. 181). In philosophy, Passmore (1970), among others, has noted: “the rejection of dualism is indeed one of the few points on which almost all the creative philosophers of modern times have agreed” (p. 38). Consequently, Gergen’s exploration of the elimination of subjective mental and emotional states, in favor of their intimate, ongoing co-construction among persons is especially instructive and worthy of serious consideration.

However, this ongoing co-construction presupposes a thoroughgoing social constructionist metatheory, meaning that no view of “self, causality, and agency,” modern or postmodern, can be said to be in any sense “false” or “fundamentally mistaken,” either factually or morally (p. xvi). These views are “simply human constructions around which we live our lives” (p. xvi). They are not, of course, inconsequential. In fact, Gergen invites us to ponder and evaluate their consequences on what he has termed in the past a “socio-rationalist” or purely pragmatic basis (Gergen, 1985), which he describes here as a matter of whether or not these constructions “enrich our potentials for living,” seem to “have value,” or strike us as “worth sustaining” (Gergen, 2009, p. xvi).

Nevertheless, this social constructionist underpinning for relational being raises for us a few friendly questions and concerns. These questions and concerns revolve around four basic issues, which we attempt to address, in turn: (a) an extreme, almost absolute form of co-active freedom seems to exist in Gergen’s work; (b) this extreme, creative freedom appears to minimize or overlook other aspects of the natural, temporal, and moral context of meaning-making; (c) the minimization of these aspects implies that Gergen has not fully overcome dualism; and (d) this residual dualism is deeply problematic for human meaning-making, rendering it almost arbitrary.

Absolute Freedom

The first problem, we feel, is that Gergen (2009) believes there is “no principled limit” (p. 152) whatsoever on the kinds of meanings that might be “invented” (p. 203) or “created” (p. 188) by persons in co-action. We find this extreme or absolute form of freedom (however co-active) implausible. It is noteworthy that none of the “critics” that Gergen gives voice to in his book raise questions about this highly tendentious premise. It is assumed, never defended.

How credible is this limitless capacity for co-active meaning? To an extent, Gergen himself seems rightly to appreciate some indelible human limitations. For example, we do not, indeed cannot, construct meanings to live by on our own, individualistically, without sensitively and responsibly coordinating our action, reflection, and creative imagination with that of other people. Gergen eloquently shows us the deleterious consequences and self-defeating patterns of living that transpire when we fail to realize our tricky but potentially fulfilling relational entanglement with one another. We cannot ignore or undo that entanglement; it is a limitation on the types of meanings produced. In fact, we would say that Gergen obviously appreciates the fact that these relational limitations do not hamper human freedom and creativity, but instead serve as an indispensable enabling condition for the kind of dynamic relational being—as opposed to isolating individualism or static community—that he rightly prizes and wants to nurture. In this sense, relational being is not limitless, even from Gergen’s perspective.

Minimization of Context

For the most part, his book seems to restrict this creation and construction of meaning to the domain of the interpersonal. However, this restriction seems to lead to a second problem—

the neglect of the crucial role of other contexts of living in the unfolding of meaning, including the natural world, certain structures of our embodiment, our deep embeddedness in an historical culture or cultures, and, for some, God, Tao, Brahmin, or Buddhist Interbeing. One might even argue that in downplaying these contexts Gergen's view is incompletely or inadequately relational (Slife, 2005). That is to say, his view *incompletely* relates the interpersonal construction of meaning to these other partners in co-constructing the meanings and practices of human life and community.

For example, people clearly participate in the meanings of a mountain, but they are *co-*participants in these meanings, along with the mountain itself. Many options of meaning are possible for the humans involved (e.g., the mountain is beautiful or ugly), but many *other* options of meaning are not practical or credible, given the nonhuman factors involved—for example, the mountain is the sky, or the mountain no longer impedes our progress. These contexts impose some limits on or even guide the social construction of meaning. Other relational thinkers, such as Bakhtin and hermeneutic theorists such as Gadamer and Charles Taylor, do not consider these contexts to arbitrarily or wrongly constrain human freedom. Rather, they view these contexts as the *conditions* of such freedom and responsibility. Without them we would experience a debilitating disorientation or sheer vertigo.

Consider also the sphere of ethical meanings in which we are also contextualized. We exist in a kind of mutually-shaping conversation with our cultural past and the meanings and norms that imbue the practices and institutions of our society. To be sure, we interpret and co-construct those meanings and norms in ways that deepen or alter them. However, they also interrogate and, in a sense, interpret *us* in ways that may change our identity or the meanings we live by, often in quite unanticipated ways, as in any serious conversation. The role of these

meanings implies that we cannot simply reconstrue or reinvent those practices and understandings, individually or interpersonally, in just any way or for just any reason. Thus, this ethical context, too, is an enabling condition of our creative agency, not just an arbitrary limitation placed on it.

By way of illustration, we live in an individualistic society in which most of us feel deeply committed to the ideals of human rights and dignity, and we intensely prize our privacy and personal autonomy. Still, it has widely been argued—and Ken Gergen has helped to build this argument—that this way of life also leads to emotional isolation and even narcissism; it frays the social bonds needed to sustain individual freedom and make it meaningful (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). Our point about these positive and negative aspects of individualism is the inherent difficulty of extricating ourselves from these individualistic meanings. As much as we may dislike certain features of this cultural outlook, we cannot return to abandoned moral outlooks and, say, take up life as a medieval serf.

Moreover, rethinking individualism will mean finding a way to reconcile the best of our ideals of human rights and dignity with the kind of deep relationality Gergen elucidates. This kind of reconciliation is a challenging work of moral imagination that is underway in many different cultural quarters. No doubt, both these ideals and our understanding of relationality will change or deepen in the process. However, the result will have to make good ethical sense to us, or seem genuinely worthwhile. Otherwise, we will not be motivated to make the changes, even sacrifices, that a partly different way of life will involve. These historical and ethical constraints are, to be sure, constructed among co-actors, but there are *other* portions of our ethical, natural, and historical contexts that contribute as well, contributions that we do not see Gergen

acknowledging. It is in this sense that we believe Gergen is proffering, of all things, an incomplete relationality.

Residual Dualism

This incomplete relationality also hampers Gergen's efforts to thoroughly overcome dualism—our third issue with his social constructionist approach to relational being. There is much to learn about avoiding dualism from Gergen's work, but we believe that his social constructionist underpinnings ultimately fail him in expunging the deeper roots of this ontological assumption in Western culture. John Searle (1997, 2004), for example, spends considerable time in his penetrating treatises on dualism describing the depth of its pernicious tentacles in Western culture's conceptions and practices. However, because conventional analyses of these tentacles are so often superficial, numerous and varied attempts to remediate the problems of dualism almost always fail. Jones (2009) puts these in the category of "failed attempts to escape dualism."

We believe that Gergen's analysis and remediation fit within Jones's category. Gergen clearly senses the main problem with dualism: it does not relate meaningfully the various constituents of meaning in our lives. As Kruger (1988) describes, meaning is not a reducible critter. That is to say, you do not find the meaning of something, or understand a social construction, by stripping it of its context, because context is a necessary condition for any meaning. Using dualistic terms, we believe Gergen recognizes that we will never understand the object without the context of the subject, and the subject without the context of the object. A truly nondualistic, truly relational conception, then, is one that relates *completely* the subjective and objective worlds of classical dualism. The subjective world, the world supposedly inside our head, consists of our opinions, will, and meanings, whereas the objective world, the world "out

there” beyond our minds, consists of the objects and laws of the world. We are not saying that the dualist properly conceptualizes these factors and events, but we do believe that all the phenomena we associate with these factors, including feelings, values, objects, and regularities, play important roles in the meanings of our lives, and thus would need to be coalesced for a fully relational, nondualist framework to work.

An important example of how *not* to do this coalescing is the reductive materialism of many neuroscience explanations. As Hedges and Burchfield (2005) describe, many neuroscience approaches have focused on the objective to the exclusion of the subjective. Because these researchers have developed only objective methods, they have focused almost exclusively on what they can study—objective phenomena. Subjective phenomena, such as values and will, have simply been side-stepped. Our point here is this reductive materialism is not a monism, as some neuroscientists have labeled it; this materialism is more correctly understood as a *one-sided dualism*. Neuroscience, in this sense, still operates in a dualistic world. As Taylor (1995) and Wittgenstein (2001) have described, adherents of this materialism still engage in a dualistic sorting of inner and outer. It is just that the neuroscientist attempts to focus exclusively on one side of that dualism. Another way to put this is that neuroscientists do not reconceptualize important aspects of the subjective; they simply abandon them. We think Gergen would agree with this assessment.

Our problem, however, is that we believe that Gergen may have made the same error as the reductive materialist, except on the other side of the dualist divide. He has properly, in our view, focused on the interpersonal context as a prime ingredient of our meaning in the world, but he has not included in his account what dualists would have construed as the “objective” factors of the world—the mountain, for example. Our environment is surely only one of many

meaningful constraints on social constructions. Yet Gergen tends to grant absolute freedom to the subjective constructors, allowing them to escape entirely the contextual limitations as the natural world and the cultural past—limitations, once again, that we see as guiding conditions, not arbitrary limitations. In effect, we believe that Gergen has made a very positive move from dualism to something we might call intersubjectivism, but he has not yet moved all the way from dualism to nondualism or a thorough-going relationality because he has not completely related all the constituents involved in our constructions of the world. He has not reconceptualized the phenomena conventionally associated with objectivity; he has simply abandoned them.

Arbitrary Meaning-Making

For these reasons, we are not convinced that Gergen's social constructionism *fully* overcomes the exaggerated freedom and painful isolation of the bounded, masterful self of modern times. Co-constructing our practices and meanings in relation to the past, our current world, and other people seems to imply that certain meanings and values are *not* possible for us. They have to make practical or ethical sense to us in our world. Another way to make this point is to consider what an extreme and isolated construction process means for Gergen's own relational position. Sometimes it seems like he is telling us about how things work and what they mean, as if relationality is the *correct* position for psychologists. Surely Gergen would deny this interpretation of his passion for and promotion of relationality. Yet if there is not something privileged about his relational position—perhaps it just better fits our current world—then his philosophical outlook is just another arbitrary social construction. Why should we take it any more seriously than the views of the local soothsayer?

A social constructionist might reply that we should elect a viewpoint or value, in Gergen's (2009) words, on the pragmatic basis of "utility" or its capacity to "enrich our

potentials for living” (p. xvi). Still, we suggest that human agents do not and cannot choose between important meanings or ends in living merely on the basis of pragmatic usefulness or self-defined “richness.” Suppose one happens to be either a Maoist or a Taoist and is deliberating about whether or not to convert to the other view based on an encounter with its ideas or practices. This conversion cannot be deliberated on a purely pragmatic basis because each philosophy will understand and define what “pragmatic” or “enriched potentials for living” means in the first place. One philosophy will be interested in means that produce certain social and economic arrangements, the other in attitudes and practices that help bring about a transformation in the universe or Tao. In each case, different sets of means and ends are part of a “package deal,” a way of being. They reflect at least partly incommensurable moral visions or philosophical outlooks. To be sure, they may influence or learn from one another, something that happens all the time, but the only options the social constructionist offers us for understanding this process are either an abstract criterion of usefulness or an unguided, arbitrary, or whimsical choice of ends that amounts to no choice at all.

Even many ordinary life decisions, which may appear to be based purely on considerations of pragmatism or usefulness, are derived in part from moral or cultural visions of what we find to be inherently good, honorable, or decent. Consider everyday dietary decisions, for example. Historians and anthropologists have long shown how such decisions are often made against a background of moral, religious, and cultural visions, however conscious or unconscious they may be (Simoons, 1994). Within the context of our complex and multifaceted traditions, we reflect all the time about whether or not everyday social arrangements are fair or just. We would not even know how to evaluate the “utility” of such arrangements except in terms of whether or not they seem more or less fair or just. This sense of fairness or justice does not

imply that our evaluations are perfect or final, or even that they do not do some degree of harm to some people. Indeed, a great deal of humility seems required for reflecting on such matters if they are to be as honest and humane as possible. However, these deliberations do not take place without broader and non-arbitrary ethical frameworks.

Gergen insists that we simply “cannot ask whether the concept of justice is true” because it is merely one of those “human constructions around which we organize our lives” (p. xvi). However, his insistence on not asking this justice question seems to us, rather paradoxically, to be a matter of his firm moral principle! In other words, he is striking an ethical pose in this position. Further, he seems to hold that embracing the truth of a conception of justice necessarily entails an authoritarian manner, confounding the affirmation of truth with the inevitability of dogmatism. We suggest, by contrast, that there seems to be no good reason to throw out the baby of justice with the bathwater of dogmatism and domination.

Conclusion

It seems to us that Gergen’s approach presents an important account of the human struggle for better or richer meanings in which to live. We agree that it is a deeply relational struggle to overcome fear, envy, and distrust and to cultivate the courage, humility, and wisdom—the relational character, one might say—needed to do so. On the other hand, we do not agree that Gergen reaches all his goals, such as a thoroughly nondualist or relational account of human meaning-making. Moreover, we predict that it will be obvious to virtually any reader that Gergen believes relational being to be more than just an invented construct and that the book sheds a superior and non-arbitrary light on human action and welfare. For this reason, we believe it makes an invaluable contribution to the conversation about how to fashion a truly social psychology.

References

- Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, 40, 266-275.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hedges, D., & Burchfield, C. (2005). The assumptions and implications of a neurobiological approach to depression. In B. Slife, J. Reber, & F. Richardson (Eds.) *Critical thinking about psychology: Hidden assumptions, plausible alternatives* (pp. 99-120). Washington, D C: American Psychological Association.
- Jones, D. (2009). *Changing pictures of social science theory and practice: A Wittgensteinian approach to human minds and experience* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Texas, Austin.
- Noë, A. (2010). *Out of our heads. Why you are not your brain, and other lessons from the biology of consciousness*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Passmore, J. (1970). *Philosophical reasoning* (2nd ed.). London: G. Duckworth & Co.
- Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Searle, J. R. (1997). *The mystery of consciousness*. New York: The New York Review of Books.
- Searle, J. R. (2004). *Mind: A brief introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simoons, F. J. (1994). *Eat not this flesh: Food avoidances from prehistory to the present*. (2nd ed.) Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Slife, B. D. (2005). Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24 (2), 157 – 178.

Slife, B. D., Reber, J. S., & Faulconer, J. E. (in press). Implicit ontological reasoning: Problems of dualism in psychological science. In R. Proctor & J. Capaldi (Eds.), *Psychology of science: Implicit and explicit reasoning*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, C. (1995). *Philosophical Arguments*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Philosophical investigations: The German text*. (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans., 3rd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.