

# **Reflexivity for sustainability: appreciating entanglement and becoming relationally reflexive**

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to open up new possibilities for reflexivity which can help promote adequate human responses to sustainability issues. It explores how predominant ideas about reflexivity are located within an individualistic perspective of bounded and independent selves. The relational thinking of Gergen (2009) and Hosking (2011) is discussed to consider the implications for approaching selves as unbounded and interdependent. It develops the concept of relational reflexivity which is argued to respect the social and material entanglements of selves and foster systemic intelligence and action.

## **Keywords**

reflexivity, sustainability, environmental sustainability, relational thinking, relational ontology, relational reflexivity, entanglement, unbounded selves

## 1. Introduction – interests and intentions

This paper explores what understanding serves as entangled and unbounded implies for ideas about reflexivity. This topic is pursued in an attempt to help enhance potentials for adequate human responses to the dynamic and interlocking challenges related to (un)sustainability.

Sustainability is considered in a broad sense where ideas of managing and organising are enacted within a biophysical habitat (the world), which has limits. The earliest usages of notions of sustainability have been traced to German forestry 300 years ago in reference to 'sustained-yield' (*nachhaltig*) (Grober, 2012). However, the idea of biophysical limits is most frequently connected to the Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome in 1972 and subsequent thirty year update (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2005). The visualisation of 'The Blue Marble' which was the first photograph of the Earth to be taken from space is also prominent in these discussions. In the work about limits there is a central argument that physical planetary resources are finite (fossil hydrocarbons, mineral ores etc.), and that biological and planetary systems will only up to certain thresholds continue to support the 'environmentally stable conditions [of the Holocene] over the past 10,000 years' which are seen as fundamental to sustaining the current human populous (Rockström et al., 2009). Hence in this paper sustainability is about a 'capacity for continuance into the long-term future' (Porritt, 2007, p. 33). Continuance is understood to be about the ability of human societies to organise in ways that respond to assessments from the natural sciences which suggest rapid degradation of ecosystems, and looming and passing ecological limits (Cardinale et al., 2012; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009).

Entanglement is a key idea that is attempted to be appreciated in this paper. Human entanglement in issues of sustainability are considered to be in terms of 'matter' – constituted by the biological and planetary systems in which our bodies are part – and 'meaning' – the ways we go about making sense of sustainability and the human values that we inscribe into the associated challenges (Barad, 2007). In order to respond to the material challenges of sustainability (including habitat and species loss, environmental toxicity and climate change) we need greater appreciations for the co-constructing interrelationships between meaning and matter, as the social and the material are taken to be 'constitutively entangled in everyday life' (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1437). These sensibilities for appreciating entanglement resonate with others' suggestions that sustainability and related ecological crises are bound up in crises of mind – habits of thought and action which foster dis-engagement from our relations with biological and planetary systems in which we are immanent (Bateson, 1972, 1979; Orr, 1994). By considering humans as unbounded beings this paper explores the possibilities for theories of reflexivity to take account of entanglement. Appreciating humans as unbounded beings means that the world and the ecosystems it encompasses are understood not as something surrounding and apart from us, but as 'a zone of entanglement' (Ingold, 2008, p. 12). For example, the skin is seen as 'a permeable zone of intermingling' rather than a boundary between a human being and the rest of the world (Ingold, 2011, p. 87).

Reflexivity seems to offer possibilities for considering researcher entanglement, but some scholars have argued that ideas of reflexivity are located within an individualistic perspective (Holland, 1999; Luhmann, 1990). An individualistic perspective is suggested to 'abstract the individual from the many situations in which he or she is involved, emphasizing sharply drawn person-other boundaries' (Sampson, 2000, p. 1425). By taking an historical approach Sampson (2000) argues that current understanding of a person's independence and interdependence has been framed within Christian traditions where an essentialised

individual, rather than the relationship between persons, became central in Western history. For example, scientists are typically thought of as singular geniuses (e.g. Einstein, Pasteur etc.), rather than what has been described as 'collective subjects' working amongst the collective practices of their time (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 70). Markus and Kitayama have shown how the ideas of people as 'independent, bounded, autonomous entities' have dominated the 'European-American cultural frame' (1994, p. 568). Connectedly, Rose has explored how Western societies are unusual in construing the person as a self – 'a naturally unique and discrete entity, [with] the boundaries of the body enclosing ... an inner life of the psyche' (1996, p. 22).

This paper argues that considering persons as unbounded opens up new possibilities for theories of reflexivity, which by centring entanglement can help promote adequate responses to sustainability challenges. This is because global sustainability issues bring to our attention how unsuccessful we have become at understanding the meanings and feedbacks of our socio-material relations. The paper proceeds as follows. In Section Two, there is a discussion of the debates associated with reflexivity and how these are predominantly located in an individualist perspective. Section Three explores social constructionist relational thinking as this perspective offers the greatest potential to appreciate our entanglement. In Section Four how reflexivity has been considered within relational thinking is discussed. In the final section the concept of relational reflexivity is offered as a reflexivity for sustainability.

## 2. Debating reflexivity

Ideas about reflexivity have been used variously. For some reflexivity has become a way of describing modern societies and how they differ from those in the past (Archer, 2012; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Amongst these sociological debates reflexivity has been talked about as: *systemic* – related to reflexive modernization where 'advanced modernity' becomes its own issue and calls into question its own basic premises (Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck et al., 1994); *social* – a 'capability for reorientation and redirection [which] helps build up new social formations' (Donati, 2010, p. 192); *meta* – a mode of reflexivity where 'internal conversations critically evaluate previous inner dialogues and are critical about effective action in society' (Archer, 2012, p. 13); and, *disciplinary* – a collective enterprise which is 'embedded in analytical tools and operations' of disciplinary arrangements (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36). These debates have some connectivity with the intent of this paper to consider the potentials for reflexivity to appreciate entanglement. This is because they place reflexivity as being something brought about through the collective relations of people, institutions or societies. However, this section focuses on discussions about reflexivity associated with methods and practices of human inquiry. These debates are of particular interest because although this paper is not seeking to specifically contribute to conversations about research methodology they enable consideration of how predominant ideas about reflexivity inform and perpetuate notions of bounded selves.

Scholars who have explored the methodological implications of reflexivity have suggested that it is not a singular and easily identifiable concept, with intents for its usage including both enhancing and undermining objectivism (Ashmore, 1989; Johnson & Duberley, 2003; Lynch, 2000). Amongst the various perspectives reflexivity is commonly considered to be about a metaphorical bending back on oneself and inquiring into the plausibility of research claims and the intricacies and complexities of interpretations which underlie the claims (Lawson,

1985). In this way it is suggested that being reflexive is about promoting an awareness of how the researcher and the object of study affect each other mutually and continually in the research process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Whilst reflexivity can be seen to promote critical intent by bringing attentions towards politics and powers within ways of researching and knowing it does so amongst an individualistic perspective (Holland, 1999; Luhmann, 1990). The bending back to question oneself which predominant ideas about reflexivity promotes, places boundaries around a knower (subject) which dis-embed them from being amongst the known (object). This is achieved because whilst reflexivity brings attention to how the knower produces the world, it simultaneously infers that the self can stand outside itself to substantially appreciate its situatedness in time and space. This issue has been talked about in a number of ways including: the linearity of reflexivity which places 'a subject in one realm, [and] the object of knowledge in another' (Lash, 2003, p. 51); and, a 'form of "god-trick" in which reflexivity is actually part of a process of ignoring or concealing the more complex interplay of relations' (Maxey, 1999, p. 201). Whilst these criticisms of reflexivity have occurred more recently, similar issues were approached much earlier by pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey (1930).

Dewey's work argued against thinking about knowledge in terms of truths which mirrored and represented reality. Instead pragmatist philosophy saw knowing as the output of competent collective social inquiry where it only becomes meaningful when coupled with action. Dewey's work has been traced to the origins of reflective and reflexive practices (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Reynolds, 2011). Pragmatist philosophy has been returned to as part of efforts to approach the discussed criticisms and limits of reflexivity. For example, Alvesson sees pragmatism as a means of 'balancing endless reflexivity and radical scepticism with a sense of direction and accomplishment' (2003, p. 14). The balancing requires 'a willingness to compromise between reflexive ideals' in order to produce knowledge 'for the best possible purposes' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25). Hence pragmatism offers philosophies which enable us to see knowledge in ways which move us away from a vortex of trying to solve reflexive problems and achieve maximum reflexivity. It does this by promoting a modesty that mastery of knowing about the world is impossible and that reflexivity is only meaningful when coupled with action.

These discussions which focus on methodological implications may place reflexivity in a valuable position for enhancing potentials for social and organisational change through heightening a critical appreciation for the powers, politics and limits of knowing. However, it is the core contention of this paper that these debates are problematic and restrictive to appreciating and taking action on pressing sustainability issues. This is because the debates have taken place in ways that although attempting to work against essentialist ideas of selves they still promote dis-entanglement by preserving dualist boundaries (i.e. object-subject, mind-body). As this paper has set out maintaining these boundaries is counter to appreciating and approaching sustainability challenges. Whilst the movement towards modest reflexivity is perhaps palatable in approaching other social and management issues it is not sufficient to help foster human re-engagement in the matters and meanings of sustainability. Crucially reflexivity needs to be considered amongst ideas of unbounded and entangled selves. This is next explored drawing upon relational thinking as this perspective offers the greatest potential to approach reflexivity more deeply, in terms of both ontology and epistemology.

### 3. Relational thinking

Those that have talked about social constructionist relational ontologies include Gergen (2009) and Hosking (2011). Gergen's relational ontology is produced with an intent to 'generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves with a vision of relationship' where virtually all intelligible action takes place within the ongoing process of relationship (2009, p. xv). Gergen argues that 'to approach human beings as separate or bounded units' and 'understand the world in which we live as constituted by independent species, forms, types, or entities is to threaten the well-being of the planet' (Gergen, 2009, p. 396). A central claim within Gergen's thesis is that meaning is produced through being in co-action with the implication that 'mental life [is] created within relationships' (2009, p. 70). In this way knowledge becomes 'an outcome of relational processes' where 'through co-action people generate a world of the real' (Gergen, 2009, p. 204). A core contention of his thesis is 'that virtually all faculties traditionally attributed to the internal world of the agent – reason, emotion, motivation, memory, experience, and the like – are essentially performances within relationship' (Gergen, 2009, p. 397). Thinking in this mode Gergen argues that *others* are no longer the causes of our actions nor we the effects, but instead that 'whenever we think, remember, create, and feel, we participate in relationship' (Gergen, 2009, p. 397). Gergen's metaphor of the body as a sieve – 'with materials moving in both directions' (2009, p. 97) – is powerful for conceptualising a person as being interdependently produced by what they are in relation with.

Hosking brings her ideas together under the label of relational constructionism. Relational constructionism is set apart from other varieties of social constructionism as it does not centre a bounded 'constructing sovereign subject' (Hosking, 2011, p. 51). Instead ontology is given to relational processes, because it is suggested that it is these ongoing processes which 'actively create and maintain stabilities' (Hosking, 2011, p. 55). Relational constructionism focuses on how relationships produce constructions. Consequently a view of the individual as possessing a self or mind 'gives way to talk of relational processes' with language as a key medium in which inter-acting occurs (Hosking, 2011, p. 52). There are 'not one but many selves', which are emergent and contingent, produced in 'particular relations with particular others' (Hosking, 2011, p. 51).

In both Gergen's and Hosking's relational thinking there is a strong intent to decentre notions of bounded selves and appreciate the person as interdependently produced through relationship. However, as Sampson (2000) has cautioned there is a danger of placing bounded selves (Western individualism), a perspective in which this paper argues that many ideas of reflexivity have been developed, in binary opposition with unbounded selves (Eastern collectivism). Instead Sampson (2000), whose writing is drawn upon by Hosking, argues for a dialogic view as he sees individualism and collectivism as necessarily interdependent concepts. He argues that there is 'no individuality without collectivity, no independence without interdependence' with the person needing to be understood as both bounded and porous (Sampson, 2000, p. 1429). Sampson's central contention is that without any boundaries there can be no relations between things. Hence relational ontologies sensibilities for considering unbounded selves are brought about in opposition to, but also in codependency with ideas of boundedness. This means that in a relational perspective although the majority of attention is on the relations which produce selves, a minimal essentialist self necessarily co-exists.

As set out in the introduction of this paper there is a core need to appreciate human

entanglement in the intertwined sociality and materiality of sustainability. Hence in drawing upon relational thinking, appreciating the co-constructing interdependency not just within the social, but also with and between the material is a key contribution of this paper. For example, Actor Network Theory which seeks to challenge the distinctiveness between what is 'human' and 'non-human' adds to this through the concept of relational materiality, where the 'bits and pieces' of the world do not exist in and of themselves, but achieve significance (reality) in relation to others (Law & Mol, 1995). Consequently, the flow of relatings and co-actings are not just human processes, everything within the world be it machines, organisations or organisms are implicated in shaping and producing realities.

In drawing upon relational thinking to appreciate notions of entanglement the division between ontology and epistemology becomes unhelpful as this assumes distinctions between subject and object and human and non-human. As Barad suggests in her considerations of entanglement 'we know because we are of the world' and part of its 'differential becoming' (Barad, 2003, p. 829). Like Bateson's (1972, 1979) advocacy for a unification of ontology and epistemology for human re-engagement with nature, Barad (2003) argues for 'onto-epistem-ology'. This is positioned as 'the study of practices of knowing in being' and is suggested to be 'a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter' (Barad, 2003, p. 829).

This section has positioned ideas about social constructionist relational ontologies and how they offer potential to move away from ideas of bounded selves, which have been argued to help us appreciate our entanglement within the issues that sustainability encompasses. In doing this, the crucial need is to understand the relatings of relations being shaped not just by human interactions, but also interactions amongst the sociality and materiality of ecologies, technologies and organisations. Hence relational thinking is suggested to necessitate movement away from separations between ontology and epistemology to onto-epistem-ology. Given this discussion how does reflexivity become about ontology as well as epistemology?

#### **4. Reflexivity in relational thinking**

By considering alternative possibilities for reflexivity in relational thinking there is a need to take care not to fall back within ways which are being attempted to be substantially unsettled. This is because as described relational thinking asks us to move away from conceptions of individual autonomy and independence in which predominant ideas about reflexivity are located (i.e. the individual turning back within themselves to become aware of the blinkers they bring to their inquiries). The starting point for considering a reflexivity for sustainability is to consider how Gergen and Hosking have already approached the concept within their relational thinking.

In much earlier work Gergen and Gergen briefly discuss reflexivity, positioning it to be about an approach to research where 'the term reflexive is applied not to one researcher, but to relations between and among investigator and research participants' (1991, p. 93). It is suggested that the foremost feature of relationally reflexive research is 'the sharing of power between researchers and subjects in order to construct meaning' (Gergen & Gergen, 1991, p. 86). These comments connect with later discussion within *relational being* albeit Gergen doesn't directly draw implications for reflexivity in this book. He suggests that working as an unbounded being involves breaking apart distinctions between the researcher and the

researched. For example, he notices the prominence of relational processes amongst the sensibilities of some Action Research inquiry practices as they view knowledge as an outcome of relational processes with knowing only coming into existence through social participation.

Hosking has considered the implications for reflexivity within relational constructionism. She suggests that reflexivity needs to be radically re-conceptualised and considered 'in relation to the multiple local conventions, norms and interests of the various participating "forms of life"' (Hosking & Pluut, 2010, p. 62). Reflexivity is explained as: (a) a local and co-constructed process oriented towards the question (b) how are we 'going on' together, and therefore paying attention to (c) the realities and relations we are co-creating during the research process and so (d) is concerned with local pragmatic and ethical issues (Hosking & Pluut, 2010). Hence in this perspective reflexivity is substantially understood in terms of an ongoing dialogic process which can be seen to enable collective turnings back on the construction of the inquiry (Hosking & Pluut, 2010). The dialogic processes are seen to promote equal arrangements of power that support relationally engaged 'ecological' processes rather than disengaged 'egological' ones (Hosking, 2012). Dialogue is seen to be open and free from selfish attempts to know and control others so 'emphasis shifts to ways of relating that make space for multiplicity, ongoing emergence and improvisation' (Hosking, 2012, p. 13).

Gergen and Hosking both draw upon spiritual ideas to explore the potentials for considering selves as unbounded and the consequences of working within relational thinking. For example, writing together they are most interested in Buddhist teaching and consider Buddha nature and how meditations of emptiness 'provide the basis for being in the moment (nowness) open to what the situation might call for' (Gergen & Hosking, 2006, p. 314). Hence they make clear links between unbounded selves and Eastern collectivist philosophies. In his more recent writing Gergen further develops these spiritual connections. Gergen states that *relational being* has within it a sacred dimension – as 'that which contributes to the growth and extension of relational process acquires aspects of the divine' (2009, p. 392). He goes on to discuss that he wants to appreciate the sacred in a way which 'is not distinct and distant [e.g. the conception of a remote God], but immanent in all human affairs' (Gergen, 2009, p. 393). Whilst these discussions about spirituality and the sacred are not specifically related to Hosking or Gergen's comments about reflexivity they are important for developing appreciations for practising unboundness. This is because unbounded selves can be seen to be in relation, and hence constituent, in all beings.

The role of reflexivity in Gergen and Hosking's work is substantially discussed in relation to the 'arrangements' of 'sharing' of power in methods of researching. Reflexivity is suggested to have an ethic and spiritual dimension which implies certain ways of participating in dialogue. This paper seeks to further develop these ideas from relational thinking about reflexivity, this is explored next in the final section.

## **5. Relational reflexivity for sustainability**

Reflexivity for sustainability not only approaches ideas of unbounded selves but also appreciates human entanglement in the sociality and materiality of sustainability. Hence the dialogic processes which Gergen and Hosking explore, mostly in respect of research methods, are fundamental, but fostering a 'relational reflexivity' for sustainability is also about reflecting the material arrangements and their social meanings in how collective sense making

and action emerges. Relational reflexivity is as much about practices of being and living as it is about inquiry methods for researching. Crucially for sustainability, as others have advocated in respect of management education, is a need to support a relational appreciation of *being in the land* which brings deeper collective meaning to the places and ecologies in which relatedness happens (Jolly, Whiteman, Atkinson, & Radu, 2011; Walck, 2003). The intention is to embed reflexivity beyond an individual (and the idea of an individual) by placing it amongst relations, instead of burdening a discrete self. Doing this can open up possibilities for promoting systemic action to reflect the systemic issues encompassed in the concept of sustainability.

Relational reflexivity is about an ethic for, and knowing about a greater whole which is expressed through the processes of relations, rather than being a reflexivity that is owned and deployed by the self. For example, the skill of the relationally reflexive manager would be about how they hold themselves amongst often turbulent flows of relatings, taking care to avoid self-identifying habits of bounded selves. They work across the blurred domains of home and work with purpose and an attention to place, but with a realisation that they cannot fully know purpose and its dynamisms. Purposes form and are enacted through the co-constructing interrelationships of the social and material. The relationally reflexive manager lives their unboundedness through a calm mindfulness where they understand themselves and their vulnerabilities and contentments as emerging from their relational entanglement in a becoming world. It involves a mindfulness that connects with Introna's description of an 'active and ongoing cultivation of a practice of the letting-be of things – all beings, human and non-human' (p.280) which means living 'in the continued shadow of doubt, without any hope for certainty' (2013, p. 283). The relationally reflexive manager is able to 'observe', where there is no effort to be something on ones own, which means that there isn't any condemnation of others by comparisons to an independent self (Krishnamurti, 1997).

The work for performing relational reflexivity is a distributed and reciprocal endeavour. As discussed there are implications for how we conceptualise ourselves and move amongst our relatings, and this is part of the work of relational reflexivity. However, the main work is beyond any linguistic comprehension by selves and happens in relations. Relational reflexivity comes about through a mix of primordial purposefulness for a connected and knowing greater whole, with awareness of the non-knowing which is inherent in being constitutively entangled. In this way there is an inevitable faith for an incomprehensible systemic intelligence which emerges from the intertwinings of unbounded selves (human and non-human). It is this systemic intelligence which is *for* the sustainability of the whole, and with it forms of continuance for the human species. This perspective is starkly counter to what has in the history of scientific research suggested to be its underlying faiths; that fixed and universal rules about causal effects between things exist and are fully knowable (Popper, 1974).

The conceptualisation of relational reflexivity offered in this paper seeks to unsettle predominant views of reflexivity by finding new possibilities and spaces for reflexivity which can help appreciations for, and adequate responses to, sustainability issues. The concept of relational reflexivity has developed existing ideas about reflexivity in relational thinking in three main ways. Firstly, it has suggested that reflexivity is applicable beyond debates about research methods with its implications extending in to ways of being and re-thinking being. Secondly, it builds upon the substantially dialogic views of reflexivity in relational thinking by arguing for the importance of taking account of materiality to respect ideas of onto-epistem-ology. Thirdly, through this heightened appreciation for the intermingling of



sociality and materiality, relational reflexivity has been created with an embedded ethic to centre the pressing issues of sustainability – it is a reflexivity for the nourishment of a greater whole.

In review, this paper has discussed how predominant ideas about reflexivity can be seen to be substantially located within ideas of bounded and independent selves. Relational thinking, which helps appreciate notions of unbounded selves and entanglement was explored to find alternative possibilities for reflexivity. It has been argued that potentials exist by locating reflexivity within the relations of an onto-episte-mology. To conceptualise what this means the concept of relational reflexivity has been offered and suggested to be a reflexivity for sustainability.

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