

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Psychology Faculty Works

Psychology

---

2018

### Human Essence: Toward A Relational Reconstruction

Kenneth J. Gergen

*Swarthmore College*, [kgergen1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:kgergen1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Kenneth J. Gergen. (2018). "Human Essence: Toward A Relational Reconstruction". *The Oxford Handbook Of The Human Essence*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/1067>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

### Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

Kenneth J. Gergen

The Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence

*Edited by Martijn van Zomeren and John F. Dovidio*

Print Publication Date: Jan 2018 Subject: Psychology, Social Psychology

Online Publication Date: Nov 2017 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247577.013.14

### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter opens with a social constructionist perspective on human essences. As proposed, essences are not given in nature, but constructed within cultural traditions. Thus, the major challenge is not that of “getting it right” about the essence, but generating accounts that may contribute to society. A criterion of reflective pragmatism is proposed in which questions of contribution and critique prevail. In this light the chapter places in critical light the bio-cognitive and neurological explanations of human nature, especially focusing on the ideological and political implications of these orientations. In contrast, discussion opens on relational conceptions of human essence. Several approaches are considered, including symbolic interactionism and object relations theory in psychoanalysis. However, a fully relational account abandons the individual as the fundamental unit of analysis in favor of relational process out of which the very conception of the individual is formed (or not). Several practical implications are treated including the potentials of relational responsibility

Keywords: bio-cognitive explanation, culture, reflective pragmatism, discourse analysis, essentialism, human nature, social construction, evolution, neurological explanation, relational responsibility

---

Scientific questions can be both productive and pernicious. To ask a question is to invite a reply, and under certain conditions such a reply might open new and exciting domains of inquiry and practice. Such is the case when we have asked about why objects fall to the earth, or inquired into the causes and cures of various diseases. Yet one must also be careful about the formulation of questions, as these formulations carry with them a penumbra of typically unarticulated assumptions. Psychologists have long inquired, for example, into the causes and cures of mental illness. The question seems productive enough. However, in the teaming energies devoted to answering such a question we have largely overlooked the hidden assumptions that there is indeed “mental illness” in the world, that human action is “caused,” that people labeled as mentally ill are defective, and that such people should be subjected to “cure.” Such assumptions are then disseminated into the culture, used by people to understand themselves, employed as cornerstones for professions such as psychiatry and clinical psychology, and realized in the poli-

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

cies of hospitals and insurance companies; they also stimulate the development of pharmaceuticals. The result is a steady expansion in diagnostic labels for mental illness, a mushrooming population of the “mentally ill,” and billions of dollars spent (p. 248) on drugs with no direct curative effects (Moncrief, 2009; Whitaker, 2010).

It is in this context that I wish to address the question of human essence. What is it that makes us fundamentally who we are? What, at the core, moves and motivates us? This is scarcely a new question. Most relevant to the present volume, the idea of an inner source of action can be traced to Aristotle’s *Da Anima*. As he reasoned, there must be an active force that animates the otherwise lifeless body. To this force he assigned the concept of what is generally translated as *psyche*. The *psyche* possesses the “power of producing both movement and rest.” Over later centuries the concept was incorporated into Christian theology as “the soul.” To commit a sin, within this tradition, is to act voluntarily, thus bringing the soul into a state of impurity. With the Enlightenment, the concept of soul was secularized and reconceptualized as the mind. It was left largely to 20th century psychology to re-define Aristotle’s *psyche* in a manner congenial with a positivist science. For psychologists, then, the question of human essence has typically been framed in terms of human nature, with debates variously organized around such antinomies as determinism versus free will, mechanistics versus humanistics, nature versus nurture, biological versus social determinants of behavior, and brain versus culture, among others. In each case the question has triggered vast new worlds of theory and research. Yet interesting to say, no clear and compelling answers have been forthcoming. Despite a century of empirical research, we remain locked in the same mystery of “What is it that causes us to behave as we do?”

In the present volume on human essences, the wheel turns once again, and we are introduced to an array of more recently accumulated orientations to this eternal question. However, rather than providing yet another answer, my aims in the present chapter are two-fold: First I wish to focus first on the very question: What are the assumptions behind the question of essences, could they be otherwise, and what would be the consequences? Here I wish to contrast the realist assumption that traditionally anchors the question of essence with a social constructionist orientation to knowledge. This discussion will give way to a critical examination of the now dominant bio/cognitive orientation to essences in psychology. If we reflect on the social consequences of this orientation, as a constructionist orientation invites, what is gained, what is lost? Then I shall outline the contours of a relational orientation to human essence. The focus shifts in this case from essences *within* the person to the motivating power of relational process. This account is offered not as a truth posit, but with an eye to its generative potential for societal practices.

## Human Essence: Cultural Construction and Consequence

As suggested in the opening paragraph, any inquiry into essence must necessarily proceed from specific traditions of understanding, their prevailing distinctions, the ways in which questions are constituted, procedures for reaching answers, and agreements as to the range of reasonable answers. The discursive conventions constituting these traditions will necessarily lay the groundwork for all that can be properly said about the matter. Thus, experimental social psychologists will never locate in their data evidence for the soul, nor will a priest ever conclude from his experience with parishioners that sin is the product of the hypothalamus. In a broader sense this is to say that there is no “getting it right” with respect to the nature of human (p. 249) essences. We cannot step outside all traditions to ask questions and offer intelligible replies. Indeed, we may say that the very inquiry into essences itself derives from a tradition of understanding. It is not a question that *must* be answered in order for us to achieve fundamental knowledge or an accurate picture of our condition in the world. Human essence is, after all, a “conversational object,” and inquiry into its character is optional.

These preliminary remarks are in no sense intended to demean the pursuit of the question. Rather, it is to invite even more serious attention to the issues at stake. As reasoned, accuracy in the matter cannot be our goal. We cannot measure our discourses about human essence against a set of observations, such that we can determine whether one perspective is more accurate than another. What constitutes a fact or a relevant observation in one tradition will fail to do so in another. This has indeed been a major source of indeterminacy in debates between anti-abortionists and women’s rights advocates. The former offer physiological evidence that a fetus becomes a human being soon after conception, while the latter eschew such evidence on the grounds that anti-abortionists bring anthropomorphic biases into their tissue readings. Empirical evidence is only evidence within a paradigm of understanding, and these paradigms can be lethal in their consequence. More broadly, this is to say that discussions about what is or is not human nature are, then, entries into moral and political deliberation. Or as Schwartz (1987) has put it, “Moral language is only sensible when applied to full-fledged people, and our understanding of the facts of human nature tells us who the full-fledged people are” (p. 311). We move, then, from accuracy as our criterion of concern, to societal consequences. What happens to our lives together on this planet when we place in motion a particular conception of human essence? Who gains, who loses, what happens to the quality of our lives and our relations with our surrounds? These are questions that themselves require answers from differing perspectives—each with its own assumptions, values, rationalities, and evidence. Required is indeed an open and continuing deliberation on what is the good.

In what follows I wish to bring critical attention to two accounts of human essence within contemporary scholarship. My concern is first with the confluence of cognitive, neurological and evolutionary/genetic conceptions of the human being that increasingly enter pub-

lic deliberations on society's future. I will then turn to a more recent development in the social sciences, namely a broad movement to re-conceptualize human essence in more social or relational terms. When understood in its radical form, we find that it is indeed relational process out of which the significance of "being human" emerges. As I will propose, a relational answer to the question of "what is human essence" has significant promise for future global life.

## Human Essence as Bio-Cognitive

Consciousness, like digestion, is a property of biological tissue.

*John Searle, The Rediscovery of the Mind*

There are numerous treatments of the ways in which psychologists have conceptualized human functioning over the past century (see, for example, Shotter, 1975; Leary, 1990). However, to underscore the socio-political significance of such conceptions, I wish to focus on a contemporary movement within psychology. It is a movement of particular importance because it represents the confluence of three (p. 250) longstanding metaphors of human nature and resultantly acquires substantial weight of authority. By taking a critical look at this movement, we will also be prepared to consider the relational developments to follow.

My concern, then, is with the emerging confluence among the cognitive, neurological, and evolutionary/genetic orientations to essence. Historically, the three orientations have not only tended toward separation but even antagonism. The cognitive view of human action holds that the chief determinants of behavior are located within ratiocinative systems such as thought, memory, planning, intending, and so on. Traditionally such views were allied with 19th century mentalism along with methods of introspection and theories of mental chemistry. In turn, this orientation to "the essence of human functioning" can be traced to Enlightenment conceptions of people as conscious agents of their own destiny. However, owing chiefly to the development of the computer in the waning decades of the 21st century, the cognitive vision of human nature turned mechanistic. With the conjoining of cognitive research and artificial intelligence programs, one could begin to understand all mental functioning in terms of computer mechanisms (i.e., information processing systems).

It was this latter move that established the groundwork for the subsequent alliance with the neurological vision of human essence. Psychological science had long resisted tendencies toward neurological explanation, as such explanation would ultimately mean the demise of psychology. If all mental states can be reduced to physiological states, and physiological processes can be observed in a way that psychological processes cannot, then psychological descriptions can be dismissed as so much folklore. However, with the mechanistic turn in cognitive psychology, the way was opened toward a congenial parallelism. That is, because both cognitive and physiological systems could be understood mechanistically, then it was inviting to see the two languages as describing "the same

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

thing,” only at different levels of functioning. Psychologists thus acquired important rhetorical support from a “natural science,” and the way was open for neurological scientists to appropriate an entire field of scientific psychology. With the development of brain scanning methods, researchers could (misleadingly) demonstrate *where* in the cortex various cognitive processes occur. Cognitive-neuroscience now dominates the landscape of psychological inquiry.

Evolutionary views of human essence have long had a voice in psychological science, but not always a favored one. Early in the 20th century, evolutionary theory—as a theory of instincts—enjoyed a certain prominence. However, with the hegemony of behaviorism, instinct explanations grew out of fashion. Not only did such explanations fly in the face of the optimistic vision of behaviorists, to wit, that all human behavior could be shaped for the better. But explanations by “instinct” seemed to superficially circumvent the real challenge of understanding how behavior patterns were acquired and extinguished in society. With the emergence of socio-biology in the latter half of the century, a form of instinct theory once again began to acquire status (Wilson, 2004). The fact that evolutionary accounts of human behavior could be congenially allied with developments in behavior genetics added significant weight to such explanations. And when fledgling cognitivists required fuel for undoing the behaviorist establishment in psychology, inherentist theories such as these became valuable allies. To the extent that the organism is genetically prepared to act in various (p. 251) ways, behaviorist views of environmental determinism are undone. The determinants of human action successfully shifted from environmentalist (“bottom up”) to nativist (“top down.”). And the biological basis of both evolutionary and neurological theory facilitated an alliance - even if superficial - among cognitive, neurological, and evolutionary perspectives.

At least within the United States the confluence of the cognitive, neuro, and evolutionary/genetic accounts of human nature constitute what many see as the core of contemporary psychological science. It is important to understand that none of the accumulated research findings in these combined areas in any way furnish a foundation for this amalgamated vision of human essence. All such facts are generated from within discursive traditions already in place. Without this interpretive forestructure there would be no “contributing facts.” How then might we evaluate this collective vision of human essence? As reasoned earlier, the important question concerns the socio-political implications. To what kind of society do we contribute when we understand human beings in just this way? These issues are especially significant, as this bio-cognitive perspective increasingly enters into the conversations of the culture. This is so from the various public accounts of the brain basis for altruism, crime, leadership, and morality, for example, to evolutionary basis for religion, prejudice, and deception and to the increasing number of cases in which education is reconceptualized as “brain training.”

As many see it, the adverse implications of this bio-cognitive confluence are substantial (Bellah et al. 1985; Leary, 2007; Gergen, 2009). Humanists have long been concerned with the way in which deterministic visions such as this undermine the cultural assumption of voluntary choice. With voluntarism impugned, we lose what many see as the es-

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

sential capacity to hold individuals responsible for their actions. Such misgivings are intensified in the present instance, because a reduction of human meaning to biological process would strip much of it of significance or value. If we were to replace the vocabulary of emotion, for example, with the more precise vocabulary of neurological correlates, valued traditions would crumble. To replace the phrase, “I love you” with, “my medulla oblongata is stimulated by you,” for example, would undermine the entire tradition in which words of love play a pivotal role. This would include all terms of endearment, terms that solidify relations and build trust.

Yet the humanists are scarcely alone in their concerns. As many hold, there is implicit political conservatism of the bio-cognitive conception. If patterns of human behavior are prepared by evolution and locked into the nervous system, then our contemporary patterns of behavior are more or less here to stay. Race prejudice, rape, oppression, and war are simply expressions or outcomes of human nature. Feminists have been particularly vociferous in their antagonism to such views, for evolutionary theory in particular is used to rationalize patterns of male promiscuity and aggression (Fausto-Sterling, 1985). In this sense, philandering and marital breakdown are simply among the enduring facts of life. Issues of morality or responsibility are largely irrelevant.

The bio-cognitive vision of human nature also has implications for policies of social control. By implication, undesirable behavior such as crime or dysfunctional behavior (e.g., “mental illness”) are locked into the nervous system. If we wish to eliminate crime, our best option is to remove “the criminal element” from the streets. Attention to such issues as economic disparity and ethnic prejudice are thus replaced (p. 252) with the development of more punitive laws and larger prisons. In the case of socially dysfunctional behavior, the invitation is to “change the brain.” If a school child fails to pay attention, the likely result will be a diagnosis of ADHD and a prescription for AderoI. Neither the techno-scape of the child nor the slow pace of traditional pedagogical practices are brought into question. In effect, the bio-cognitive orientation has contributed to a culture in which almost a tenth of the population either has or will be “treated” with psychotropic drugs.

Further, the bio-cognitive account of human nature discourages the envisioning of alternative futures. If we are hard wired to engage in deceit, oppression, and war, for example, there is little reason to open deliberation on whether we might create alternative forms of life. We might reasonably think in terms of control by force, but discouraged is the active search for means of establishing ways of life in which these forms of activity would be unthinkable or rendered irrelevant.

Yet over and above these socio-political shortcomings, there is an overarching problem which bio-cognitive advocates share with much of the remainder of the field. It is essentially a problem of boundaries. That is, the prevailing view of human essence treats the individual as a bounded being, one who possesses within (the body, the cortex, the mind, the genes) the major determinants of action. Or as Edward Sampson (2008) has put it, the vision is of a “self-contained individual” (p. 16). We are asked, then, to view society as composed of fundamentally separate or alienated entities, each seeking ends that are

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

largely self-sustaining or self-gratifying. We create the sense of a Hobbesian world of “all against all.” We come to believe that people’s concerns for others are highly delimited—largely based on individual gratification (“enlightened individualism”) or the desire to perpetuate one’s genes. Concern with “myself” is also invited to ensure that we are not of lesser value than others and, more hopefully, “better than others.” Social life is thus rife with competition and anxiety over personal failure. And from this standpoint human relationships are artificial byproducts of otherwise separate individuals; human relationships are secondary to and derivative of individual actions. Relationships are to be valued only when one is unable to function autonomously. An instrumental orientation to others is invited, in which we evaluate others in terms of “what can they do for me?” As many see it, this individualist ideology already undergirds many of our major institutions (education, law, and virtually all large organizations). We thus reap a harvest of conflict, anxiety, loneliness, conformity, manipulation, and exploitation.

## The Human as Relational Being

Human beings are constituted in conversation.

*Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self*

It is one thing to fault psychology’s prevailing view of human essence for its individualist ideology. Yet it is quite another to formulate an alternative in which the “I” is replaced by the “we,” that is, in which relational process takes precedence over individual functioning. This is so, in part, because for over three centuries most all major conceptions of the human being in the West have shared in the presumption of bounded being. History has supplied over two thousand terms for psychological functioning, a vast number central to our everyday pursuits. It is difficult to imagine cultural life without reference to terms such as “thinking,” “believing,” “wanting,” “feeling,” and “intending.” If we are to speak of human essence all, we can scarcely leap out of these traditions. Even the traditional conception (p. 253) of relationship presumes the existence of at least two fundamentally separate elements that come together to form a relationship.

How, then, are we to formulate a viable and compelling account of human essence that makes intelligible our inherent interweaving and in which separation constitutes an unnatural and artificial condition? Further, could we articulate a relational account that might sustain what is meaningful and valuable in cultural life, encourage innovation, and avoid tendencies toward conservatism and social control? Attempts to conceptualize the individual as a social actor have long been fixtures on the intellectual landscape (Burkitt, 2008; Taylor, 1992; Curtis, 1991) Even those within the bio-cognitive tradition have searched for ways to link the self-contained elements of mind/brain to the social world. In perhaps the most ambitious of these attempts, van Zomeren (2016) posits a biologically prepared motivation to generate and successfully maintain social relationships.



## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

During the past decade, however, the hegemony of the bio-cognitive view, and the mounting critiques of this view, have ignited a new wave of socially-centered theories (Kirschner and Martin, 2010). While providing significant resources for seeing human essence as relational, there are also significant differences among theoretical positions. These differences have important socio-political implications. For analytic purposes it is useful to consider three lines of thought, varying in terms of their congeniality with traditional individualism as opposed to the primacy of relationship. Consideration of the first two will be brief, as it is the third that is most radical in its essentializing of relationship.

### Individuals as Cultural Carriers

That persons are influenced by their cultural surrounds is a virtual truism for psychology. This was most obviously the case during the halcyon years of behaviorism and still remains vital in many areas of psychology. Yet relational reconstructions radically alter our understanding of this process. As outlined earlier, the presumption prevails in contemporary psychology that the individual is endowed with certain psychological structures or processes. For the behaviorist the human learns about the external world, but the fundamental process of learning is not thereby altered; for cognitivists the external world provides raw resources for appropriation by neurologically based cognitive appetites. In neither case is the mental fundament itself produced, extinguished, or transformed by the social world. It is precisely this latter move that characterizes a range of recent attempts at relational reconstitution. As variously reasoned, it is not the self-contained individual who precedes culture, but the culture that establishes the basic character of psychological functioning.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory provided the initial stimulus for this line of reasoning. More recently, Bruner's (1993) influential work has drawn sustenance from Vygotsky in proposing that "it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system" (p. 34). Similarly, James Gee (1992) argues that "the individual interprets experience by forming "folk theories," which together with nonlinguistic modules of the mind, cause the person to talk and act in certain ways . . ." (p. 104). These attempts to conceptualize individual process begin to undermine the bifurcation between self and other. Our very essence is that of cultural carrier.

Yet for many, such theorizing remains insufficient. There is, first of all, the paramount question of how the mind can be (p. 254) culturally formed. As I have argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1994), if all mental process is built up from social process, then we are left without an account of how this "building of the mind" can get under way. Presumably the individual would have no mental processes to enable him or her to understand and absorb the lessons of the culture. In effect, if the mind is a "blank slate," how can the social world be comprehended? Yet if mental process is required in order to understand the social world, then the mental must precede the social. The social view of the individual threatens to collapse. On the socio-political level, many also find the view of humans as cultural carriers too deterministic. If our actions are supplied and made intelligible by a

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

cultural tradition that precedes us, it is difficult to understand how change is possible. If all one has available is cultural tradition, then how can one use the tradition to escape its grasp? Radical innovation is impossible.

### Inter-subjective Selves

Selves can only exist in relationship to other selves.

*George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society*

Among the first psychological accounts of the self as fundamentally relational were those of Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934). For Cooley one's conception of self was a reflection of other's views of oneself. In effect, the sense of self was inextricably woven into the social milieu. George Herbert Mead's classic work *Mind, self and society* provided a far more sophisticated account of this process. As Mead proposed, there is no thinking, or indeed any sense of being a self, that is independent of social process. For Mead, we are born with rudimentary capacities to adjust to each other, largely in response to gestures—with the hands, vocal sounds, facial expressions, and so on. It is through others' responses to our gestures that we slowly begin to develop the capacities for mental symbolization; or in effect, our gestures and the reactions they elicit from others come to be represented mentally. Language becomes possible when people share a common set of mental symbols, for example, when words call forth the same symbols to both parties in a conversation. Because each of us draws our sense of self from others, we are thus thoroughly interrelated. For Mead (1934), "No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such in our experience also" (p. 164).

Drawing from an entirely different ontology of the mind, the *object relations* theorists in psychoanalysis reached resonant conclusions. In the early contributions, theorists such as Klein, Fairbairn, and Bowlby attempted to amend Freudian drive theory to include the emergence of social dispositions. Thus, for example Klein (2002) proposed that the process of thinking begins when the infant must compare his/her phantasy with reality, and that during the childhood years, life-long dispositions toward the social world are established. In more recent years, object relations theory has given over to relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1988). Here the focus on the individual's dispositions toward others has been replaced by a major concern with inter-subjective dynamics. As it is reasoned, in our relations with each other, we are engulfed by psychic processes of phantasy, desire, repression, and unconscious motivation. And because our actions affect each other's psychic life, our subjectivities are inextricably inter-woven.

Yet while challenging on both intellectual and practical grounds, there are (p. 255) reasons to press beyond the inter-subjective account of relational process. Not the least of these is the same mind/world dualism inherent in preceding accounts—including the bio/cognitive. Such a dualism is especially problematic in the case of professional practices such as psychotherapy. At the outset is the problem of introspection, that is, how one is to

identify one's own states of mind. How can the mind turn back on itself to discern its dynamics, its emotional conditions, its motivations, and so on? Coupled with this problem is the hermeneutic challenge of interpreting the conditions of others' minds. How can one justifiably infer psychological states from others' words or actions? If the only means of verifying one's inferences is through other words and actions, one enters an infinite regress of speculation. In effect, once we posit minds within bodies, we confront an intractable enigma of explaining inter-subjective connection.

## The Relational Constitution of Self

In the beginning is the relationship.

*Martin Buber, I and Thou*

There is a third and more radically relational account of essences, one that takes relational process as a fundamental prior to the conception of individual self. The inspiration for this orientation comes not from psychology, but linguistic philosophy and literary theory. Focal in the former case is Wittgenstein's (1953) account of the origins of meaning in language games. Or effectively, the meaning of any word derives from its use within social relations. In the case of literary theory, Mikhail Bakhtin (1975) has played a critical role in his pointing to the way our utterances are not only dependent on a cultural tradition of language use, but are also addressed to others in a specific context of interchange. Or one might say our actions are made intelligible only by virtue of a relational history and are enacted for others with anticipated consequences. For present purposes, there are two major consequences of such proposals. First, rather than commencing with the assumption of independent selves from which relationships are derived, we begin with the assumption of social process from which the very concept of independent persons may (or may not) emerge (Gergen, 2009). Second, in such accounts, the mind-world binary is eradicated. Because all statements about the nature of the reality gain their intelligibility through discursive traditions, this would include the "reality of mind" (Rorty, 1979). Thus, rather than placing mental activity somewhere toward the center of the relational formulation, we may abandon mind-world dualism and allow social process to serve as the essential fulcrum of explanation. That is, we may bracket all accounts of psychological states and conditions as essences and reconstitute psychological predicates within the sphere of social process.

Within psychology, one important opening to this more radical conception of the relational emerges from contemporary discourse analysis. Such analysis typically focuses on the pragmatics of discourse use. In the case of mental discourse, then, the analyst is less concerned with the mental phenomena to which such discourse may or may not refer, than with the way it functions within relationships. For example, in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) ground breaking work, the concept of "attitude" is shorn of mental referents and, as they see it, serves to index positional claims within social intercourse. An "attitude," then, is essentially a social claim ("I feel . . ." "My view is . . ." "I prefer. . ."), not an ex-

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

ternal expression of an internal impulse. Similarly, Billig (1996) demonstrates how we may (p. 256) understand “thinking” not as a mental process, but as a rhetorical skill. By the same token, we may understand memory not as a mental event but as the outcome of social negotiation. Or as Shotter (1990) proposes, memory is not so much in the head as it is a “social achievement.”

Yet it is also clear that the focus on discourse is insufficient. A fully developed account of a relational essence would ideally include fully embodied patterns of interdependence (Slife, 2004). This has indeed been the direction of my own work (especially Gergen, 2009). To illustrate, consider the case of emotion. To be sure, emotional discourse terms may serve as key elements of conversation (e.g., “That makes me angry,” “Do you love me?”). Yet these terms are also embodied, in the sense that without certain patterns of facial expression, tone of voice, posture and so on, they would lose their intelligibility. In effect, we may say that emotional expressions are forms of cultural performance. Like language, such performances are rendered intelligible by virtue of their cultural history. One doesn’t possess an emotion so much as he or she engages in the *doing of an emotion*. The question is not, then, whether one is truly feeling love, sadness, or depression, but whether he or she is fully engaged in such performances. And should one be physically alone and “feeling an emotion,” he or she would be engaged in a minimal or partial performance (similar to reciting the lines of a play “in one’s head”). In effect, our emotional lives depend importantly on relational history.

At the same time, these embodied performances of emotion are also embedded within patterns of ongoing interchange. They are entries into the ongoing process of relating. We may use the term “relational scenario” in referring to the culturally sedimented patterns of interchange (*lived narratives*), within which emotional performances can play an important role. Thus, for example, the performance of *anger* (complete with discourse, facial expressions, postural configurations) is typically embedded within a scenario in which a preceding *affront* may be required to legitimate its meaning as anger. (One cannot simply shout out in anger for no reason; to do so would be to exit the corridors of intelligibility.) Further, one’s performance of anger also sets the stage for the subsequent performance of an *apology* or a *defense* on the part of another. And if an apology is offered, a common response in Western culture is *forgiveness*. At that juncture the scenario may be terminated. All the actions making up the sequence, from affront to forgiveness, require each other to achieve legitimacy. In effect, they are co-constituted (Slife, 2004). To be recognizably human is to participate successfully within the dances of relationship.

## Relational Being and Future Making

These attempts to generate a more relational conception of human nature are yet in their infancy. At the same time, it is not the truth of these accounts that is most important. As advanced earlier, it is to their contribution to cultural life that we must turn for evaluation. In this case, the potentials of the relational turn cannot be underestimated. Within the Western tradition the individual human being has served as the central rationalizing

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

device for most of our major institutions (e.g., democracy, public education, corporations, law). We now confront the possibility of developing intelligibilities that go beyond the identification of separable units—I versus you, we versus them—and that may create the reality of a more fundamental relatedness, the palpability of inseparability. The tendency to view the social world as constituted by individual (p. 257) units—whether selves or groups (and by implication ethnicities, classes, institutions and nations)—may be replaced by a concern with the relational processes by which the very idea of individual units (selves, groups and so on) come into being. The focus moves from the dancers to the dance.

To illustrate, consider the longstanding tradition of holding individuals responsible for their actions. This presumption is not only built into Western systems of law, but on the level of everyday life, rationalizes our attempts to reinforce the social order. Yet we are also well aware that these same traditions of individual responsibility are often alienating. The discourse of blame functions much like criticism, in that the target is typically degraded, set apart from the community that judges. In the process of blame, the vast sea of complexity in which any action is submerged is removed from view, and the single individual serves as the sole origin of the untoward act.

Yet if we shift our sites from the individual to relational process a range of new possibilities emerge. We may indeed begin to think in terms of *relational responsibility*, that is, how it is that we can sustain the process of meaning making without which all that we hold as intelligible or valuable decays (McNamee and Gergen 1999). Here we may begin to seek alternatives to our rituals of individual blame. In what ways can we speak together, such that we may replace patterns of blame, mutual recrimination and separation with the collaborative generation of meaning? What form of dialogue might alter or terminate the unwanted action but simultaneously sustain a relationship of mutual respect?

The shift from individual to relational responsibility is but one conceptual leap of great promise. We begin to ask new questions and generate new visions of action. Consider as well the following vistas opened by a conception of relational essence:

- Political life is typically constructed in terms of oppositions, with one party, group, or faction pitted against another. The traditional construction of separation now gives way to possibilities of shared investments. Or more generally we may think in terms of moving from a competitive to a *relational politics*. Here we move from *we versus them* to *we together*, which means placing the primary emphasis on decision making in the context of relations with the greater society. In relational politics, party loyalty gives way to concerns for the greater array of societal relations of which party members are a part.
- Identity is not derived from the nature of the world. (There are no necessary or natural distinctions among persons or groups.) Rather, identity is a relational achievement. Invited, then, is an obscuring of the demarcation lines separating either individuals or groups (e.g., professional, political, ethnic, national, religious). Invited are con-

cepts and practices that enable a continuous flow of meaning making across all boundaries.

- Prejudice does not originate in the individual mind. Prejudicial action is meaningful only within culturally specific traditions. As the traditions are handed down through history so is prejudicial action invited. In this sense, all of us are capable of prejudicial actions. By the same token, we are all capable of loving, caring, and communally responsible action. The challenge is to selectively cultivate and transform practices of relationship.
- We may challenge the view that there is a natural (biological, genetic) basis for intergroup antagonism (as socio-biologists, ethologists, and Freudians are (p. 258) wont to argue). Violence is a meaningful integer in a relational dance; this dance is rooted in historical convention and is subject to change both on the grass-roots and policy levels. To avoid the outbreak of hostilities requires stepping out of the traditional dances and locating alternatives to the rituals of *we* versus *them*.
- Societal transformation is not a matter of changing minds and hearts, political values, or the sense of the good. Rather, transformation will require unleashing the positive potential inherent in relational process. The challenge is to create relational practices that enable collective transformation.

Nor are these simply idle visions. One may now locate multiple contexts in which relational theory now informs, nourishes, and inspires the development of cultural practices. In the area of conflict resolution, for example, there is a significant movement toward creating new and more promising forms of dialogue (Sampson et al., 2010). In the domain of organizational change, there are attempts to replace command and control as the stimulus to change with practices of inclusion from which the organization's future is charted (Cooperrider et al., 1999). Many therapists are now replacing the traditional metaphor of therapy as medical cure with practices emphasizing the collaborative creation of new realities (see, for example, McLeod, 1997; Westerman & Steen, 2007). In education, there are significant moves toward expanding dialogic and collaborative forms of pedagogy (Dragonas et al., 2015). In effect, the relational metaphor of essence is entering directly into cultural life to inform its practices. And there is good reason to anticipate an increasing need for relational accounts of human essence. This is so because the technologies of today—television, internet, cell phones, jet transportation, and social media, among others—bring the world's peoples together as never before. Everywhere we confront cultural differences, innovation, and demands for adaptation. The resulting need for theoretical deliberation on relational process is acute.

## Conclusion

If concepts of human essence are culturally constructed, we may not only anticipate but also welcome multiple and non-convergent perspectives. Each perspective represents a cultural tradition, harbors values, and invites a range of actions. In this context we may suspend the question of empirical justification and take a more pragmatic orientation. In

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

effect, what do these various perspectives offer to the culture? On this account, attempts to amass research support are far less important than pursuing the potentials of the theoretical vision for enriching the future of society. By way of illustration, I have raised critical questions about the now-dominant view of persons as essentially bio-cognitive in nature. In contrast, I have outlined the development of a relational orientation to human action, one that places relational process over individual functioning in our understanding. I have proposed that such a perspective replaces the implicit conservatism of the bio-cognitive position with an invitation to create forms of dialogic and collaborative practices that are vitally needed for global well-being.

### Further Reading

Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kirschner, S. R., & Martin, J. (Eds.) (2010). *The sociocultural turn in psychology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Taylor, C. (1992). *Sources of the self: The making of modern identity*. Cambridge, England: Harvard University Press.

### References

Bakhtin, M. (1975). *The dialogic imagination* (M. Holquist, Ed., and Trans. & C. Emerson, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individuals and commitment in American life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Billig, M. (1996). *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology*. Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press.

Bruner, J. (1993). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Burkitt, I. (2008). *Social selves: Theories of self and society* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner & Sons.

Cooperrider, D. L., Sorenson, P., Jr., Whitney, D., & Yaeger, T. F. (Eds.) (1999). *Appreciative inquiry: Rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change*. Champaign, IL: Stipes.

Dragonas, T., Gergen, K. J., McNamee, S., & Tseliou, E. (Eds.) (2015). *Education as social construction*. Chagrin Falls, OH: WorldShare Books.

## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

Curtis, R. C. (Ed.) (1991). *The relational self*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (1985). *Myths of gender: Biological theories about women and men*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gee, J.P. (1992). *The social mind: Language, ideology and social practice*. New York: Bergin and Garvey.

Gergen, K.J. (1994). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kirschner, S. R., & Martin, J. (Eds.) (2010). *The sociocultural turn in psychology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Klein, M. (2002). *Love, guilt, and reparation: And other works 1921-1945*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Koch, S., & Leary, D. E. (Eds.) (1992). *A century of psychology as science*. Washington, DC: APA Publications.

Leary, D. (Ed.) (1990). *Metaphors in the history of psychology*. New York: Cambridge.

Leary, M. (2007). *The curse of the self: Self-awareness, egotism, and the quality of life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McLeod, J. (1997). *Narrative and psychotherapy*. London, England: Sage.

McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mitchell, S. A. (1988). *Relational concepts in psychoanalysis: An integration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moncrief, J. (2009). *The myth of the chemical cure: A critique of psychiatric drug cure*. London, England: Palgrave.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London, England: Sage.

Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sampson, C., Abu-Nimer, M., Liebler, C, & Whitney, D. (Eds.) (2010). *Positive approaches to peacebuilding: A resource for innovators*, Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.



## Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction

---

Sampson, E. E. (2008). *Celebrating the other: A dialogic account of human nature*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.

Schwartz, B. (1987). *The battle for human nature: Science, morality and modern life*. New York: Norton.

Shotter, J. (1975). *Images of man in psychological research*. London, England: Methuen.

Shotter, J. (1990). The social construction of remembering and forgetting. In D. Middleton and D. Edwards. (Eds.) *Collective remembering*. London: Sage.

Slife, B. (2004). Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24, 157-178.

van Zomeren, M. (2016). *From self to social relationships: An essentially relational perspective on social motivation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Westerman, M., & Steen, E. M. (2007). Going beyond the internal-external dichotomy in clinical psychology: The theory of interpersonal defense as an example of the participatory approach. *Theory and Psychology*, 17, 323-351.

Wilson, E.O. (2004). *On human nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Whitaker, R. (2010). *Anatomy of an epidemic*. New York, NY: Crowne Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Ed.). Oxford, England: Blackwell. (p. 260)

### **Kenneth J. Gergen**

Kenneth J. Gergen Department of Psychology Swarthmore College Swarthmore, PA, USA