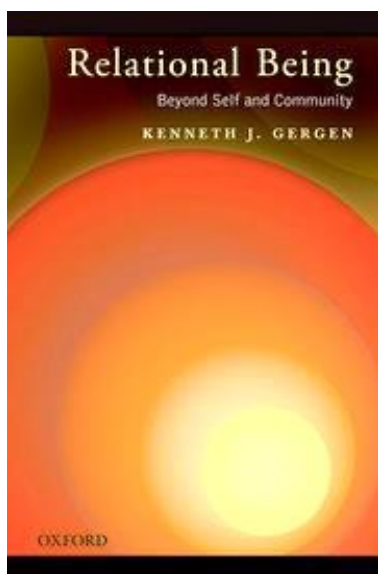


# JOURNEYING WITH RELATIONSHIP

A personal response to:



Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational Being: Beyond Self and community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (originally printed in the *Psychotherapy and the Arts* newsletter, (2010).

*Timing is everything when it comes to book and ideas, and this book by Ken Gergen arrived just at the right moment for me in my intellectual and professional life. My work over many years with people with dementia had underlined the centrality of relationship, for as so often happens, people in extreme situations of need can point the way to what are the really important things for human beings. Through the people with dementia, I became aware that our society's over-emphasis on the individual without regard to relationship and context can serve to pathologise individuals and rob people of their personhood. This added to my studies in person-centred practice and post-modern thought, made me more than ready to engage with Gergen's ideas.*

From: *Heather Hill (2018)*

*"I am who I am because of who we all are"*  
(Gergen, p.388)

This is a book with a large vision and a courageous writer willing to grasp the nettle and make an inspired attempt to take the concept of relational being and apply it to a totality of our lived experience. Gergen's relational view is one I very much share, but I have struggled even in my little part of the care/therapy world to advocate for it or to even totally embody it. I am therefore in awe that Gergen, armed with a relational perspective, has taken on the world. I loved this book. While the scope and the density of ideas could be quite daunting, I found myself carried along by the flow of the work. At the time of my first reading last year, I was teaching an intensive four day course. As I travelled into the city each day by train, I was reading "Relational Being" and wildly scribbling notes on significant points. My students became used to my enthusiastic sharing at morning check in time of yet another inspiring Gergen idea!

There is no way that I can do justice here to all the ideas Gergen explores. However, I will try to capture the flavour of the book and hope it encourages your curiosity to read it for yourself. It is decidedly not a book of dogma but a book which invites a willingness from the reader to re-look at our usual ways of being, thinking and doing.

First some comments on the territory Gergen covers. It's vast. Section 1 of the book – From

Bounded to Relational Being – puts forward his basic arguments for a relational perspective. The sections which follow are broadly divided into "Relational being in everyday life", "Relational Being in professional practice" and "From the moral to the sacred", each of which are further sub-divided.

Consistent with his relational message, Gergen has chosen to include multiple voices in his text; his own (multiple) voices along with those of friends and colleagues; what he calls "aesthetic voices" (p.xxv), ie quotations from a wide ranging literature, and "the critic". Recognising that traditional professional writing "is a genre that separates the knowing author from the ignorant reader; it positions the author as the owner of his or her ideas; it often portrays the author as one whose mind is fully coherent, confident, and conflict free", he consciously opts to explore a form of writing "that more fully embodies the relational thesis." (p.xxv). Very importantly, Gergen concludes: "By juxtaposing mixed genres, my hope is to avoid distinct closure of meaning. A space is opened for the reader to generate new associations and images" (p.xxvi). For me as reader, the layers and changing rhythms provided by the multiple voices also made this text much more accessible and pleasurable to read.

Gergen also acknowledges the shoulders he stands on – his "textual companions". Again this seems very consistent with his relational approach and displays a humility which allows

Gergen to emerge as much more human and more of an intelligent inquirer than an expert authorial voice. I had quite a chuckle over some of the Kenneth-the-man anecdotes, especially a certain Mary and Kenneth moment. (You'll have to read the book to find out!)

Bauman (2001) has written that society is a "factory of meanings" and that over time, certain ideas become hegemonic. In our western society, a dualist view (mind-body, you-me, either – or) remains the dominant paradigm, as is a dedication to the individual. This hegemonic world view is what Gergen is taking on. However, he is clear that he is not offering an alternative "truth", nor is he writing an academic treatise. Rather he hopes to offer "*a compelling construction of the world, an inviting vision, or a lens of understanding – all realized or embodied in relevant action. The account is not a set of marching orders, but an invitation to a dance*" (p.xxv). For me as a dancer, this is eminently appealing!

Gergen states his aims thus:

*My attempt in this work is to remove the reality of a distinctly inner or mental world. This is not to replace it with a behaviourist view of "everything on the surface." Rather, the attempt is to eliminate the very distinction between inner and outer, and to replace it with a view of relationally embodied action. (p.xx)*

Gergen starts by addressing the traditionally individualist view of self – "bounded being" - and offers instead the concept of "multi being". He replaces cause and effect with "mutual confluence" and isolated, individual action with the concept of "co-action". "*In the tradition of bounded being, the person was isolated; reason functioned most perfectly in a social vacuum. In contrast, the multi-being is socially embedded, fully engaged in the flow of relationship*"(p.137). He acknowledges how language itself mediates against a relational view and this is one I as a dance therapist have often struggled with, as I've tried to communicate that most basic of dance therapy tenets, namely that "mind" and "body" are not separate – for in talking of two "things" (mind AND body), I am still using dualistic language. This separation, says Gergen, is more a state of language than a state of nature.

*What if there were no nouns? Would our world remain composed of distinct and separate things? What if our only language for describing the world were dance? The movements of the body are continuous, and it is difficult to separate the*

*flow of action into discrete, noun-like entities; like waves of the ocean it is not clear where one movement ends and another begins. If we used dance to teach our children about the world, the world might not appear to us as separated entities. The child might discover a world of endless movement, not discrete "forms" but continuous "forming". The child might never ask if it were possible to separate the dancers from the dance. (p.30)*

Needless to say all dancers in the world would concur with that! We dancers know that in dancing with the "other", the dance is a co-creation out of which no separation can be made.

Having set out a relational perspective, he now proceeds to take this out into the world. This is where the real stretching happens for we live in a world still wedded to and imbued with individualism and dualism. Whether all Gergen's arguments are "successful", I would not presume to comment, but I think that would be missing the point anyway. For what Gergen is doing is breaking fresh ground, by attempting to reframe our world within a relational perspective and thereby expand possibilities upon which those who follow may add.

There were many "significant" points that I noted as I read the book, but will merely focus on some of the ideas related to therapy, which is the major interest of readers of this newsletter. Coming with a relational perspective to this area means addressing where the "problem" is situated, the aims of therapy, and the nature of the therapeutic relationship. Not all of this will necessarily be new to therapists currently working in the field, but framing these aspects within a relational lens offers a shift in perspective on the "state" of the field – its varied approaches, benefits and limitations.

Gergen firstly examines how we might examine the concept of "the problem". In our society with its focus on "bounded" being, the problem is "in" the individual. Furthermore, the problem often is defined by a diagnostic label, reflecting the tendency in our culture to pathologise difference. He submits that the problem is not a problem by its *nature* so much as through its *relationship to context*. What is a problem in one society, one context, may not be a problem in others. "*In a world where all hear voices, beware the one who fails to do so*" (p.275). Problems are social constructions.

Gergen spends some time addressing the biological explanation for behavioural/emotional

problems and our increasing dependence on drugs. As he says, this is not to say that there is not a good argument for the “cautious use” (p.281) of psychotropic drugs. However, it is to issue a caution against a reductive view of the complexity of human experience (ie biological explanation), a view which dominates and silences other views and voices.

*Silenced is discussion of the historical and cultural processes of meaning-making, processes that define what counts as a problem and a solution. Attention is removed from the cultural surrounds contributing to states of anguish. We cease to focus on the co-active process from which the meaning of life events is derived. Minority voices go unheard, and the capacities of people together to foster resiliency are undermined.* (p.281)

For me, this comes back to rejecting a one truth approach, whether it be to do with therapy, research, or understandings of human experience generally. Just as “problems” are social constructions so are determinations of what constitutes good treatment, successful therapy. Gergen believes that the reasoning behind the emphasis on evidence-based practice – “let us honour those therapies most likely to guarantee us something for our money” - is “blind to the relational context that grants to therapy its efficacy”(p.277) and indeed has increased rivalries between various therapies. This arises from a belief that one or other can be established as the truth, which he sees as an “attempt ..to establish a foundation for therapy that does not depend upon the negotiations of people in relationship” (p.276). He decries the politicisation occurring around which therapies are best value for money. “To reduce the range of reimbursable practices to a handful – as therapists and policy makers are wont to do – is not to render therapy more effective. It is to withdraw valuable assistance to those seeking help” (p.276).

For Gergen, the therapeutic relationship is about engagement in an ongoing flow of relationship and is improvisational. Therapist and client are “engaged in a subtle and complex dance of co-action, a dance in which meaning is continuously in motion, and the outcomes of which may transform the relational life of the client” (p.282). And of course, this relational engagement goes beyond the room, out into the whole relational web of the client’s life. Gergen states “It is not mind-repair that is ultimately at stake, from a relational perspective, but relational transformation” (p.277).

This chapter has several examples of current therapeutic approaches which meet to some degree the challenges set from a relational perspective. Gergen wants to go beyond these, by questioning the desire for a “fixed end” to therapy, for how can this be achieved in a world of ongoing motion and relational flow. Successful therapy may be seen as having the client replace a negative with a positive narrative; Gergen brings us back to a concept of multi-being and asks:

*Would it not be more functional for an individual to have a repertoire of available selves than a single ‘true’ understanding? Would it not be better to have multiple ‘lenses’ for comprehending the world than a single lens, a multiplicity of narratives than a singular ‘narrative truth’? (p.304)*

Anticipating that many might balk at this, Gergen allows his critic to have a say and indeed acknowledges, through an example, that for some such freedom would not necessarily be appropriate or helpful. His question then is: “To what extent, in the present world, should our therapeutic practices nourish an appreciation of ambiguity and the joy of improvisation? (p.306)”

In this much more democratic, co-active and relational approach to therapy, it is only logical to do as Gergen does, which is to push beyond “thinking” (defined in purely cognitive terms) and the emphasis on “talk”. I am reminded here of the work of Heron and Reason, who introduced the concept of an extended epistemology: experiential (knowing through direct experience), presentational (performative e.g. knowing through the arts) propositional (conceptual), and practical (through action) knowing. There are many different ways to know, think and talk – not all cognitive or verbal. As a dance therapist, I would particularly highlight the aspect that we cannot focus solely on the disembodied mind, and that in some way the body needs acknowledgement within the therapeutic relationship as a mode of knowing. Gergen: “In each new way of talking lies the potential for a new way of relating” (p.291).

Gergen goes on to describe the performative approaches of Fred Newman and the East Side Institute. I might also add here the work of the Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy, which has developed a form of multi-modal inquiry which can be used in a therapeutic context – it emphasises the experiential, the relational, and multi-modal ways of knowing (not only through the arts, but

intuition, imagination etc.) Therapy for them is about journeying together with a person as s/he inquires into some aspect of his/her life.

Gergen's "*ultimate hope is for therapy that can liberate participants from static and delimiting conventions of understanding and facilitate unthrottled engagement in the ongoing flow of relationship. As I see the therapeutic challenge, it is to facilitate participation in the continuous flow of co-creation*" (p.306).

And, there is so much more as Gergen addresses other parts of our world.....

I feel I have only been able to give you a small taste of this book. It is a book which offers challenges to ways of thinking many of us may be on the way to giving up – but not quite! He gives examples where new ways of doing and thinking are already being embodied in our world. This challenges us to push beyond the known, the "normal". While I have given attention here to the chapter on therapy, it is really the overall underlying concept of relationship and the boldness to push boundaries, which makes this book particularly worth reading. It invites reflection, questioning, conversation and visioning of possibilities beyond current cultural norms.

#### **Further resources:**

Bauman, I. (2001). *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity Press  
East Side Institute:  
<http://www.eastsideinstitute.org/>

Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT) [www.miecat.org.au](http://www.miecat.org.au)

Forum: Qualitative Social Research (open access online journal). Special issue on performative social science <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/index>

Extended Epistemology – brief summary of participator research and extended epistemology of John Heron and Peter Reason can be found on <http://www.human-inquiry.com/partknow.htm> review.



*Heather has been a dance movement therapist since 1985, over time coming to specialise in working with people with dementia. She also consults in person-centred practice and has brought body experiences into*

*training staff and working with couples living with dementia. Through her dementia work in particular, she came to realize how important it is to move beyond a focus on the individual, hence her enthusiasm for this book.*

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