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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Self as Social Construction

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**Abstract** The paper begins with the articulation of key assumptions central to contemporary constructionist scholarship. This is followed by an analysis of the issues in the social construction of the self. To this end several major lines of inquiry along with their socio-political implications are brought into focus. Finally, an alternative to traditional conceptions of self, one that emerges distinctly from social constructionist theory is presented.

**Keywords** Culture · Community · Individualism · Language · Relational Self · Social construction

## Introduction

In treating the social construction of self it is first necessary to sketch the contours of the terrain. At the outset, there is the matter of the self. History has prepared us to speak of the self in many different ways, and some of these are more central to constructionist concerns than others. My particular concern in the present paper will be with a family of uses that generally refer to a psychological or mental world within the individual. The members of this family are many and varied. We variously speak of persons as possessing mental concepts of themselves, and it is often said that these concepts are saturated with value, that they may be defective or dysfunctional, that they figure importantly in the individual's rational calculus, and that they ultimately supply resources for the exercise of personal agency. And too, many simply identify the process of conscious choice as equivalent to the individual self. Such assumptions are deeply embedded in Western culture and provide the under-girding rationale for practices of jurisprudence, childrearing, education, counseling, and psychotherapy, among others. Further, such assumptions furnish the basis for much research in psychology. While the particular conceptions of Western culture are not widely shared, similarities in concern with a mental world of the individual may be located in many cultures of the world.

With this particular focus on self in place, I shift attention to the matter of social construction. In this case, it is important to outline some of the major assumptions that play themselves out in contemporary constructionist scholarship. This will prepare the ground for treating issues in the social construction of the self. Here I will discuss several major lines of inquiry along with their socio-political implications. Finally, I will introduce an alternative to traditional conceptions of self, one that emerges distinctly from social constructionist theory.

## The Emergence of Social Constructionist Theory

There are many stories to be told about the development of social constructionism in scholarly worlds. I offer here but one, although one that is congenial with much common understanding. To be sure, one may trace the intellectual roots of social constructionism to Vico, Nietzsche, Dewey, and Wittgenstein, among others. And too, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) was a landmark volume with strong reverberations in neighboring disciplines. However, there are at least three major intellectual movements that began to take shape in the late 1960s in the United States and Western Europe. The amalgamation of these forms of inquiry—sometimes identified with postmodernism—largely serve as the basis

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for most social constructionist inquiry in the scholarly world today.[1]

Perhaps the strongest and most impassioned form of critique of the dominant orders has been, and continues to be, *ideological*. In this case, critics challenge various taken for granted realities in society and reveal the political ends that they achieve. In effect, such analysis discloses the socio-political consequences of the sedimented accounts of reality, in the attempt to liberate the reader from their subtle grasp. Within the scholarly world more generally, such "unmasking" has played a major role in Marxist scholarship, along with anti-psychiatry, feminist, racial, gay and lesbian, and anti-colonialist movements, among others. The second major form of critique may be viewed as *literary/rhetorical*. With developments in semiotic theory in general and literary deconstruction in particular (Derrida 1976), attention was variously drawn to the ways in which linguistic convention governs all claims to knowledge. Thus, whatever reality posits one puts forward, they will bear the marks of the linguistic forms (including, for example, grammatical rules, narrative conventions, and binary distinctions) necessary for communication. In this sense the forms of language are not driven by reality so much as they provide the forestructure for what we take to be its nature. The third significant critique of foundational science was stimulated largely by the 1970 publication of Thomas Kuhn's, *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Kuhn portrayed normal science as guided by paradigms of thought and practice shared by particular communities. In effect, the outcomes of science were not demanded by the world as it is, but are the result of communal negotiation. This social account of science was further buttressed by a welter of research in the sociology of knowledge and the history of science (see, for example, Feyerabend 1978; Latour and Woolgar 1986).[2] Although these movements largely originated within separate scholarly spheres, scholars increasingly discovered affinities among them. In effect, one could recognize the contours of a broader movement, often identified as social constructionist. Within this movement, three domains of agreement are noteworthy:

[1] For a more detailed account of these critiques within psychology, see Gergen (1994). Additional accounts of social constructionist premises and potentials may be found in Potter 1996, Gergen 2009, and Hacking 1999.

[2] It should be noted that the term *constructivism* is sometimes used interchangeably with constructionism. However, unlike social construction, early scholars tended to define constructivism in terms of cognitive processes within the individual mind. However, recent scholarship has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between constructivism and constructionism. Constructivists increasingly view mental practices as reflections or embodiments of social process. Many now speak of social constructivism, or use the terms interchangeably.

## The Social Origins of Knowledge

Perhaps the most generative idea emerging from the constructionist dialogues is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in human relationships. What we take to be true as opposed to false, objective as opposed to subjective, scientific as opposed to mythological, rational as opposed to irrational, moral as opposed to immoral is brought into being through historically and culturally situated social processes. This view stands in dramatic contrast to two of the most important intellectual and cultural traditions of the West. On the one hand is the tradition of the individual knower, the rational, self-directing, morally centered and knowledgeable agent of action. Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships.

The communal view of knowledge also represents a major challenge to the view of Truth, or the possibility that the accounts of scientists, or any other group, reveal or approach the objective truth about what is the case. In effect, propose the constructionists, no one arrangement of words is necessarily more objective or accurate in its depiction of reality than any other. To be sure, accuracy may be achieved within a given community or tradition—according to its rules and practices. Physics and chemistry generate useful truths from within their communal traditions, just as psychologists, sociologists, and priests do from within theirs. But from these often-competing traditions there is no means by which one can locate a transcendent truth, a "truly true." Any attempt to determine the superior account would itself be the outcome of a given community of agreement.

## The Centrality of Language

Central to the constructionist account of the social origins of knowledge is a concern with language. If accounts of the world are not demanded by what there is, then the traditional view of language as a mapping device ceases to compel. Rather, following Wittgenstein (1953), a view of language is invited, in which meaning is understood as a derivative of language use within relationships. And, given that games of language are essentially conducted in a rule-like fashion, accounts of the world are governed in significant degree by conventions of language use. Psychological research could not reveal, for example, that "motives are oblong." The utterance is grammatically correct, but it is cultural nonsense. Rather, while it is perfectly satisfactory to speak of motives as varying in intensity or content, conventions of talk about motivation in the 21st century do not happen to include the adjective,

"oblong." Expanding on this point, many constructionists see attempts at generating philosophical foundations for scientific study as forms of language games. For example, the longstanding question of whether and to what degree the mind has access to the external world—the central problem of epistemology—is a problem only within a given game of language (see Rorty 1979). To play the game we must agree that there is a "mental world" on the one hand and a "material world" on the other (an "in here" and "out there"), and that the former may possibly reflect the latter. If one does not agree to play by these rules, there is no "problem of individual knowledge."

Of special relevance to an understanding of research methods, constructionists also tend to accept Wittgenstein's view of language games as embedded within broader "forms of life." Thus, for example, the language conventions for communicating about human motivation are linked to certain activities, objects and settings. For the research psychologist there may be "assessment devices" for motivation (e.g. questionnaires, thematic analysis of discourse, controlled observations of behavior), and statistical technologies to assess differences between groups. Given broad agreement within a field of study about "the way the game is played," conclusions can be reached about the nature of human motivation. As constructionists also suggest, playing by the rules of a given community is enormously important to sustaining these relationships. Not only does conformity to the rules affirm the realilty, rationality and values of the research community, but the very *raison d'etre* of the profession itself is sustained. To abandon the discourse of the mind would threaten the discipline of psychology; to dispense with the discourse of social structure would threaten the collapse of sociology. Without conventions of construction, action loses value.

## The Politics of Knowledge

As indicated above, social constructionism is closely allied with a pragmatic conception of knowledge. That is, traditional issues of truth and objectivity are replaced by concerns with that which research brings forth. It is not whether an account is true from a god's eye view that matters, but rather, the implications for cultural life that follow from taking any truth claim seriously. This concern with consequences essentially eradicates the longstanding distinction between *fact* and *value*, between is and ought. The forms of life within any knowledge-making community represent and sustain the values of that community. In establishing "what is the case," the research community also place value on their particular metatheory of knowledge, constructions of the world, and practices of research. When others embrace such knowledge they wittingly or unwittingly extend the reach of these values. Thus, for example, the scientist may use the most rigorous methods of testing intelligence, and amass tomes of data that indicate racial differences in intelligence. However, the presumptions that there is something called "human intelligence," that a series of question and answer games reveal this capacity, and that there are separable "races" in the world, are all specific to a given tradition or paradigm. Such concepts and measures are not required by "the way the world is." Most importantly, to accept the paradigm and extend its implications into policy within the tradition is deeply injurious to those people classified as inferior by its standards.

This line of reasoning has had enormous repercussions in the academic community and beyond. Drawing sustenance in particular from Foucault's (1978, 1979) power/knowledge formulations, one comes to understand that the realities, rationalities and values created within any social enclave have socio-political ramifications. And particularly because those within a given interpretive community seldom appreciate that their realities are local and contingent, there is a strong tendency toward reification. Those who fail to share the local realities and values are thus viewed as misled, ignorant, immoral, and possibly evil. In effect, with the process of reality building set in motion, the result is often social division and antagonism. Each tradition of the real becomes a potential enemy to all those who do not share in the tradition. To illustrate, experimental psychologists are generally committed to a causal view of human action, and view the experimental method as the most valuable means of demonstrating cause-effect relations. There is little doubting these assumptions and practices; they are simply taken for granted. However, this form of life cannot accommodate the concept of human agency. To include an uncaused cause within the formulations would destroy a way of life. At the same time, to embrace the experimental way of life is to threaten the legitimacy of claims to voluntary action and thus a tradition of moral responsibility. With this background in place, we may now turn to more specific concerns with the self.

## The Construction and Critique of Self

Inquiry into the social construction of self can roughly be divided into three categories. The first is primarily concerned with establishing the self as a social construction, the second is focused on specific social processes in which the conception of self is embedded, and the third involves critical assessments of the cultural and political outcomes of traditional beliefs in the self. I consider each in turn.

## The Self in Historical and Cultural Context

One gains an acute appreciation of the extent to which one's everyday understandings are both culturally and historically situated—and perhaps precariously so—through comparisons with commonplace beliefs in other cultures and times. In this sense, such comparisons not only illustrate the richness in human constructions of the self, but function as well as a destabilizing device in contemporary culture. The historical and cultural literature in this case is enormous, and here I will simply earmark two significant lines of inquiry. On the historical side, two of the most extensive accounts of the vicissitudes in Western conceptualizations of the self are those of Charles Taylor (1989) and Jerrold Siegel (2001). Both explore this history in an attempt to locate resources for a morally or personally meaningful life. Numerous other accounts treat the emergence of particular concepts of self within circumscribed historical periods (see, for example, Cary 2000; Cushman 1996; Graumann and Gergen 1996; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Much the same denaturalization of the self takes place in cross-cultural comparisons. Perhaps the major theme that pervades this work is the comparison between the individuated, bounded, and autonomous view of the self that is shared within Western culture, and the more socially or communally embedded vision of the self that may be found in many other cultures of the world. The interested readers should consult such works as Marsella et al. 1985, Becker 1995, and Markus and Kitayama 1991.

## The Self as Social Accomplishment

A second significant line of constructionist inquiry builds on the first. If the self is socially constructed, one asks, how are we to understand the processes central to this achievement. Echoing the earlier discussion of the literary and rhetorical contributions to social construction, the major focus of this line of inquiry has been on discourse practices. To be sure, psycholinguistic study of the relation of mind (or cognition) to language, along with research into grammar and syntax, for example, had generated a large corpus of literature. However, within a constructionist frame, this tradition has not been engaging. For one, studies relating mind to language have presumed a dualism between mind and speech that many constructionists call into question. Further, in its search for "the truth about language," traditional research was stripped of concern with political and ideological context, and thus of little relevance for many constructionists.

Inquiry into social achievement of the self has taken two major forms. The first is concerned with the structure of language and the demands made by linguistic convention on the conception of self. The second has focused on ongoing conversational practices. In the case of language structure, for example, Sampson (2008) has drawn attention to the binary structure of language and its contribution to the self/other dichotomy. As Harré (1991) has also proposed, the existence of personal pronouns (e.g. I, you, he, me) contributes significantly to an ontology of separate selves. Perhaps the most prominent form of inquiry linking discursive structure to conceptions of self has centered on narrative. Drawing from a longstanding emphasis in semiotic studies on the formative influence of narrative structure, scholars have variously explored the way in which conceptions of the self are guided by a narrative forestructure. As MacIntyre (1984) cogently argued, one's conception of self, and indeed one's moral integrity, emerges from one's narrative of self. It is the form of this narrative, as shared within an interpretive tradition, that underlies one's sense of self. The work of Gergen and Gergen (1983) Sarbin (1985), Polkinghorne (1988), Rosenwald and Ochberg (1990), and Bruner (1990) has given the study of narrative a prominent place in the psychology of the self. The longstanding concern in psychology with life history has also been highly congenial to narrative study. The work of Dan McAdams (1985, 2006) has underscored the centrality of narrative not only to self understanding but also to the trajectory of one's actions. His inquiry into "redemptive narratives" has also fired interest in the relationship of self-understanding and spiritual traditions (McAdams 2005).

The second major line of inquiry into the self as a social accomplishment has been concerned with ongoing interaction. Such inquiry was initially stimulated by the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967) and the *ethnomethods* by which realities are constituted within conversation. The link between ethnomethodology and the psychological self was secured in Jeff Coulter's 1979 volume, *The social construction of mind: Studies in ethnomethodology and linguistic philosophy*. Coulter's work demonstrated the ways in which the self is continuously fashioned and refashioned as conversation unfolds. Inquiry into discursive *positioning* (Davies and Harré 1990; Van Langehove and Harré 1998) offered subsequent insight into a critical aspect of this process. The concern in this case is with the way in which conversational interlocutors position each other's identity as they speak. However, while further work in discourse and conversational analysis adds depth and richness to these views,[3] such inquiry reaches a juncture at which the specifically psychological self is no longer in focus. Such inquiry focuses almost exclusively on the spoken or written word, while simultaneously placing the "conversational object" at ontological risk. Thus, analysts

[3] See, for example, Benwell and Stokoe (2006).

will demonstrate how conversational references to the self deconstruct the psychological referent. Attention is then drawn to publicly defined identity.

## Critical Reflection on the Psychological Self

For the constructionist, the realities created by people together are functionally insinuated into their daily relationships. The discursive ontologies and ethics are embedded within normal and normative practices. Or more succinctly, the discourses of daily life are constitutive of living traditions. In this sense, scholars have been concerned with the way in which vocabularies of the self both rationalize and sustain cultural practices. It is in this vein that may constructionists have drawn sustenance from Foucault's (1978, 1979) writings on knowledge and power. Language, for Foucault, serves as a major medium for carrying out relations. Because language constitutes what we take to be the world, and rationalizes the form of reality thus created, it also serves as a socially binding force. By acting within language, relations of power and privilege are sustained. And, by engaging in the further circulation of a form of language, the array of power relations is further extended.[4]

In particular, as many critics see it, there is a substantial dark side to constructing a world of individual, self-contained selves. When a fundamental distinction between self and other is established, the social world is constituted in terms of differences. The individual stands as an isolated entity, essentially alone and alienated. Further, such a view lends itself to a prizing of autonomy—of becoming a "self made man," who "does it my way." To be dependent is a sign of weakness and incapacity. To construct a world of separation in this way is also to court distrust; one can never be certain of the other's motives. And given distrust, it becomes reasonable to "take care of number one." Self gain becomes an unquestionable motive, both within the sciences (such as economics and social psychology) and the culture at large. In this context, loyalty, commitment, and community are all thrown into question, as all may potentially interfere with "self-realization." Such views represent an extended critique of Western individualism.[5]

These critiques become more pointed in their implications when self-dysfunction is considered. At the outset, an extensive literature illuminates the constructed character of the psychiatric concepts of mental illness, and points to the ideological and political interests served by diagnostic categorization. Thus, for example, scholars have explored the social construction of schizophrenia (Sarbin and Mancuso 1980), anorexia (Hepworth 1999), depression (Blazer 2005), attention deficit disorder (Divorky and Schrag 1975), and post traumatic stress disorder (Quosh and Gergen 2006).[6] These deconstructions of illness categories have been accompanied by critical assessments of the impact on both clients and the society more generally. For example, diagnostic categories are variously seen as devices used largely for purposes of social control (e.g. client management, insurance justification), that mystify the values agendas they express, and sustain the myth of mental health practice as medical science in such a way that problems in living are increasingly treated with pharmaceutical suppressants (Kutchins and Kirk 1997; Szasz 1961). Further, by disseminating "knowledge of mental illness" to the culture, people cease to examine the societal conditions that may favor depression or hyperactivity, for example, and increasingly come to construct themselves in these terms (Gergen 2006; Hare-Mustin 1994). Further, to be categorized as mentally ill frequently increases the anguish of those who bear the labels. To hear voices, to be hyperactive, or to be chronically sad, for example, is not inherently to possess an illness, and there are more beneficial constructions possible (Parker et al. 1995).

## The Relational Self

The preceding critiques of the psychological self have brought about an active movement to reconceptualize the mind in general, and the self in particular. The attempt in this case is to construct an ontology that replaces the vision of the bounded self as the atom of the social world with relational process. From this standpoint, it would not be selves who come together to form relationships, but relational process out of which the very idea of the psychological self could emerge. As can be seen, the development of such a view follows congenially from the constructionist perspective so instrumental in denaturalizing the traditional view of the psychological self. If what we call knowledge emerges from social process, then social process stands as an ontological prior to the individual.

Earlier theorists, such as George Herbert Mead and Lev Vygotsky, creatively attempted to reconceptualize the self as a relational emergent, but with significant remnants of the individualist tradition remaining. Theoretically speaking, it is a difficult task to eliminate the "doer behind the deeds." It is Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) that provides the major groundwork for departure. For Wittgenstein, language obtains its meaning and significance primarily from the way in which it is used in human interaction. Thus, for example, the meaning of "yellow card"

[4] See also Rose (1985, 1990).

[5] See, for example, Gelpi (1989), Hewitt (1989), Bellah et al. (1985), Heller et al. (1986), Lasch (1978) and Leary (2004).

[6] See also Neimeyer (2000), and Fee (2000).

and "corner kick" gain their significance from their use in the game of soccer. This same logic may be applied to the discourse of the self, and in particular, to the way in which one refers to states of mind. We may expand on the implications with the following propositions:

1. *The self as discursive action.* As we have seen, there is no viable way of understanding such utterances as, "I decided," or "I am angry" as reports on what we presume to be an inner state of mind. We may thus relinquish the view of such discourse as a manifestation or outward expression of an inner world. Rather, we may view the meaning of such discourse as dependent upon its use in relationships. Thus, to announce, "I am unhappy" about a given state of affairs, the term "unhappy" would not be rendered meaningful or appropriate by virtue of its manifesting the state of one's neurons, emotions, or cognitive schema. Rather, the report plays a significant social function. It may be used, for example, to call an end to a set of deteriorating conditions, enlist support and/or encouragement, or to invite further opinion. Both the conditions of the report and the functions it can serve are also circumscribed by social convention. The phrase, "I am deeply sad" can be satisfactorily reported at the death of a close relative but not the demise of a spring moth. A report of depression can secure others' concern and support; however it cannot easily function as a greeting, an invitation to laughter, or a commendation. In this sense to use mental language is more like a handshake or an embrace than a mirror of the interior. In effect, mental terms are used by people to carry out relationships.
2. *Discourse of the self as performance*. As theorists further reason, we are not dealing here with "mere words," used by people to "get what they want from the other." One's utterances are essentially performative in function. That is, in the very saying of something, one is also performing an action within a relationship. As performance, more than the felicitous use of words is required. For example, if spoken in a faint voice, eyes on the floor, and with a smile, the words "I am angry" would constitute a failed performance. It would be culturally bewildering. In order to perform anger properly within Western culture, voice intensity and volume are essential; a stern face and a rigid posture may be required. Much is gained, then, by replacing the image of private "feelings" with public action; it's not that one has emotions, a thought, or a memory so much as one *does* them.
3. *Discursive action as relationally embedded*: If it is reasonable to view psychological discourse as embedded within an embodied performance, one may then inquire into its origins. If there is no animating origin lying behind the action, one is then drawn to its roots within relationship. In the same way one cannot achieve intelligibility by using a word of one's own creation, one's actions will not make sense if they do not borrow from a cultural tradition. Thus, the performance of self carries a history of relationships, manifesting and extending them. One may also ask about audience; for whom are these intelligible performances? As Bakhtin (1981) pointed out, to speak is always to address someone—either explicitly or implicitly—within some kind of relationship. This is also to say that the performances are fashioned with respect to the recipient. The other enters expressions of the self in their very formulation.

## The Relational Rewriting of Self

Relational theorizing of this sort has been a significant stimulus to a range of constructionist inquiry, which together essentially reconfigures both the conception of the psychological self and its implications for practice. In one of the earliest provocations of this kind, Potter and Wetherell (1987) demonstrated the problems inherent in the supposition that attitudes in the head cause overt public actions. As they went on to demonstrate, an attitude is more fruitfully understood as a public action in itself, or essentially, a position taken in a conversation. Much the same line of argument may be applied to the concept of reason. Replacing the Cartesian view of thinking as that process establishing the very certitude of self, reasoning may be viewed as a form of public performance. As Billig (1987) has proposed, most of what we take to be rational thought, is more adequately viewed as a social process of argumentation. We do not argue because we have private thoughts, but rather, private thinking comes into being through the social practice of argumentation. What we consider "good reasoning," then, is not distinguishable from effective rhetoric.

Echoing this line reasoning is a substantial movement focused on *communal memory*. Common conceptions of memory—and indeed the conceptions that ground most scientific study of memory—presume the existence of an interior process. Following the preceding line of reasoning, however, one may consider the word "memory" in its performative role. It makes little sense to view the phrase "I remember" as a report on a particular psychological or neurological condition. What kind of condition would one be reporting on, how would one be able to "look inside" and recognize when we had a memory as opposed to a "thought" or a "desire." Rather, we may ask, what form does our behavior take when we say that we have

remembered something, and how is it that this form (as opposed to some other) came into cultural existence? In effect, we may consider an act of memory not as a private mental performance but a collectively defined action. In this sense, if a school child is asked "what does 3 times 3 equal?" the answer "nine" is not a report on an inner condition of memory, but an action that has been fashioned within a complex relational history. And when the family gathers at a reunion, the stories of yore are not pictures of their minds, but forms of conversation that have typically been incubated in a long history of conversation. In their study of how people recall political events—such as wars or revolutions—Iniguez, Valencia, and Vazquez (1997, p. 250) conclude, "Every memory, as personal as it may be—even of events that are private and strictly personal and have not been shared with anyone—exists through its relation with what has been shared with others: language, idiom, events, and everything that shapes the society of which individuals are a part." For an extended review of the literature on collective or relational memory the reader may consult Middleton and Brown (2005).

A final line of inquiry adds further dimension to this relational reconstruction of self. One tends to think of emotions as "natural givens," simply part of one's biological makeup. We generally assume that infants are born into the world with fully functioning emotions; a child's cry is taken as a sign of anger, and a smile as an expression of happiness. Psychologists attempt to locate the physiological basis of emotion, and argue for its universality. The argument for universality is appealing on one level, as it suggests that human understanding is part of our biological makeup. We are innately prepared, for example, to appreciate another's fear of love or joy. Yet, it is also a dangerous assumption, in as much as what one assumes to be "natural" is typically the emotions of one's own culture. What the Ifaluk call *fago* or the Japanese call *mayae,* for example, we in the West simply delete from the universal vocabulary of emotion.

In the present context, it is more helpful to view emotional expressions as relational performances. More specifically, one may employ the concept of a *relational scenario,* that is, a scripted set of interdependent actions such as one might find in a stage performance (see Gergen 2009). Each action in the scenario sets the stage for that which follows; what follows gives intelligibility to that which has preceded it. In effect, the performance of each actor is required to give the play its coherent unity; each performance depends on the others for its intelligibility. In these terms, one can view emotional performances as constituents of culturally specific scenarios—parts of a play in which others are required. This is to propose that the angry shout or the sluggish expression of depression only make sense by virtue of their position in a relational scenario. That is, such expressions cannot take place anywhere and anytime, but only within a culturally appropriate sequence. One cannot easily jump to his feet in the middle of family dinner and shout, "I am so sorry"; such behavior would be unintelligible. But if accused of an implicitly racist remark, the same expression would not only seem fitting, but desirable. More generally, there are socially prescribed times and places where it is appropriate to perform an emotion.

Further, once an emotion is performed the relational scenario also prescribes what follows. Thus, if a friend announces that he fears he has a fatal disease, certain actions are virtually required by the cultural scenarios and others prohibited. One may properly respond with sympathy and nurturance, but it would be tasteless to reply with a silly joke or talk about one's vacation. Further, like good stories, many emotional scenarios also have *beginnings* and *endings.* If it is late at night and one's electric power is suddenly lost, that is the beginning of a scenario in which expressions of fear (as opposed, for example, to jealously or ecstasy) would be appropriate. In contrast, if someone is reporting one's sorrow, another may continue to give nurturance and support until there the sorrow subsides. At that point the scenario is terminated.

The relational reconstruction of the self has naturally given rise to a range of criticism. Two of these critical points are most prominent. In the first case, critics charge that such relational views create a black box or empty organism, bereft of all subjective life. In reply, the relational theorist points to the desirability of abandoning dualism, and the problematic distinction between *inner* and *outer*, between self and identity. This is not to deny that one is doing something privately in one's prolonged gaze into the distance as one begins to write an essay. However, it is a mistake, it is proposed, to view this silent period specifically in terms of *psychological* processes, that is, functioning according to their own autonomous demands. Rather, the relational theorist proposes, when preparing to write, one is readying oneself to put socially intelligible statements on paper, that is, preparing to engage in a social action. Thus, one may be doing something privately—which we might want to call reasoning, pondering, or feeling—but from the relational standpoint these are essentially public actions carried out in private. To illustrate, consider the actress preparing her lines for a play. The lines are essentially nonsense independent of their placement within the play; that is, they require a relationship to be intelligible. Yet, the actress can rehearse the lines in private, quietly performing the words form without voicing them. We might say she was "imagining," or "thinking them through." But essentially she is carrying out a public action, only without audience and full performance. In effect, they are *partial performances* (Gergen 2009).

The second significant critique is that a relational view represents an eradication of individual agency, and thus

undermines longstanding traditions of moral responsibility. To this the relational constructionist replies that there is no eradication of tradition implied. The relational account is itself a construction, and not a truth posit. No traditions need be abandoned; however, all may be subjected to critical reflection. At this point, questions may be raised concerning the wisdom, and indeed the justice, of holding single individuals responsible for their actions. Not only do such practices generate alienation and resentment, but in selecting a target of scorn, they relieve those in judgment from assaying their own contribution to the unwanted outcome. In contrast, the relational theorist proposes, a relational account abandons the determinist/voluntarist antinomy of longstanding, and shifts the concern with "wrong-doing" to the collaborative practices that may be viewed as its origin. One begins to inquire into practices of justice that may sustain viable relationships as opposed to severing them.

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