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**THE RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING**  
**Out of the Head and into the Discourse**

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According to the traditional view of language, we generally treat words and gestures as if they pictured an independent world. This tradition fosters a belief that there could be a correct way to put things, a better method for reaching truth, or a more accurate representation of what is really there. And, if language pictures reality and it is individual speakers who utter words, then accurate representation of reality must be accomplished by individuals whose words reflect the inner workings of their minds. With this view in place, it is not difficult for us to describe how we have come to focus on individuals and their words or actions as a way of understanding the internal, mysterious mind as well as the social world.

It is also not difficult for us to recognize the connection between this representational view of language and scientific method. In both the belief is that we can know with certainty. A representational view of language positions language as a conveyor of what is "really" there. Thus, a speaker's words and gestures are taken to be accurate reflections of his or her knowledge and thereby, a reflection of reasoning abilities. In science, we can have knowledge via proper methods -- which are, of course, born of individuals' abilities to reason.

If it were the case that language represents reality, then when a person speaks or acts, she or he must be depicting reality either accurately or inaccurately. The veracity check in play here has us comparing the supposed "inner representations" of the individual with the established and presumably

univocal, social criteria. By locating the nexus of meaning inside the individual, we are then prompted to explore any need for change or adjustment on an individual basis.

Not only is change directed toward individuals, but the language of individualism that emerges from the representational view invites a vast array of pathologies. These pathologies can be framed as possible limitations of individualist discourse.

Most obvious of the pathologizing possibilities offered by individualist discourse is the construction of a sense of personal deficit. Discussing the discourse of deficit, Gergen (1990) explains that when meaning and action are seen as originating within the individual, it is ultimately the individual who is seen as flawed, deficient, and in need of remedy. Clearly, our major institutions (education, religion, business, and so forth) become the natural contexts within which individuals are transformed into "proper" citizens.

Most of us would be surprised at any attempts to call these internal aspects of human life into question. Yet, by linking these taken for granted "aspects" of personhood to a particular discursive tradition, we are able to examine them by way of the social life forms they invite. Individualism, while enduring and valuable, is only one way of talking and thus only one way of being. It is the discourse that emerges within a modernist sensibility. Fully armed with the discourse of individualism we are able to locate a broad array of qualities within persons ranging from intellect to leadership to sociability to agency. It is individuals who reason, who lead, who relate, and who act intentionally. Thus, it is only reasonable to conclude that it is individuals who should become the focus of remedial efforts when their actions or meanings do not fit with culturally preferred norms.

One alternative to the discourse of individualism is a discourse that centers on a relational sensibility. In relational discourse, attention is directed toward the interactive moment. Meaning is always transformed in relationships. That is, we reconfigure meaning as we engage with others.

Therefore, meaning is social. We are concerned here with actions and their supplements (Gergen, 1994) as the basic unit for creating realities. We are interested, as well, in the further supplementation of patterned action through time. We need not resort to an individual's private meanings but rather can resort to inquiry that explores the vast networks of relations that participants bring to the current interchange.

It is on this point that I question the desire of some to retain individuality. I agree with them that "no two persons can occupy the same position in conversations at the same moment." Yet, I am puzzled about how such an assertion requires (justifies) the epistemology of individualism. Do we want to conceptualize "uniqueness" as inherently part of an individual's meanings and experiences or could we conceptualize uniqueness as the confluence of (relational) membership in various and multiple discursive communities? When we place our emphasis on the interactive moment we stand curious about how (not why) particular conversational resources become viable and sustainable at a given moment and not others. To emphasize the interactive moment is to focus on the social/relational in context.

The realities we create in any interactive moment are fed not by private meanings but by conversational resources engendered (that is, given significance) in relationships -- the present relationship as well as anterior real and imagined relationships. Meaning emerges through supplementation, it is always local, and thus our emphasis is on processes of relating.

A relational sensibility attempts to centralize what people do together. Contrary to this orientation, the goal, whether spoken or unspoken, of most traditional approaches to human interchange is twofold: (1) to alter undesirable patterns of interchange and (2) to alter individuals' meanings. Yet, within a relational orientation our attempt is to alter undesirable patterns of interchange which may, simultaneously, reconfigure other relational configurations. Meaning, in a relational approach, is a joint performance. It is always a move in an on-going dance. It is not "inside the head."

Yet rather than assume that the "place" where transformative dialogue occurs is in an individual's interpretation of events, we can assume that alternative realities can be crafted when other relational configurations are introduced into the conversation. In moments of conflict, rather than move directly

to inquiry about the meanings participants attribute to certain actions, we can open inquiry into the broader relational networks that give significance to the current (and often disputed) actions. Who would approve of this sort of behavior? What other relationships are you (or have you been) part of where this sort of thing would be sensible? Are there other relationships where these sorts of actions would be questioned? When you act this way, who else are you inviting into this conversation? Who is excluded? and so forth.

When we shift our inquiry to relational networks, we can utilize a variety of traditional "techniques" and also avoid retreat to individuals' meaning structures. In conclusion, I would like to offer four **intelligibilities of relationship** (McNamee and Gergen, 1996) that serve as fertile ground for inquiry. They open inquiry into various relational processes rather than into private meanings of individuals and thereby expand the domain of supplementary actions that give meaning to any interactive moment. These four intelligibilities signify an attempt to centralize what people do together.

### **Four Intelligibilities of Relationship**

#### *Speaking Internal Others*

We all embody aspects of others; we carry others with us. What we index as another's autonomous action is misleading. Individuals' actions bear the mark of myriad others. Our understanding of the "others within" invites us to break the taken for granted flow of interchange and to explore the myriad identities at play and rest. Relevant questions become who is speaking and acting here?, who is listening?, what voices are not being heard?, what selves within are suffering?, why is this voice dominant and not some other?, how can we help these suppressed potentials into being?

#### *Crafting Conjoint Relations*

Meaning is a joint accomplishment. Our actions are never independent, but acquire their very intelligibility as actions by virtue of others with whom we are (or have been) engaged. We can disrupt

problematic meanings and their associated practices in relationships by responding with alternative moves, describing them as joint accomplishments, or exploring alternative relationships where an incoherent action might gain coherence.

### *Invoking Group Realities*

Individuals' actions can be described as manifestations of larger aggregates (e.g., a manager's autocratic decisions as manifestation of local government mandates). We can describe a conflict between two people as conflict between two groups and thereby move from rituals of individual blame into the relational sphere. Another's actions are understood in terms of the larger institutions by which they are constituted. Each is described as a manifestation of a collectivity.

### *Entering the Systemic Swim*

There are no untoward events to which we have not each made a contribution. We are invited to multiply the discourses of exploration. Our problems in relationships are related to local, national, and global politics, the state of the economy, shifting sensibilities in cultural values, and so forth. Metaphors, images, and technologies from other relational domains can re-construct a problematic situation in relational terms.

### Summary

In situations of conflict a relational sensibility turns our attention toward expanding the discourse. Expanding the domain of discourse opens possibilities for participants -- invites new forms of action. Yet, expanding the domain of discourse does not require exploration of private meanings. Our attention, instead, should be directed toward the relational performances that generate the realities we live.

## **References**

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