

Book Review

Kenneth J. Gergen:
Relational Being. Beyond Self and Community
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While the belief in the power of science, even in the social field, reached a peak in the period after World War II, there also emerged a critique. Contributors like Kuhn, Feyerabend, Lakatos, Toulmin, Polanyi and others directed their attacks against the tools of science, in particular such ideas as the objective language, the neutral observer, the unequivocal empirical observation, and the necessary logics. Their focus was on the *discontinuities* of science. They focused, however, less on the other major problem of discontinuity: that of the *objects*. In particular in the social field, those that are under investigation: people, groups, organizations, societies, are not stable, either. They are continuously on the move, continuously taking on new shapes and forms. How can this be handled from a research perspective? How can we create knowledge about phenomena that will, in all likelihood, have undergone change by the time the paper is published?

One response to the challenges associated with “the double discontinuity” were trends like post-modernism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, and similar. In spite of major contributions to the critique of concepts like absolute truth, unequivocal justice, universal reason and linear progress, it can be argued that the deconstruction aspect became so overriding that the need for people to also construct something tended to be forgotten. People have a life to live, and institutions to build, and need to hold something as better, more true, or more reasonable, than something else. The fact that the world is “on the move” needs a positive understanding, not only a tearing down of all forms of understanding. Furthermore, since the contributors to the various

“post-schools” seem, with some exception for psycho-therapy, not to have any research-related practical experiences of their own, they tend to imagine that the world can be enlightened by texts alone, something that in a sense goes contrary to their own argument. The “post schools” would have to be followed by something that puts more emphasis on positive, in this sense “constructive”, understanding and continuity without, however, falling back on the more traditional versions of universal reason.

In everyday research, there are emergent trends representing, in different ways, responses to this challenge: First, rather than focusing on the structural properties of the phenomena, focus shifts towards the mechanisms that *generate* these properties. The generative forces are thought to be more stable than the patterns they create each and every time. Second, increased emphasis is put on the *actor* (or agent) perspective, at the expense of the “objective, path dependency” type reasoning often characterizing the traditional, structurally oriented kind of research. What people do, is decided more by their Intentions, perceptions and relationships, and less by “objective forces”. Third, and in line with this, *choice* becomes more important than determinants. Fourth, more emphasis is placed on what people create *in interaction with each other*, at the expense of what the individual, often “rational player”, is creating on his or her own. Concepts like community and joint learning gain in importance. Fifth, more emphasis is put on *agreement* between the actors concerned, as the foundation for whatever can be identified in terms of structural characteristics of, say, an organization, or a society, at the expense of internal or external forces. Sixth, an increased emphasis is put on *practices*, as the spearhead of the transactions between people. For instance, most learning takes place as a result of what happens when new efforts are made, new tools tried out, new plans put into action. Finally, *research itself is no exception* from these trends. Research has to find its place as an actor in interaction with other people, not as an observer that in some way or other stands outside the human community.

These trends are not new. Most reflect points that have been argued before, often far back in the history of social research. What is new, is that each of the trends emerges in a stronger version than before, but above all, that they tend to interact. When they interact, they merge to form a greater wave;

perhaps nothing less than a new turn in social research. This turn demands an understanding that can catch, in a positive way, not only the relational but also the fluent and transitional in the human condition. Kenneth Gergen's recent book, "Relational Being", can be seen as a response to this demand.

In "Relational Being", Gergen raises the issue of man as a bounded individual, versus man as created by his relationships. Compared to many of his predecessors, the way in which Gergen conducts his discourse has some important advantages. Among these, his use of examples is immediately outstanding. All major points in his argument are illustrated and backed not only by examples, but by examples drawn from real everyday situations and practices. This is not only a convenience for the reader, as pointed out by theorists of science like Stephen Toulmin, it is the examples that carry the argument. If a point cannot be exemplified, it does not have any meaning. Gergen does, furthermore, radicalize the relational argument. Contrary to leaving at least some space for the bounded individual playing tactical games against his or her environment, Gergen wants to do away with this figure altogether, and see man as fully created, or constructed, through relationships.

Much of Gergen's discussion centre around the relationship between a bounded, versus a relational interpretation of words. Let us say that someone calls someone else "authoritarian". Seemingly, this is a characteristic of the individual, something that emanates from "inside" the person. However, for the concept of authoritarian to have meaning, there must also be something that we can call non-authoritarian. Only when a set of characteristics can be held up against a set of contrasting characteristics, do we understand what the characteristics mean. There is, however, a further set of conditions: To understand "authoritarian" we need some kind of experience with "authoritarianism" and its antithesis. Unless we have lived experience with the phenomena under discussion, the words characterizing the phenomena will be empty. Gergen shows how the words that we generally take to characterize individuals and set them apart from their environment, in reality gain their meaning from relationships. This is not simply an abstract, "theoretical" point. Gergen shows, through numerous examples, how an individualistic, bounded inter-

pretation of people leads us astray in our relationships, not only to individual people, but to groups, organizations and society.

That an organization is a set of relationships is something that all contributors to “theory of organization” would agree on. Gergen points out that the interesting question is how these relationships are seen: on the one hand they can be seen as the structural prerequisites for co-operation between essentially bounded individuals, on the other they can be seen as the links that make it possible for people to relate to each other in such a way that learning and innovation can be the outcome. To achieve this, the relationships must be built on mutual affirmation, not on some pre-defined scheme or other. For the members of the organization to be continuously creative, the relationships must, furthermore, be kept fluid. Only when the relationships are kept open and subject to continuous transformation, will it be possible to continuously improve on performance. The primary linking mechanism in this kind of relationship is the dialogue. To maximize the creative potential of an organization, all its members must be part of the creative process and involved in the dialogue. To keep a major number, i.e. the shop floor workers, outside, is to reduce the creative potential below the level possible. As soon as people or groups are seen as existing “inside their own boundaries”, a free and open communication becomes impossible. Instead, people will try to be smart at others’ expense, further their own cause, try to protect themselves against the smartness of others, and so on. Patterns become frozen. Gergen adds a further major argument for broad participation: all messages circulating in the organization, be it from top management or anyone else, have to be interpreted by the members. There is a major difference between being interpreted by alienated subordinates in isolated roles, versus being interpreted by members who see themselves as part of a broader community where everybody shares responsibility for the overall results.

Points of this kind are often put forth in today’s discourses on organization. The emphasis on participation, community, joint learning, relational leadership, is a fairly general trend. What are the reasons why these points have to be argued, again and again? How come that actors who verbally subscribe to ideas of this kind, nonetheless often go in other directions? Some of the forces can be narcissistic leadership and a corresponding neglect of

organizational relationships, a tendency to want to freeze patterns that have proven successful in the past, a drive towards differentiation of rewards that often result in steep organizational pyramids, and a tendency to let successful groups identify themselves as different from their surroundings. These forces call for continuous counter-forces. How should these counter-forces be mustered and organized? This brings us to a theme in which Gergen has involved himself in other contexts: operational research and, in particular the notion of action research:

Seen from the point of view of action research as this has evolved in the Scandinavian context, the prime value of Gergen's book is not only that he provides an overall framework that can make more or less separate arguments form a larger and coherent whole, but also that he radicalizes the argument. In this sense, he not only consolidates, but also expands, the arguments for action research. This notwithstanding, there are also some questions emerging. Gergen, in this book, does not go into a discussion of research practices. He delimits the discussion to what can be called the basics of understanding. Although he offers a rich array of examples, these examples are to a large extent from everyday situations, not mediated through neither action research nor any other form of research. In this sense, Gergen decouples his discourse on how to understand the world from a discourse on research practice. This is, it can be argued, perfectly legitimate. It is, after all, not possible to deal with everything in one book. There are, however, some counterarguments:

By separating a discourse on the basics of understanding from operational research, one may gain the impression that this understanding is "prior" to research practices; something that stands "above" issues pertaining to how to proceed in research terms in specific contexts. In many ways Gergen's own argument goes, however, against this. When people relate to each other they seldom start by "clarifying what understanding is to guide our relationship". Rather, they tend to start with what practical outcomes the relationship is expected to provide. If the relationship between research and its partners is no exception, *relational practices* form the spearhead of the development of the relationship. What, then, does this mean for research?

The conventional action research perspective is to become involved in practical relationships to other people, but to keep on doing research in the

conventional way, that is: as a bounded individual developing “my theory”. My perspectives as a researcher are supposed to come from “inside” myself, from some characteristics that make just me able to see further and clearer than other researchers. Gergen touches upon this issue at the end of his book. Apologizing for the need to use conventional images to be able to communicate at all, he sees the answer to this challenge as lying in a continuous expansion of the relational argument into an all-encompassing world view. Out of this, a new language more appropriate to the understanding of research as a relational actor will appear

Together with some colleagues, this reviewer has embarked on another course. Instead of spanning continuously broader and wider, we try to go back to specific research practices. Starting from the elements of “relationalism” that can be found as trends in existing research (briefly indicated above), the point is to see if these can be strengthened, not through philosophical argument but through strengthening the relational *organization* of research: One example is the national workplace development programmes, at the moment found in particular in Finland and Norway (Alasoini 2006; Gustavsen 2004; Pålshaugen 2009). Rather than assuming that “the right way of understanding the world” can emerge from one centre only, these programmes are based on mobilizing a number of research groups, distributed all over the country. Each research group is located between two “poles”, or points of reference: On the one hand each group must relate to enterprises and other organizations and help create practical development. On the other hand, each group must relate to the other groups within the programme in a discourse on research. In this way each group has to demonstrate success simultaneously along two mutually interdependent lines: a practical line and a research line. This discourse on research is not, however, with all possible actors within the research community, generally a waste of time, but with other researchers *committed to the same kind of practical goal*. Only then is a meaningful discussion on how to approach research tasks possible. What happens in this kind of relationship between groups of researchers is generally that they come to the process with different theories, often with the expectation that practical work is application of pre-given theory. As the confrontation with reality starts, new perspectives force themselves to the

surface, this time as an outcome of the two sets of relations into which research is located. “The deconstruction of theory” occurs not as a result of arguments that are in themselves, “theoretical”, but as a result of theoretical shortcomings in the confrontation with practical problems. To create and sustain a position in the network, each group must make the practical impacts of its work become continuously deeper and broader, often with building broader networks of participating organizations and move towards, for instance, regional innovation systems. In this way, fluidity and continuous transcendence is sought. Although the research groups tend to move towards each other in terms of reflections on experience, they do not become identical. In this “moving towards each other” there emerge, however, elements of learning that can be fed to national actors, such as the labour market parties centrally. From an action research perspective, this process of a stepwise but interactive pattern of growth from an initially distributive point of departure is the only way in which something can be generalized. All other forms of generalization are words uttered by single actors, and not the product of being in a relationship to other actors. This pertains even to action researchers when they generalize beyond their cases.

Gergen’s discussion will certainly broaden and consolidate the arguments behind this kind of research policy, a policy that has encountered its problems even in Scandinavia. However, while action research has already won most of the debates on epistemology and ethics in research, it has also lost most of the debates on research policy. Much of the research performed under the heading of action research has failed to convince other actors in society that this is a form of research worth investing in. It is a mistake to assume that this is purely because of a failure to understand the ontological and epistemological reasons behind this kind of research. To bring action research further, there is a need for a thorough working over of research practices. As pointed out by Gergen, this is a question of developing *relationships*. While this development must consider the broader issues of understanding, it has, however, to depart from specific research practices, move “bottom-up”, and imply a strong focus on issues of organization, not only of the relationships to the partners and users of this research, but also of the relationships within the action research establishment itself.

References

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