

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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### My Route to Relational Research in Four Parts



**By Ken Gergen**

*Abstract of Comments taken from a keynote presentation at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Relational Research Symposium, September 2018<sup>1</sup>*

On Sept. 25 – 26, 2018, the Taos Institute hosted a 2-day virtual symposium which was designed and facilitated by the Relational Research Network on the topic of *Relational Research Practices: Challenges and Opportunities*. Ken Gergen presented the opening keynote talk with Sheila McNamee. They were asked to share how they see that research has changed over the years. These are some of Ken's thoughts shared in the keynote and captured by Kermit Cole.

#### **Social Construction**

The constructionist dialogues question the idea of philosophical foundations of science and knowledge.

What we call science and knowledge are constructed within a culture to achieve ends that are important for them at a given time.

We may also abandon the assumption of universal truth - true regardless of culture.

We are thus invited to raise new questions about what we are trying to accomplish in our research and why.

Much traditional social science research was trying to predict, but that's a very limited way of looking at what our aims could be. What if we wished to use our research to give voice to people who could not be heard, or help a group of people achieve social justice?

You cannot separate such questions from matters of value.

In evaluating research we may thus take a stance of *reflective pragmatism*. What are we trying to achieve pragmatically, and what are the value implications?

#### **Pluralism**

The preceding ideas open us to the possibility that all forms of research have a place in the social sciences. The idea of a universal method is strangulating.

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<sup>1</sup> With appreciation to Kermit Cole.

So why not phenomenology, action research, autoethnography, performance, and so on? And we should welcome all forms of indigenous research. Asking always, what is being accomplished in these various endeavors and with what value?

The rubric of “qualitative research” is currently used to refer to an enormous array of research approaches, including all those just mentioned. In effect, the qualitative research movement fosters pluralism, and indirectly a constructionist view of knowledge.

## **Relational Theory**

Relational theory for me is an attempt to move beyond the construction of the social world in terms of individual persons.<sup>2</sup>

Relational theory tries to elaborate a space of understanding in which we see relational process as that which gives rise to what we take to be real, rational, and good. This includes the very concept of independent persons or selves.

We may place the highest value on the well-being of this process as it represents the source of all meaningful action. When the process is nurtured, so do we co-create flourishing worlds for all.

We may thus ask, when we carry out research, how does it create, support, or enrich, the process of relating? How do our practices of research contribute to relational well-being?

For example, how am I relating as a researcher to the people who are the focus of the research? Traditional empirical research places a distance between the observer and the observed, between the subject and the object. Would it not be better in terms of relational well-being to work collaboratively?

As well, what is the audience for this research, and how do I relate to this audience? Is my audience limited to only a closed circle of professionals in a competition for place and space? Or, can my inquiry be shared with a global audience, written (or performed) in such a way that it can be understood and appreciated?

And what are the implications of the research for our lives together; do we create mutual understanding, for example, as opposed to alienation and distrust?

Thus, there is no specific *relational methodology* or practice of research. Rather, we are talking about an orientation to research with a particular value perspective.

## **Future Building**

Let us think of research not as a report on the world as it is, but as a way of creating the future.

Thus we ask, how can we use research to create futures that we care about?

Collaborative action research is only one path to creating a future in which relational well-being may be nurtured. But we could have a rich dialogue on other ways to think about research as future building. I would welcome such an exchange.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on relational theory see my book, *Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community*. I will also be joined by Mary Gergen in giving a six weeks on-line course, beginning Nov. 5. See: <https://www.taosinstitute.net/exploring-relational-theory-and-practices-fall-2018>