THE RELATIONAL SELF IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT. The historical context giving rise to the individualized self is nicely developed by Stam. Yet, we also find in his review of developments in self theory a subtle shift from concern with isolated individuals to selves in relationship. The present offering first expands on this movement, proposing that concerns with relational as opposed to individual functioning are becoming dominant. A sketch is then offered of major shifts in both the intellectual and cultural context that favor developments in relational theorizing. Finally, the focus shifts to the social and political potentials of these new modes of theorizing.

> On my living room wall hangs a painting by Max Gimblett entitled, "Self Portrait as David Rakowski." The painting is composed of a large face, the upper half of which is wildly colorful, and the lower half austere and Zen-like. I ask myself, how did this curious painting come to be an intelligible action within the late 20th century?

I find Henderikus Stam's contribution an enormously rich resource, articulate, insightful and informative. While there are numerous moments in which I found myself moved to respond, I will focus in the present remarks on but a single, but engaging issue. My remarks are stimulated in large measure by Stam's reflections on the historical origins of the self and its subsequent valorization and institutionalization. He provides a number of engaging insights on how it is that the self becomes an object of psychological, philosophical, and political concern. At the same time, as his analysis of the self proceeds, Stam shifts his attention from the atomistic, or contained self of earlier times to the challenge of inter-subjectivity. Indeed, as he moves from Habermas's analysis of inter-subjectivity to Butler's linguistically interpellated self, he traverses from the scholarship of modernism to the postmodern. For Butler, there is no self outside historically located traditions of language. And as Stam sees it, Butler's work begins to share a certain affinity with the dialogical self of Hermans and his colleagues. But this shift from the bounded to the socially contextualized self raises interesting questions. Specifically, how are we to understand the historical conditions giving rise to this transformation in theoretical sensitivity, and what are the implications for cultural life?

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In the remainder of this paper I will first propose that this shift toward the social is scarcely confined to the few theories addressed by Stam, but is highly general in scope. Then, I shall consider several transformations in historical context that appear to favor this shift. Finally, I will return to an issue raised by Stam, specifically the socio/political consequences of this newly developing movement in theory.

The Expanding Arena of Relational Sensitivity

In my view, the shift from the bounded to the unbounded conception of the person is a pervasive feature of contemporary scholarship. The work of Hermans (2002) and his colleagues on the dialogically engaged self is not an isolated intellectual event. Rather it is an animated companion to broad ranging developments in the social sciences. For example, as psychoanalytic theory has shifted toward "object relations," therapists have become increasingly concerned with the complex relations between transference and counter-transference (see, for example, Mitchell, 1995). No longer is it possible to view the therapist as providing "evenly hovering attention," for the therapist's psychological functioning cannot be extricated from that of the client. Feminist theorists have further enriched the conception and significance of inter-subjectivity in therapy, and its relationship to everyday practice (Miller and Stiver, 1997). More radically, Westerman (2005) not only locates crippling problems in the Cartesian perspective of the individual agent, but outlines a view of therapy in which coordinated action replaces mental probing as the instrument of change.

From separate quarters, many developmental theorists are elaborating on the implications of Vygotsky's early view that everything within the mind is a reflection of the surrounding social sphere (Wertsch, 1985). From this perspective there are no strictly independent thought processes, as all such processes are fashioned within particular cultural settings. Stimulated by these developments, cultural psychologists now explore forms of thought and emotion indigenous to particular peoples (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1997). Narrative theory has become increasingly absorbed with the extent to which narrative genres serve as the basis for the individual's self understanding (M. Gergen, 1992; McAdams, 2006). Discursively oriented psychologists add further dimension to relational theory by relocating so-called "mental phenomena" within patterns of discursive exchange (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Billig, 1996). For example, rather than viewing memory as an "in the head" process, inquiry is concerned with the way memory is embedded within relationships (Middleton & Brown, 2005). In a similar vein, much of my own work has attempted to reconstitute concepts such as meaning, agency and emotion as outcomes of relational coordination (Gergen, 1994; Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004). These are but representative contributions to a far broader dialogue.

The Historical Context of "Discovery"

If these various inquiries into a social conception of the self do comprise general movement in scholarly inquiry, we may legitimately direct attention to the historical context. Why does such work now become so compelling; what is it about emerging cultural or world conditions that renders such theorizing so significant for the scholars involved? It is tempting in this case to locate the source internally, that is, within the scholarly dialogues of recent decades. Such a search would indeed be rewarding. On the one hand there has a steadily accumulating scholarship critical of individualized conceptions of self, and their societal implications. As critics variously assert, when a fundamental distinction between self and other is established, the social world is constituted by differences. The individual stands as an isolated entity, essentially alone and alienated. Further, there is a common 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 are the views that now circulate widely though academic culture.[1]

Coupled with such critique, advances in literary, moral, and political theory have also progressively undermined the virtually unquestioned assumption of private, autonomous selves. In the literary sphere the poststructuralist movement associated with Derrida (1978), attempts to demonstrate the futility of presuming a "logos" or rational agent, who originates language or meaning within the head. In moral philosophy, theorists such as Taylor (1991) and MacIntyre (1984) have demonstrated the impossibility of moral theory based on private , autonomous deliberation. And, in the sphere of political theory, Sandel (1982) has offered similar arguments to undermine the liberal individualist orientation.

Yet, in my view, it is useful to expand the dimensions of understanding in this case, to consider the cultural context in which scholarly inquiry is conducted. In my view there are two major transformations under way, the combination of which are profound in their significance for cultural life. The first is the explosion in technologies of sociation. By this I mean the development over the past century of numerous technologies that stimulate and sustain human connection. These are not only the technologies of low cost transportation (the automobile, mass transit, jet planes) that physically bring people together. More profound are technologies that facilitate communication at a distance (radio, film, television, cell phones, and the internet.)

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[1] See, for example, Sampson (1993), Bellah et al. (1985), and Lasch (1979).

Immersion in processes of communication is maximal. As I have outlined elsewhere (Gergen, 2001, 2002) all these technologies serve not only to foster a dependency on relationship, but as well a pervasive consciousness of connection. The isolated computer as the dominant metaphor of human functioning in psychology is being replaced by the network. It is not so much, "I think therefore I am," but "I am networked, therefore I am."

Closely related to the expansion in such technologies is the process of globalization. The geographic limits to expanding one's endeavors are rapidly receding. The horizon of expansion for virtually any organization – business, government, religion, NGO – is without clear limits. One significant outcome of the globalization process is an increasing consciousness of difference. As the world's peoples increasingly intersect, so do their different values, religious beliefs, politics, and ways of life become apparent. In many cases there are resulting antagonisms, resistances, and outright bloodshed. The rise of global terrorism is perhaps the darkest indicator. Most relevant to the development of relational theory, is the increasing sense of the culturally constructed character of the real and the good. What were once unquestionable verities and values, are more frequently seen as outgrowths of particular peoples in particular contexts. And to the extent this is so, we come to understand that whatever our commitments, they issue from relationships; and, whatever hope we have for a viable global future will depend on capacities for relational transformation.

Socio/Political Implications

In my view the broad move toward the social reconstitution of the self does far more than reflect shifts in either the intellectual or cultural context. Such theorizing is not simply a barometer of the times. I have found it quite interesting that most of the proponents of a socialized conception of self are scarcely neutral. Their investments are often substantial , their commitment tinged with a sense of moral purpose. I think this sense of purpose is rightly placed. Theories of the self seldom remain lodged within circles of scholarship. If they are at all significant they are slowly secreted into the public sphere; they alter the shared intelligibilities of the society. And, as they lend themselves to the more general reconstruction of the self, so do they invite new forms of life.

As I see it, we are already witnessing a sea change in many arenas of societal practice. Institutionalized practices born of the individual or atomic self are gradually giving way to relation centered practices. I have already touched on the shift in therapeutic practice from concentration on the loan psyche to the processes of inter-subjectivity. However, we also find newly developing practices of education, from collaborative classrooms, and narrative exploration to collaborative writing projects. In the organizational domain we locate a shift from top-down, hierarchical organizational structures to flat, democratic organizations. There are accompanying conceptions of

leadership as dialogic partnership and practices of organizational change based on bottom up transformation. In medicine we find increasing sensitivity to the significance of doctor-patient relationships, and the ways in which illness and pain are co-constructed. These are only representative of the many developments in relational practice.

I believe that the scholarly reconstruction of the self can play an enormously important role in providing the conceptual tools for such transformations in cultural life. And it is precisely the significance placed on relationships, as opposed to individual trajectories, that may best lend itself to a viable global future. As Hermans and Kempen (1998) have aptly proposed, a dialogical orientation to cultural relationship avoids many of the existing pitfalls of understanding. The major challenge at this juncture is the development of practices that may bring the alienated into forms of mutual coordination.

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