



10-1-2002

# Clearing Away the Self

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The final, definitive version of this article has been published in *Theory and Psychology*, Volume 12, Issue 5, October 2002, pages 625-650. by SAGE Publications, Inc. on SAGE Journals Online: <http://online.sagepub.com/>

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## **Abstract**

One of constructionism's chief pragmatic goals is to facilitate relationships that have transformative potential. According to Kenneth Gergen, one important theoretical tool towards that end is relational theory, the construing of human behavior in terms of dialogic processes. We trace the meaning of 'dialogic' and 'transformative' through different constructionist traditions and argue that these terms are used in a relatively narrow sense, as compared to an alternative approach we are suggesting. Moreover, we propose that the usual narrow construal of these concepts has the unintended consequence of undermining the central constructionist goal of facilitating transformative relationships. We present an empirical example that illustrates (1) how people's conception of their self as a collection of social scripts draws their attention to and reinforces the accretion of scripts; (2) how this accretion can get in the way of transformation; and (3) how a broader conception of a 'dialogic' self can open up more direct, transformative relational possibilities.

## **Keywords**

dialogic self-construction, identity, phenomenology, self and social context, social constructionism

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# Clearing Away the Self

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**ABSTRACT.** One of constructionism's chief pragmatic goals is to facilitate relationships that have transformative potential. According to Kenneth Gergen, one important theoretical tool towards that end is relational theory, the construing of human behavior in terms of dialogic processes. We trace the meaning of 'dialogic' and 'transformative' through different constructionist traditions and argue that these terms are used in a relatively narrow sense, as compared to an alternative approach we are suggesting. Moreover, we propose that the usual narrow construal of these concepts has the unintended consequence of undermining the central constructionist goal of facilitating transformative relationships. We present an empirical example that illustrates (1) how people's conception of their self as a collection of social scripts draws their attention to and reinforces the accretion of scripts; (2) how this accretion can get in the way of transformation; and (3) how a broader conception of a 'dialogic' self can open up more direct, transformative relational possibilities.

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Freedom and transformation have a special status in constructionist psychology as central criteria for evaluating theories. Based on such approaches as anti-foundationalist philosophy (e.g. Feyerabend, 1976; Kuhn, 1962), the sociology of knowledge (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mannheim, 1936) and critical theory (e.g. Habermas, 1987; Horkheimer, 1968/1992; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1997), constructionist psychology denies the empiricist notion that theories can correspond to reality. There is no way to put all events in the 'real world' on one side and all our representations on the other and then see how they match up (Gergen & Kaye, 1992).

As the analysis of discourse replaces the analysis of how discourse represents the world, constructionists need alternative criteria for evaluating theories. Some reject all traditional criteria for evaluating theory to embrace an 'attitude of tolerant indifference' or a 'happy nihilism' (Kvale, 1992). Most constructionists, however, 'find certain moral demands embedded in the very nature of discourse' (Danziger, 1997, p. 409). One such moral demand on a theorist is to facilitate conditions that grant people the greatest

possible freedom for transformation by constructing themselves through social relations (Gergen, 2001a, 2001b).

Constructionist psychology has facilitated this kind of freedom by, for instance, challenging traditional conceptions of the self—by making it possible for people to interpret the self not in terms of essences, as a bounded entity with fixed attributes, but as a *dialogic* process (e.g. Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Wortham, 2001b). According to Bakhtin, whose work has been an important inspiration to many constructionists, ‘dialogic’ means both that individuals only exist through their relations with others and that these constitutive relations are characterized by ‘unfinalizedness, open-endedness and indeterminacy’ (Bakhtin, 1929/1973, p. 43). Constructionists do not prefer such a dialogic account of the self because it is more accurate. Rather, they reject an essentialist account of the self because of its implicit claim that essences represent the sole truth of what it means to be an individual and because this claim limits people’s perceptions of what is possible for them.

This paper argues that many types of constructionism unwittingly contradict themselves, in their accounts of social construction and their emphasis on freedom and transformation as criteria for evaluating theories. Put simply, we argue that self-construction, if it is a matter of building up identifications and habitual enactments, drastically limits the possibilities for self-transformation. To make this argument, we first discuss different conceptions of dialogic self-construction in the current literature. Following the practice of Gergen (1985) and Stam (1990), we use ‘constructionist’ as an umbrella term for similar approaches. Different conceptions of dialogic self-construction entail different theories of how individuals relate to others and encompass different possibilities for freedom and transformation. We evaluate current conceptions of dialogic self-construction in terms of their implications for freedom and transformation, and we compare the sorts of freedom and transformation that are invited by current conceptions to an alternative conception that we believe has more beneficial consequences.

### Overview of Argument

The constructionist theories we review agree that the following are important aspects of dialogic self-construction (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990):

1. Self-interpretations are *texts*, which means that they consist of socially learned and recognizable categories and story-lines. These texts make our lived experience accessible to us.
2. An individual *identifies* with—that is, defines the self in terms of—specific types of categories and story-lines.
3. The individual *repeatedly* makes these self-defining categories salient

with respect to the self, either by consciously circulating them or by embodying them through tastes or bodily techniques.

4. Consequently, social relations organize in repetitive ways around the categories that the focal individual makes salient.

We argue that, when people adopt this type of dialogic self-construction, they attend relatively more to the abstract discourses that each participant *supplies* to a situation and relatively less to the unique dynamics of the currently ongoing interaction. It is because of this neglect of unique situational dynamics that relations organize repetitively around the socially recognizable meanings supplied by each participant. We argue that people's identification with a particular construction of the self stands in the way of those situated processes that might otherwise let meaning *emerge* from the unique dynamics of the joint situation.

We are not arguing that current constructionist conceptions are wrong, however. To the contrary, we believe that they accurately portray how people often identify with categories or discourses and use these to position and construct themselves repeatedly in various contexts. But we are arguing that many of these current conceptions are incomplete because they do not sufficiently attend to the more *direct* ways in which people can relate to others and to situations. By 'direct' we mean that such relations need not be mediated by the self-defining texts that participants supply to the situation. We believe that the current constructionist conception of dialogic self-construction is really a theory of a particular, albeit ubiquitous, type of social behavior.

Specifically, we draw from our empirical work and our reading of the phenomenological literature (e.g. Dreyfus, 1999; Heidegger, 1962) to illustrate how individuals can identify not only with 'texts' (imagined and enacted categories for the self) but also with their lived experience. This alternative kind of self-interpretation identifies the individual with currently ongoing activity. We do not mean to imply that people who adopt this different kind of self-interpretation do not use texts to understand the self, but only that in this more direct mode people place a primacy on lived experience (instead of on particular types of text) and then search for appropriate texts. We label this alternative type of dialogic self-construction *direct involvement*, as compared to the *identity-induced involvement* described in most constructionist literature. Because individuals in direct involvement primarily orient towards the unique dynamics of the activity (instead of towards their abstract understanding of this activity or towards the activity's self-relevant implications), their behavior is organized relatively more by unique situational dynamics. One implication of our argument is that repetition and the need for its overcoming (i.e. transformation) are artifacts of a particular way of interpreting the self, which are inadvertently facilitated by the assumptions of current constructionist theories.

According to constructionism's own pragmatic criteria for evaluating theories (Gergen, 2001a, p. 420), a more direct conception of dialogic self-construction is preferable to current conceptions because of the expanded possibilities for relation, freedom and transformation that it offers to people who adopt it. We also argue that our conception of dialogic self-construction is more kindred in spirit to Bakhtin's work, which has served as one important foundation to many current conceptions.

### **Current Constructionist Conceptions of Dialogic Self-construction**

Constructionists argue that, in theory, individuals are free to engage a wide range of social resources in each situation. In practice, however, each individual uses only a narrow range of what is socially available. Individuals tend to repeat certain patterns of discourse and behavior across diverse situations. Constructionists generally explain such repetition in terms of 'taken-for-grantedness': individuals mistake social or personal theories and conventions for facts. People do not explore and make use of other available interpretive or behavioral options than those implied by the convention or habit they follow. Many constructionists want to expose this taken-for-grantedness in 'sciences and in daily life' (Gergen, 1985, p. 267), thus freeing individuals from the constraints of their habits (Gergen & Kaye, 1992). This section offers a critical review of how two different types of constructionist approaches explain repetition and its overcoming. We focus on how these different explanations of repetition and overcoming follow from the theories' different conceptions of dialogic self-construction.

#### *Dialogic Self-construction*

Constructionist theories conceive of dialogic self-construction in terms of specific *texts* or narratives that individuals perform repeatedly in their social interactions (e.g. White & Epston, 1990). These texts refer to imagined or enacted categories and story-lines that a person makes salient with respect to the self and that acquire meaning either through local, interactive (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990; Wortham, 2001a, 2001b) or through more macro-structural social processes (e.g. Bourdieu, 1975/1984; Butler, 1990). Some authors (e.g. Freeman, 1993, 1995; McAdams, 1997; Schafer, 1992; White & Epston, 1990) use the term 'text' to describe a way for individuals to access the world that is related to but distinct from *lived experience*. Lived experience comprises an individual's impressions of the world in a largely 'inchoate' form (E. Bruner, as cited in White & Epston, 1990, p. 12). Texts are ways of making sense of our experience by assigning social categories and story-lines to some of these impressions.

The narrative form of organizing experience implies a selection from and synthesis of life experience (McAdams, 1997, pp. 56–57). This unification yields a *dominant story*, a plot into which current events and people fit as chapters or characters (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). People can have more than one story. Nor must each story be internally consistent or compatible with other stories (Davies & Harré, 1990). Nonetheless, the stories in play at any moment organize an individual's experience of a given situation by positioning the self and others based on the focal individual's personal experience, as this experience is encapsulated in a story.

From the focal individual's perspective, a dominant story is that aspect of an individual's experience with which the individual has *identified*, which means appropriated as 'one's own' (McAdams, 1997, p. 56).

The fact that it *is* mine—that when I see the sunset, *I* am seeing it; that when you hurt my feelings, those were *my* feelings, not yours, that were hurt—provides a unity to selfhood without which human life in society as we know it simply would not exist. (McAdams, 1997, p. 57)

Because of this identification, the person tries to understand current events with reference to categories that he or she brings from prior experience, which are used to construe the current situation. The sense of a temporally continuous self (White & Epston, 1990, p. 10) is partly an artifact of a self-narrative's unifying properties—as we repeatedly think of and enact particular categories for ourselves, we get a sense of coherence as that particular type of self.

The categories of self acquire a special meaning and importance to the focal individual. Individuals have an emotional commitment to the subject position implied in their dominant story (Davies & Harré, 1990). An emotional commitment often implies a positive evaluation of the category the person identifies with (e.g. warm-hearted), a negative evaluation of the opposite category (e.g. cold-hearted), and a perceived irrelevance of alternative classifications of the same phenomenon (e.g. extroverted/introverted, overbearing/reserved, weak/principled). We argue that the commitments people feel towards the classification system they identify with cause them to supply this system to a situation, independent of whether it is relevant (one aspect of Freud's [1900/1965] concept of 'transference' that continues to be useful—although we would not want to borrow all of Freud's metapsychology). These commitments reduce the flexibility or the multiplicity of perspectives with which people can access diverse situations.

Dominant stories or texts of the self are dialogic, not found in individuals. The self constituted through such stories or categories is not 'an entity found in nature . . . but [is] told through dialogue, in words, images, and enactments' (Schafer, 1992, p. xvi).

The notion of a 'story' or 'narrative' assumes the existence of a person who tells and an actual or imagined person who listens. The fact that the

listener, another person, is always implied makes the self a dialogic phenomenon par excellence. (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. xx)

Because the stories and categories used to construct the self are always already embedded in dialogue, relations between people are 'to be considered as the interaction of readers around particular texts' (White & Epston, 1990, p. 9). These texts consist of the categories that each participant makes salient with respect to the self by performing a particular type of story. The salient categories, in turn, organize interactions because they invoke (i.e. activate and make ready for use) socially recognizable meaning that informs the behavior of the other participants towards the focal person (White & Epston, 1990). The self thus consists of a story about the focal person that is modified through real or imagined social interaction.

In summary, dominant stories are ways of mediating ongoing experience from the point of view of the subject. Based on his or her dominant stories, the individual (1) selects from current impressions those that are significant to the self and (2) interprets these impressions based on those aspects of the individual's experience that are encapsulated in the relevant story. Relational dynamics also contribute to the repetitive nature of the focal person's experience because the person is treated in a similar way by different people across different situations, as these others respond to the socially recognizable categories the focal person makes salient.

### *Repetition and Its Overcoming*

From a constructionist perspective, then, being a self means that certain categories and story-lines are repeatedly made salient with respect to the focal individual. Diverse constructionist theories disagree both about the types of processes that cause this repetition and about whether repetition is undesirable from the point of view of the focal individual. These differences are relevant because they imply different possibilities for freedom and transformation. The authors cited so far tend to emphasize the role of discursive or interactive processes in generating and sustaining particular types of selves. Other authors emphasize the role of macro-structural processes (e.g. Butler, 1990). While some of the authors reviewed so far also address power (e.g. White & Epston, 1990), most of them treat power as an effect of discourse (cf. Danziger, 1997). In contrast, authors with a more macro-structural orientation generally believe that people cannot use discourse to refuse the kinds of selves that are socially imposed on them because these selves are the results of 'rigid power structures established in the past and protected from change by countless institutionalized practices and textual conventions' (Danziger, 1997, p. 410).

Discursively oriented and macro-structural theories differ in their evaluation of repetition. For the discursively oriented theories, it is not a problem



that people's experiences are repetitively organized around dominant stories. The repetition induced by dominant stories is only a problem if the focal person decides that the content of the particular dominant story is 'unhelpful, unsatisfying, and dead-ended' (White & Epston, 1990, p. 14). In such a case, if such a person can see beyond the 'taken-for-grantedness' of habitual stories, he or she has the freedom to author a 'new, liberating narrative' (White & Epston, 1990, p. x). According to some constructionists (e.g. Freeman, 1993; Schafer, 1992; White & Epston, 1990), people often author these new narratives outside of their daily interactions, for example in a therapeutic context or in private reflection. They then circulate and modify these stories during their daily interactions. In this view, the ability to author one's dominant story according to attributes one finds desirable represents an important type of freedom.

Macro-structural approaches tend to judge the repetitive patterns that constitute the self as a problem per se, that is, independently of whether this repetition seems desirable to the person who performs it. Repetition is a problem for such approaches because they view it as a symptom of coercive structural influences. Authors in the macro-structural tradition emphasize how socially recognizable selves are expressed not only through situationally-variable categories but also through categories with which the individual is endowed as a result of social position. These categories systematically and subtly influence people's perception and self-expression in the form of tastes, dress and bodily techniques (e.g. Bourdieu, 1975/1984). In addition, because these tastes and techniques are visible to other members of a society and have socially recognizable meaning, others will organize their behavior around these cues.

As a result of this different account of repetition and its causes, the macro-structural approach has a different conception about what kinds of freedom and transformation are possible. On this view, repetition is not the result of a person's authoring of a dominant story. Rather, it is the expression of typical selves that are socially imposed on people as a result of their membership in various groups. Because people are not free to re-author themselves as the discursively oriented constructionists say, freedom consists of recognizing social constraint and operating skillfully within it. People can certainly change some of their salient categories, such as tastes, dress, bodily techniques, or even the appearance of age and gender. However, this does not imply that people are now free from socially imposed meaning. It merely means that now a different type of social meaning will be imposed on the person. Operating skillfully within these constraints means that people can 'regulate the process of repetition' (Butler, 1990) by introducing variations on social types of selves—thus Butler's account of people altering how gender-related meaning is applied to them by subverting the social meaning through parody.

### **An Alternative Conception of a Dialogic Self**

Both discursive and structural accounts of dialogic self-construction assume that the self gets built up through the repetition of categories or story-lines that the person comes to identify with. Transformation occurs when a person changes or parodies habitual categories. In contrast, we argue that repetition and taken-for-grantedness can be avoided when people avoid *identification*. Although most of us do impose habitual categories of the self on new situations, people can sometimes involve themselves more directly. Instead of building up the self through accretions of cultural categories, we can open ourselves to categories that emerge in particular situations.

Gergen and Kaye (1992) have also argued that dominant stories can get in the way of people's attention to situational dynamics. They suggest that people will be more mindful to what is appropriate in a given situation when they understand the socially constructed nature of the world. We interpret this statement as suggesting that some kind of *additional*, skeptical understanding can facilitate participation in an ongoing situation. In contrast, our argument is based on the logic of *subtracting* situation-extrinsic elements. People can respond to the elements in a situation without invoking such additional understandings.

One might argue that this is another way of saying that people achieve a tacit understanding that there are no general truths, as Gergen and Kaye (1992) suggested. We agree. But in our argument, this understanding is not a generalized, intellectually achieved one but a derived one that, *in each situation*, emerges spontaneously under the condition that people do not identify with pre-given categories. In the presence of identification, for example with the understanding that we cannot know anything for sure, people will bring this understanding to the situation as a general concept that will distract their attention from more concrete, situational cues. Something other than a general insight into hermeneutics is needed to liberate people from taken-for-grantedness. We propose that this something is the absence of identification.

#### *Texts and Lived Experience*

As noted above, many constructionists distinguish between an individual's lived experience and the texts by which people turn their lived experience into a narrative. We argue that the type of ongoing relationship that the theories implicitly posit between lived experience and texts limits the theories' conception of freedom and transformation. This section first compares the constructionist approach to our alternative and then discusses the other factor that determines and limits the constructionists' conception of freedom and transformation: identification.

Some argue that many of the impressions that constitute our lived experience are not accessible to us unless they take a narrative form (e.g. White & Epston, 1990). For example, White and Epston (1990) describe the dominant story of one subject, 'Katherine', who believed that her chronic back pain had 'isolated her from contact with strangers'. The therapists explain how they

... asked Katherine if she could recall a time when she could have let the pain prevent her from having personal contact with another person but refused to submit to its demands. After a search that lasted for about 20 minutes, Katherine remembered an incident that had occurred three years earlier. She had been for a short walk and, not far from home, had noticed a stranger approaching from the opposite direction. The stranger looked friendly, and Katherine thought that he might greet her. As he drew level, she nodded and said 'hello' as he passed. *Although this was a feat that she could not have predicted in advance, she did not attach any significance to it at the time.* (p. 57, emphasis added)

Consistent with constructionist theories, this quote illustrates a relatively impermeable relation between a person's dominant story and lived experience. However, this impermeable relationship partly occurs because dominant stories get in the way of people's ability to benefit from their lived experience. Even though Katherine had been exhibiting behaviors that contradicted her dominant story, she did not notice these behaviors because they were not 'predicted' by the story.

This account implies a primacy of texts over lived experience. People first need to activate a particular text or category, and then they have access to the impressions that fall under this particular category. Once these impressions about the self are accessible, they are available for organizing one's future behavior more consciously. This process of constructing the future based on one's personal past creates a temporally continuous self—the sense of being a particular kind of person. Because the self is the only object that is monitored continuously in this way, it acquires a special significance to the person monitoring it (cf. Higgins, 1997). Because of this special significance, the concerns relevant to this self (as opposed to the demands of the current situation) generally organize people's decisions.

In contrast, we argue that people can act *spontaneously* on the constraints of a situation when their identification—and the resulting preoccupation with an abstract sense of self—is cleared away. In such instances, situations organize themselves. The construct of individual agency is not necessary to explain situational dynamics, because the relevant categories emerge from people's interaction in the situation. Such an account places a primacy on lived experience over text. In our approach, lived experience refers to perceptions of the currently ongoing activity. These perceptions are not personal, but are generally available to all participants in the situation. Note that we are not proposing unmediated access to situations or 'text-less'

enactments of the self. All experience is mediated and all selves are storied. We claim, however, that the mediating categories only sometimes come from people's habitual stock—that they can also emerge by clearing away habitual selves and participating more directly in lived experience.

When undesirable dominant stories control people's perceptions, White and Epston (1990) try to help them recover desirable types of lived experience as the first step toward transformation. As illustrated in the above quote, the therapists encourage people to search their lived experience for situations that contradict undesirable assumptions in their dominant story. Once people become aware of this contradictory evidence, they can let go of undesirable categories (e.g. being fearful in social situations) and adopt more desirable ones (e.g. being socially courageous).

On this approach, transformation involves changing the content of one's dominant story to a more desirable one. In Katherine's example, she was already displaying courageous behaviors but simply was not aware of them because the categories she identified with blocked these types of perceptions. Hence, the transformation is primarily in the story that she used to screen her lived experience. We argue that such a theory limits the kind of transformation that is possible for a person who adopts this theory. Because the theory is only concerned with those repetitions the client experiences as undesirable, the transformation process focuses on finding evidence in lived experience that contradicts the undesirable story. Thus the structure of the old story guides and constrains the client's perception of lived experience and also implicitly constrains the structure of the new story.

As one would expect, then, the new stories in White and Epston's (1990) examples tend to revolve around the same dichotomous categories as the old story (e.g. fearful–courageous, miserable–happy)—only the clients now identify with the more 'desirable' aspect of the category. Clients' perceptions and social relations are also likely to be organized by the same type of plot, at the expense of a person's ability to experience other types of plots. It seems that what in this particular account appears as a person's freedom or authorship in fact represents the continuing influence of the person's problematic habits. This 'solution' to people's difficulties in fact perpetuates them. A more desirable freedom, in our view, would consist of the freedom from the compulsion to invoke any particular category, including both 'desirable' and 'undesirable' aspects.

We suggest that many personal difficulties have nothing to do with the particular content of a person's story. One type of content is not inherently better than another. Rather, these difficulties have to do with an inadequate relation between discourse and lived experience. This inadequate relation comes about because people's preoccupation with the categories that are relevant to their dominant story prevents them from responding appropriately to what is relevant to a situation. Thus behavior that is motivated by

the categories a person identifies with is likely to stand out and cause problems.

This reasoning also has implications for a macro-structural account. When people act based on identity-induced, situationally inappropriate categories, others' participation often organizes around the socially recognizable meaning of these 'odd' behaviors. For example, Kanter (1977) argued that because women are often underrepresented in work groups, their gender attracts attention and organizes the behavior of all participants in stereotypical ways. However, two more recent studies show that this process did not take place when women performed their task well (Bradley, 1980) and when they avoided self-serving performance attributions (Taps & Martin, 1990). These studies suggest that categories relevant to a given situation, such as competence, can override the salience of situation-extrinsic categories, unless the focal individual supplies such situation-extrinsic categories to a situation: for example, by using them as explanations for treatment the person perceives as unfair. This is not to say that stereotyping and discrimination do not exist or that the victims invariably inflict such injustices on themselves. We are merely arguing that situational factors can sometimes influence whether and how social categories are applied, and that the possibilities for this influence are currently poorly understood. We believe that non-identification represents an important aspect of such influence.

Our argument is also consistent with clinical evidence. According to a constructionist account, discourse helps and, indeed, is required for a person to access lived experience. But if discursive resources represented such valuable tools for coping, why would people often have an extensive verbal and behavioral repertoire in exactly those domains that also house their difficulties? One possible answer is that our discursive resources proliferate around our ineptness. For example, scholars have argued that mental content about an activity primarily arises when people's participation somehow fails (e.g. Heidegger, 1962; Wicklund, 1986). In such instances, people develop vocabulary that helps them understand the potential sources of this failure. Despite—or, as we suggest, precisely because of—these abundant discursive resources, people often do not benefit from the lived experience they supposedly encode.

Dominant stories are likely to arise around those situations in which people are incapable of participating effectively. Moreover, once these stories are in place, they distract the participants' attention from the unique dynamics of the situation and towards socially recognizable categories that then organize behavior in stereotypical ways. People's problems, then, may be caused not by the unfavorable content of their dominant story, but by the indiscriminate application of such stories to an ongoing situation—in a way that prevents people's effective participation. What is needed is not a theory of discourse but a theory of effective participation in a situation.

*Identification and Participation*

The constructionist theory of dialogic self-construction describes the mutually constitutive relationship between people and their social context. According to the theory, people consist of commitments to particular types of texts with social origin. An individual's participation in each social interaction is influenced by the particular type of text the individual identifies with. This means that the person experiences the interaction from the position of the subject, which involves

... recognition of oneself as having the characteristics that locate oneself as a member of various subclasses of dichotomous categories and not of others—i.e. the development of oneself as belonging in the world in certain ways and thus seeing the world from the perspective of one so positioned. This recognition entails an emotional commitment to the category membership and the development of a moral system organized around the belonging. (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 47)

We agree that individuals invariably make use of social resources, especially language. But people can use these resources in different ways, with distinct implications for how to conceive of the dialogic relationship between people and the social context. We propose that identification and subjective positioning is only one possible way in which people can participate in social interactions. It is only under this condition that people circulate the social and idiosyncratic categories they are committed to in a situation. Because situations organize around the socially recognizable meaning of the categories that the various participants supply to a situation, the generative role of dialogue in the situation is relatively limited—as compared to what might be possible in direct involvement.

The theory of direct involvement proposes that individuals can experience themselves in terms of the ongoing activity, instead of in terms of pre-determined categories that define the individual. We will illustrate how, in such instances, people in an interaction form a system that is unified in its effect on the ongoing activity. This requires that participants perceive one another in terms of potential contributions rather than subject positions. Potential contributions differ from subject positions in that they refer to people only in situationally relevant terms—they refer to concrete behaviors instead of typical perspectives, and they assume a shared interest in advancing the current situation instead of jockeying for status or other resources.

Direct involvement does not mean that people do not think of themselves and others in terms of socially recognizable categories, but merely that they use situationally oriented types of perceptions. This is possible because in direct involvement people relate differently to social categories. In direct involvement a person may well recognize the self and another as 'a member of various subclasses of dichotomous categories' (Davies & Harré, 1990,

p. 47), but the person is likely to view these categories merely as *descriptive* as opposed to *self-defining* or *self-identifying*. Categories that we view as self-descriptive are not associated with the special significance that we feel for self-identifying categories. Consequently, self-description does not invoke the kinds of emotional commitments that compel people to supply social or idiosyncratic categories to a situation. People are then relatively freer to respond to the unique dynamics of a situation, which, we argue, affords for a more expanded sense of a dialogic relation.

The absence of emotional commitment in direct involvement does not imply the absence of emotions or imply that direct involvement is a form of detachment. Emotions in direct involvement are generated by the structure of the situation itself, instead of by the implications of this situation for the self. For example:

You begin to write a poem. Before long it, the poem, begins to develop metrical, stanzaic, symbolical requirements. You, as the writer of the poem, are serving it – it seems. . . . It is at this point that we get our creative second wind, at the point when the object takes over. . . . As one friend, a novelist and critic, put it, ‘If it doesn’t take over and you are foolish enough to go on, what you end up with is contrived and alien.’ (Bruner, 1962, pp. 25–6)

Bruner here describes how effective writing comes about when the writer and the poem form one system, in the sense that each of these two elements continuously responds to the other and yields a unified effect. During this process of direct involvement, emotions (e.g. the energizing feeling of getting a ‘creative second wind’) are not the faculties of an individual but an aspect of this ongoing communication process. Emotions in direct involvement are a form of perception that connects a person to the ongoing situation and, therefore, contributes to the person’s effective participation in the situation. Because direct involvement makes people more sensitive to the situation, it is not a form of detachment. Instead, it is the abstract attitude of identity-induced involvement, of which emotional commitment is an integral part, that detaches the individual from the situation.

We argue that people will exhibit repetition and taken-for-grantedness only under the condition of identification. Our theory is consistent with the etymology of the term ‘identification’. The term ‘identity’ comes from the Latin source *ident* (*idem*), which means ‘repeatedly, again and again, earlier’. According to Webster’s (1996), identity is currently used to describe ‘the state or fact of remaining the same one or ones under varying aspects or conditions’. Identity is synonymous with repetition and stability. The modern (but not the early) usage implies that this stability of the entity across conditions is desirable, or at least natural, by suggesting that deviations from such stability can be signs of mental illness. For example, Webster’s states that identity is integral to a person’s ‘sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time and sometimes

disturbed in mental illness, as schizophrenia'. The early Latin usage conceives of identity as an achievement in the sense that it is the outcome of repeated activity. In contrast, the modern usage views identity as a state.

This etymology suggests that we have over time come to misperceive identity as a natural state, as opposed to one possible way of relating to a situation. Because we do not compare identity-induced involvement to alternative ways of relating to a situation, we do not understand the mechanism by which identification creates the repetition that we consider a more or less undesirable part of human experience. Notice how the modern definition distinguishes explicitly between a person and the situation and attributes stability to the person. In contrast, we are arguing against distinguishing the person and the situation, maintaining that the stability supplied by the individual closes off relational possibilities and impedes transformation.

Direct involvement implies a different conception of freedom, as compared to current constructionist theories. Both discursive and macro-structural accounts equate freedom with a person's 'agency' (Butler, 1990) to either author and re-author or vary scripts. This definition of freedom is consistent with our colloquial understanding of freedom as independence from constraint or the exercising of individual choice. The referent of this freedom is the biological individual. In contrast, in our account, freedom comes about when participants in a situation relinquish the compulsion to supply particular types of texts to the situation. In contrast to the traditional conception of freedom, freedom here involves a maximum responsiveness to the constraints of *situated dynamics*, such as the concrete 'metrical, stanzaic, symbolical' requirements of the poem in Bruner's quote above. The referent of this freedom is the activity that unfolds according to its situated dynamics (e.g. the writing of the poem) rather than according to the abstract categories supplied by individual participants. The following section illustrates the concept of 'direct involvement', with examples from our ongoing empirical work.

## Examples and Discussion

### *Background*

Our examples are drawn from a 12-month ethnography in the US office of a German software company, 'Velvet'. The ethnography examined the distinct consequences of identity-induced and direct involvement for joint cognitive accomplishments. The examples analyze the interactions that took place during a conference call that Velvet's German top management, including Michael (CEO), organized to discuss a coordination failure between the US and the French team. The US team, consisting of one sales person (Jeffer-



son) and two systems engineers (Dieter and Lothar), had met with Jake, the US Chief Technology Officer of the French advertising agency ‘Panache’, to discuss the initial work the team had completed for an international roll-out of Velvet’s product within Panache. During this meeting, the team called Jake’s boss, Serge, in France for a clarification question. To their surprise, they found out that Serge was meeting with the French Velvet team and an independent contractor, Loui, to also discuss an international roll-out of Velvet’s product within Panache. At that point, the US and the French team compared their ideas in front of the two Panache executives. After the meeting, the French sales person, Jean-Claude, left an e-mail for Velvet’s top management. He reported that Serge and Loui thought that the US presentation was ‘bullshit’ and that the US team was ‘a bunch of clowns’.

We illustrate the construct of direct involvement with the behavior of Dieter and Lothar, two systems engineers who participated in the conference call from their office together with Alexandra Michel, who listened while taking notes and taping the conversation. Our baseline analysis of Dieter shows that, in general, he had difficulty managing his anger, which predictably flared up when he felt that his contributions or his competence was undervalued. This anger then caused him to act solely on what was bothering him personally, regardless of whether his responses were appropriate to the joint situation. The focal conference call was the first situation we witnessed in which Dieter resisted the temptation to respond to attacks on his competence and, instead, kept prioritizing the currently ongoing situation. The attacks on Dieter’s competence in this context were direct and severe—including Jean-Claude’s remarks that Dieter’s and Lothar’s product was ‘bullshit’ and ‘ridiculous’, and his report that Loui and the client called them a ‘bunch of clowns’. But Dieter nonetheless did not respond by reacting from his typical (identity-induced) pattern of anger. In what follows we explore what his direct involvement looked like.

#### *A Different Kind of Dialogic Self*

According to our framework, attaining direct involvement is a matter of overcoming identification. We draw on Bakhtin’s theory of the novel in order to clarify what we mean by identification and its absence. Bakhtin (1935/1981) distinguishes between two perspectives in a novel, the perspective of the characters and that of the *novelist*. The defining attribute of the characters is that they speak from a particular ‘belief system’ (p. 313) or subject position that they represent—or with which they are *identical*. Characters can speak with more than one voice, but they are nonetheless ‘trapped’ in one or more subject positions. The novelist, in contrast, makes liberal use of the privilege to enter *and* leave any of the characters’ subject positions. Hence, one important attribute of Bakhtin’s novelist (in a highly developed or polyphonic novel) is the absence of identification with any

particular subject position, which implies freedom from the compulsion to construe the world from one perspective only.

The following quote from the focal conference call illustrates this absence of identification in how Dieter related to the other participants.

*Michael:* Was Jake happy [after Friday's meeting], Dieter?

*Dieter:* Well, after the meeting, Jake seemed happy. And it seemed that we came to a decision. But I am not sure about this anymore. . . . Because my problem is to understand Jake's role. And whether Jake or Serge has the last instance in this decision. And I am not sure what Serge's opinion is. Whether he is still fully behind this. It sounded to us like he was. But . . .

*Jefferson:* Dieter, did you have a chance to read the e-mail message that we traded last night with Jake about this?

*Dieter:* Right, last night, Jake responded to an e-mail that he talked to Serge. And that he had the feeling that he's still behind all the decisions. He said that unless Serge is a good actor he seems to be fine with what we decided on Friday.

Our analyses of identity-induced involvement showed that—like a character in a novel—people in this mode of relating identified with a particular subject position that had a special significance to them and from which they then construed situations (cf. also Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 47). In contrast, Dieter, in the above quote, did not present himself in terms of a unified, personal perspective that he identified with and prioritized. Consistent with how Bakhtin (1935/1981, pp. 311ff.) characterizes the language of the novelist, Dieter speaks from various positions in this segment, positions that engage in a dialogue with each other.

For example, in the above quote, Dieter did not respond to Michael's question with a personal opinion, but disclosed an 'on-line' reasoning process in the form of a conversation between a variety of relevant perspectives. In this reasoning process, the qualified use of Michael's words ('seemed happy') served as a question that Dieter posed himself from Michael's perspective. Dieter then considered this question by occupying those relevant perspectives he had access to, including Dieter's initial perspective ('after the meeting'), Dieter's current perspective ('But I am not sure about this anymore') and Dieter-speaking-as-Jake's perspective.

Notice that Dieter not only made reference to Michael's and Jake's perspectives but also spoke as Michael and Jake by using their words as his own words. This is relevant as evidence that Dieter interpreted himself not in terms of an abstract self-concept ('I am') but in terms of the activity ('doing') that he was involved in, for which he served as a resource. Instead of behaving with reference to his own abstract self-concept, he adopted various positions that could help with the task. From the perspective of the task, the relevance and utility of the resources matters but not the identity of the individual who contributed them. When Dieter used the voices of others as his own, he maintained the integrity of the perspective by repeating the

exact words (i.e. the informational or resource part), but he did not identify with any perspective—including his own.

In direct involvement, as for Dieter in this example, the embodiment of a perspective did not entail identification with the perspective. Our reading of Bakhtin suggests that identification is about the kind of relationship that an individual has with a perspective. In particular, identification is characterized by a compulsion that consists of uncontrollable (often unwitting) attachment to the perspective and taken-for-grantedness or *automaticity*. Automaticity means that people invoke their habitual interpretations without necessarily being aware of doing so and without being able to control this process (cf. Bargh, 1989, 1996). We interpret Dieter's frequent usage of qualifiers (e.g. 'It sounded to us', 'But I am not sure about this anymore') as evidence that he exhibited a relative un-identified relationship to each of the perspectives he was considering, in the sense that he had the freedom to retreat from them. Moreover, in the quote above, Dieter treated all speaking perspectives, including those that might be attributed to him, as equally significant. He did not invoke an independent or privileged vantage point to consider perspectives designated as 'other', in distinction from 'self'. Therefore, we believe that Dieter's qualifiers did not imply a distance or detachment from a given perspective but extended an invitation for other speaking positions to come in. Dieter's qualifications marked each perspective as an incomplete interpretation that would only be useful in combination with the other perspectives.

Through this sort of multi-perspectival or dialogic conversation, lower-level perspectives were *transformed* into a more comprehensive or higher-level understanding. Note that, in contrast to how it happens in the context of identity-induced involvement, the transformation of understanding in this case does not describe the attributes or states of an individual but instead describes the self-organizing processes of a situated system. The system is free to self-organize when identity-induced obstacles, including automaticity, are cleared away.

#### *Implications for Participation*

The construct of a dialogical self (e.g. Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Taylor, 1991) has been an important reaction against essentialist conceptions of the self. However, constructionist conceptions of a dialogical self make an unwanted assumption: Dialogue or relation is the exchange between distinct and relatively autonomous subject positions. Therefore, these subject positions are the prerequisite for relations (e.g. Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 148). In contrast, our framework conceives of relations as the connections that tie people and other elements as mutually constitutive parts into a situated system. Situated systems are defined by the task they accomplish (e.g. writing a poem, dancing, carrying on a conversation). We argue that,

when people conceive of their self in terms of subject positions, they tend to neglect the currently ongoing situation. Subject positions impede rather than promote relations. This section explains how the different kind of dialogic self we are introducing facilitates relations with transformative potential.

In contrast to current constructionist practice, we study the dialogic self not as a construction but as an interpretation. *Self-construction* refers to how people construct the content of a particular subject position, typically in the form of self-narratives or other accretions of categories and story-lines. *Self-interpretation* has a more fundamental meaning. Following Dreyfus (1999), we define self-interpretation as *conspicuous action* that reveals people's implicit sense of *what it means to be a self and how selves relate to the social context*. In contrast to how self-construction is currently used, self-interpretation need not involve discourse or narration. Through our study of self-interpretations, we discovered how people can interpret the self not only in terms of subject positions but also in terms of participating in a situated system. In other words, self-interpretation is the process by which people implicitly choose to conceive of themselves in terms of either a subject position or a situational system. Sometimes people define themselves by building up accretions of categories and story-lines, as the constructionists would have it, but sometimes they define themselves by clearing away such categories and involving themselves directly in situations.

We now explain how Bakhtin's work helps us understand (1) how to analyze people *as* situational systems, and (2) what the implications are for transformation. Our perspective on relations takes seriously Bakhtin's emphasis on the *intense* relationship that one consciousness can enter into with another (1929/1973, p. 26). By supplying this adjective, Bakhtin suggests that relations can be of variable quality. But relations in which one *consciousness* joins another are invariably characterized by an intense or heightened quality. According to our reading of Bakhtin, consciousness—or heightened awareness, sensitivity and concern—is the attribute that differentiates the novelist's *function* from the subject position of the novel's characters. His construct of a novelist bears important similarities to our construct of a dialogic self-interpretation. In contrast to a position (e.g. a character position in the novel, a subject position), a function is defined not as a free-standing entity or perspective but only in reference to what it accomplishes for a system. In our framework, a function differs from a role, in that a function refers to the needs of the *situational* system that constitutes currently ongoing activity.

According to Bakhtin, the primary task of this situational system (i.e. the novel) is productivity or the transformation of meaning. Note that transformation, in this context, is a continuous system-level process, not an episodic activity an individual undertakes to overcome repetition. Novelists accomplish a distinctive sort of transformation, one fundamentally different from the 'complete single-personed hegemony' (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 297)

over meaning that the poet exercises. Both the poet and the novelist provide a unique perspective on words and forms by ‘immersing’ them in a complex system. The poet, however, *is* this system, based on a deeply personal, internal complexity. In contrast, the novelist can effectively participate in and facilitate the transformational processes of a system precisely because he or she clears away self-related complexity.

As Gergen (1989) points out, in traditional psychology and in everyday life we have an extensive vocabulary for people’s ‘inner region’. This vocabulary construes the inner region in terms of personal faculties, such as motivations, cognition and emotion. Similar to how Bakhtin conceives of the poet’s inner complexity, traditional psychology has focused on how these faculties interact as parts of a *personal* system—that is, to serve the focal individual’s interests. For example, according to one influential model (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1990; Higgins, 1998), people identify with particular goals (‘motivation’). Based on these personal goals, people’s cognitive faculty scans the perceptual landscape for blips of meaning (Kelly, 1955/1963, p. 145). Emotions are an indication of how this meaning relates to the personal goals (Higgins, 1996): anger indicates perceived shortcomings; satisfaction and triumph indicate that goals have been met and exceeded. Just as the poet strips words and forms of their inherent meaning, this personal system construes events in a currently existing situation based on the person’s internal structure—not based on the situation’s structure. We believe that these models accurately describe how people function in identity-induced involvement. However, we currently lack adequate descriptions of how people relate to the world in direct involvement, partly because we lack a language for representing people as situational systems. The following example contributes towards generating the requisite conceptual tools.

In particular, the example is one attempt to represent individuals in terms of the structures they provide to a situational system. We here illustrate how emotion can work not as a personal faculty (i.e. as something that is located within a person and that serves the person’s interests) but as a situated process that serves the situational system. We do not mean to be essentialists about the existence of emotions here. We merely assert that people in our cultural context act such structures into existence, and we study the naturally occurring differences in such enactments. Our attempt differs from similar projects in the constructionist literature. These other approaches typically interpret emotions as *performances* (e.g. Averill, 1982, 1985; Gergen, 1994), which means that emotions are not expressions of an inner feeling state but requirements in a socially-structured ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein, 1953). Such approaches differ from ours in that they conceive of these performances as oriented by extra-situational considerations, including social norms and rules or the person’s own interests (e.g. Gergen, 1989).

*Towards a Situational Kind of Self*

The following are extracts from our fieldnotes:

*Jean-Claude said that the French client did not take the US team presentation seriously and in the end did not listen anymore. Lothar looks very angry, gesturing to Dieter. Gestures look exaggerated, contrived. Does not look like real anger. Dieter looks at Lothar, winks, and smiles in response to Lothar's gestures. The brief interaction with Lothar seemed to relax him.*

*In conversation with Dieter, Jean-Claude said that Loui does not trust the US team and wants to do most of the project by himself. Dieter said that this would be a 'major change for the US team' to which the 'US team has to adjust'. Dieter speaks calmly. But Lothar gets even more excited. Red in the face, slamming hand on the desk, seeking Dieter's eye contact. Exaggerated gestures. Dieter pats Lothar's knee, smiles and says: 'Why don't you get a glass of water or something.'*

According to our analysis of typical behavior for these individuals, angry behavior was unusual for Lothar—who was typically quiet and shy. We had observed Lothar previously when the team's work was publicly criticized. In these situations, Lothar had not shown any visible reactions. In all of those previous situations, however, Dieter had responded with uncontrollable anger at hearing negative feedback on his own and his team's work and competence. Hence, in the above interactions, Lothar responded to cues that Dieter typically could not help but respond to. Moreover, Lothar's demeanor mirrored Dieter's habitual emotional reactions.

The fieldnotes depict Dieter's responses as divided. On the one hand, his attention was focused on listening and responding to Jean-Claude. On the other hand, his emotions seemed yoked to Lothar's emotions (as opposed to Jean-Claude's words). In identity-induced involvement, we had often observed a process of *emotional contagion* (Barsade & Gibson, 1998) in which a particular emotion spread across all participants without regard to the common situation. For example, as people 'caught' anger from one another, they responded to this anger and neglected the joint task. Emotional yoking also involved the synchronization of emotion across co-present individuals. However, the increase in one type of emotion in Lothar (anger, irritation) caused an increase in an opposing type of emotion in Dieter (calm, relaxation). The joint situation benefited because Dieter remained impervious to stimuli that would have typically incited uncontrollable anger in him, and because he could consequently contribute in a constructive manner to the phone conversation.

We propose that Lothar and Dieter formed one situated emotional system. In such a system, emotions are not located within a participant, signaling how well the participant's personal needs are being met. Rather, emotions signal to the participants the requirements of the currently ongoing situation. In particular, we suggest that Lothar, because he knew of Dieter's sensitiv-

ities to criticism, took the task of expressing Dieter's anger upon himself, without necessarily being aware of doing so. Thus the awkwardness of Lothar's anger display might indicate the unusual nature of this emotion for him and his consequent lack of skill in displaying it. Lothar had repeatedly mentioned that he cared about the project 'being moved along' and about the participants 'making progress', which we interpret as situation-intrinsic motivations. He knew that Dieter's anger could impede progress because (1) the feeling of anger made it impossible for Dieter to contribute his knowledge, and (2) Dieter's expressions of anger caused the other participants to respond in kind and to neglect the joint task. Hence, we believe that one salient task involved containing Dieter's anger and that Lothar contributed in this important manner to the joint situation.

By anticipating and displaying Dieter's habitual emotions, Lothar 'externalized' this anger and afforded Dieter the opportunity to position himself differently towards it. Dieter had previously *identified* with his anger in two senses. First, consistent with how constructionists conceive of emotional identification with a subject position (e.g. Davies & Harré, 1990), he felt angry when the personal goals he identified with were threatened by events in a currently ongoing situation. Moreover, consistent with the notion of automaticity, he had felt one with the anger—when anger arose in him, he could only act on behalf of this anger. We believe that Lothar's exaggerated gestures communicated anger to Dieter, making it palpable for him. Dieter responded by trying to calm Lothar down with sympathetic comments and pats on the knee. These gestures indicate that Dieter was *conscious* of Lothar's perspective but did not identify with it—in the sense that the anger did not take over Dieter's experience and responses. There was no automaticity. In other words, Dieter's responses indicated that he remained in an unattached or meta-position, acting *on*—rather than acting *as*—the anger that was confronting him.

We have described here how emotion can be conceived of in situational as opposed to individual-oriented terms. Our examples have shown how in direct involvement, diverse perspectives and diverse events, such as the emotions of anger and relaxation, organize themselves into one harmonious effect on the situational system. This illustrates our belief that in direct involvement the situation is the appropriate unit of analysis.

## Conclusion

The constructionist conception of a dialogic self represents an important reaction against essentialist conceptions of the self. As explained in the introduction, constructionists react to essentialism not because the essentialist conception of the self is 'inaccurate' but because it impedes people's perception of possibilities for self-transformation. Associated with the

pragmatic commitment to facilitating self-transformation is constructionism's theoretical commitment to relational theory:

First, my contributions to the constructionist dialogues issue from what is often viewed as a pragmatic standpoint. Essentially I write as a means of entering into relationships out of which new forms of action may hopefully emerge. . . . My chief goals are transformative. (Gergen, 2001a, p. 419)

This theoretical commitment involves a preference for construing the self not in terms of psychological processes 'that create a vision of society in which individuals function as isolated, self-contained, and competitive monads', but as 'inherently relational—inseparable from communal activity' (Gergen, 2001b, p. 810; cf. Gergen, 1994). Our central argument is that the current constructionist notion of a dialogic self unwittingly undermines the very goals it was intended to promote.

From a pragmatic perspective, we have argued that when people adopt this dialogic self concept in their lives, a building up of identifications and habitual enactments results. In other words, this self concept unintentionally contributes to the repetition and taken-for-grantedness that constructionists have resolved to reveal and eliminate. The currently relatively narrow conception of transformation, as an episodic activity that an individual undertakes to overcome repetition, is an artifact of these identification-induced processes. Also, because of the special significance that the accreted identifications have for the focal individual, the person orients relatively more towards these abstract self-constructions and relatively less towards the unique aspects of the situation. As people's involvement in their psychological situation 'pads' them from the currently ongoing activity, situational relations fail to form and the unfolding of unique situational dynamics with a more profound transformational potential is impeded. Thus, when people adopt constructionism's concept of a dialogic self, the vision that they enact—that of community as consisting of 'isolated monads'—is one that constructionism wishes to counteract.

Nevertheless, we believe that constructionism's practical and theoretical goals can be accomplished through precisely the plan that the approach has proposed: namely, expanding our conception of what it means to be a self with attention to the comparative consequences that different self-conceptions entail (Gergen, 2001a, p. 420). Our framework adds another path to the one that has been charted. We suggest that this new entry on constructionism's map moves us closer towards the goals the program has set for itself. In particular, we have shown that when people identify with the currently ongoing activity (i.e. when they avoid identification with a subject position), repetition and taken-for-grantedness are avoided as unique situational dynamics are free to unfold. We have drawn on our reading of Bakhtin to illustrate an account of the self as a situated system that we believe contributes a new—and we believe more genuinely relational—



aspect to the constructionist approach. Our study of direct involvement also differs from congenial constructionist approaches, such as *positioning* (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46), in that it introduces a third force that is constitutive of meaning, beyond 'discursive practices' and personal 'choice'. This third force is situational emergence or self-organization.

The phenomenal experience of direct involvement and its relation to deft behavior has, of course, been extensively documented (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1993; Langer, 1989a, 1989b; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Wicklund, 1986). However, although these theories have often pointed to people's enhanced sensitivity to the currently ongoing situation and to the phenomenal experience of losing or 'forgetting' an abstract sense of self, they have stopped short of making the situated system (as opposed to the individual) their unit of analysis. We have argued, with constructionism, that we must move beyond the individual. But we can nonetheless incorporate into constructionism an important aspect of these above-noted approaches. Applying the phenomenology of Heidegger (1962) and Dreyfus (1999), we have framed the behaviors that these approaches describe as *conspicuous action* from which a more relational type of self-interpretation can be inferred; a self-interpretation that clears away the 'monadic' self and 'sets the world [i.e. the situational system] free' (Heidegger, 1962).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. We thank Etty Jehn and Greg Urban for many stimulating conversations and for their insightful comments on our work.

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