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**Relational Education: Applying Gergen's Work to Educational
Research and Practice**

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Abstract

This article sketches the implications of Gergen's relational approach for educational research and practice. Gergen suggests that we envision education as a set of processes intended to enhance relationships. This is a radical departure from most mainstream educational research and practice, which is designed to enhance the individual's mind. We first examine three key assumptions about individuals and about knowledge that undergird mainstream educational research and practice—an emphasis on the individual as separate from the world, an account of knowledge as decontextualized and a tendency towards hierarchies which favor purified knowledge over lesser forms. We then describe three alternative assumptions from Gergen's relational account of education—an emphasis on individuals as woven into contexts and knowledge as produced in relationship, a view of knowledge as contextualized, and a view of knowledge and action as heterogeneous, not pure. We provide examples from current educational research and practice that illustrate these three assumptions about relational education.

Key Words: education, relational psychology, social constructionism, knowledge

As demonstrated in this special issue, Ken Gergen's relational approach has had broad influence in various areas of psychology and neighboring disciplines. In this article we sketch the implications of his approach for educational research and practice. We define education as a set of processes which occur in events and institutions that are intended to promote both informal socialization and formal learning—but we emphasize that formal schooling as practiced in the West has often been taken as the ideal form of education. According to this influential ideal, education should enhance individuals' decontextualized knowledge. Gergen disagrees, arguing that education should enhance relationships and not focus on the autonomous individual (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Wortham, 2001). We examine key assumptions about individuals and knowledge that undergird most mainstream educational research and practice, and we present alternative assumptions that envision education as a set of processes aimed at enhancing relationships.

Applying his relational perspective reflexively, Gergen (2009) insists that he, as an individual, should not be given credit for transforming research and practice in any area. Instead, he positions himself as part of a relational movement, in dialogue with various others who have been constructing alternative ways of conceptualizing educational and other practices—as one node in a heterogeneous but often overlapping web of ideas and actions. In this spirit we sketch several main themes from the collection of relational insights that have influenced educational theory and practice, drawing both on Gergen's work and on related perspectives. We first define "individualist education" in terms of three common assumptions that a relational account asks us to think beyond.

We then describe three promising alternative assumptions from Gergen's relational account of education, and we offer illustrations from current educational research and practice.

Gergen's Relational Approach

Ken Gergen began his career as a more mainstream personality and social psychologist, and his earliest work was theoretically and methodologically aligned with traditional approaches. These approaches assume that the object of psychological science is the human individual, that successful psychological studies present models of how all humans function and that psychological claims must be warranted with empirical evidence showing that the claims correspond to reality. In 1973 Gergen published his famous article "Social Psychology as History," in which he argued that both the theories and the objects of scientific psychology change over historical time as different ethnopsychological approaches are accepted. This work undermined the idea of a universal human individual whose psychology can be definitively modeled, because both psychologists' models and humans themselves change with history. It also added society and culture as relevant explanations of human nature, moving beyond the individual as the sole ground for psychological explanation. Methodologically, the article presupposed that empirical hypothesis testing could not authoritatively warrant psychological claims, because psychological realities change over time and psychological science itself sometimes changes those realities. Gergen was widely criticized for his argument, but he

pursued its implications and developed a relational approach that opens up alternative possibilities for understanding and improving the human condition.

Gergen's relational approach has many facets, but in this short article we represent it with three central claims. First, Gergen argues that we should go beyond the individual as the unit of analysis for understanding human phenomena. He proposes that relational processes are basic to all aspects of being human. He acknowledges that ethnopsychological concepts of the individual exist—more so in some times and places than others—and that these can have important effects, and he also acknowledges that embodied, biographical individuals have some unique properties. But he argues that even apparently internal characteristics like self or emotions are constituted through relational processes. Second, Gergen argues that a particularly pernicious aspect of individualist approaches is an assumption about decontextualization, especially the decontextualized nature of knowledge. On a dualist account, which focuses on the individual knower, individuals ideally develop mental representations that are separate from the objects they represent and the contexts in which they are formulated. Gergen argues that this picture of knowledge fails to recognize the relational contexts and tools that are woven into knowledge and that it fails to recognize how knowledge, far from being a decontextualized individual possession, is both composed through and creates connections among people. Third, Gergen argues that knowledge is not homogeneous and need not be purified of contextual “pollutants” that undermine its validity. He also argues against related hierarchies—of knowledge-claims, actions, and sometimes even whole societies—that reflect how close to a pure, decontextualized ideal a claim, action, person or society is. Gergen shows how cognitive, moral and aesthetic processes depend

on heterogeneous resources and change over time. In his more recent work Gergen has begun to use his relational alternative to help improve mental health, education, public service, commerce and other domains.

Individualist Education

Like traditional approaches to personality and social psychology, mainstream approaches to education are individualist, in that the individual is seen as the object and locus of educational enrichment. An individualist orientation makes assumptions about individuals and about knowledge that in turn shape educational practices, which then provide young people with particular sorts of opportunities to learn and deny other kinds of opportunities. In what follows, we articulate three aspects of individualist education—an emphasis on the individual as separate from the world, a view of knowledge as decontextualized and a hierarchy running from purified knowledge down to less desirable heterogeneous forms. This brief account of individualist education provides a backdrop against which we can consider Gergen’s alternative relational approach.

Individualism and Dualist Accounts of Knowledge

Mainstream approaches to education assume that the individual is the target of schooling and the locus of knowledge. Education aims to develop the individual knower, and schools succeed when they augment the individual’s knowledge and skills. This typically involves dualist assumptions about knowledge and the knower: the individual knower is separate from the world and develops representations of it; these

representations can be more or less accurate; knowers must develop and test their assumptions by applying reasoning skills and gathering empirical evidence. Approaches to education differ in their methods for improving the individual's knowledge, ranging from more directive to more discovery-oriented pedagogies, but mainstream approaches all assume that the individual student's skills and representations are the target of educational interventions. This approach assumes a fundamental separation between people, because each individual's autonomous mind is the unit of analysis and the target of educational interventions.

Decontextualization of Knowledge

Mainstream educational approaches also assume that knowledge is decontextualized. The educated person has mastered sets of facts, propositions, models and cognitive skills that are fundamentally separate from the context in which they were learned. Knowledge is also typically viewed as relatively stable. In mainstream approaches to education, schooling often involves the transmission of isolated, portable bodies of knowledge. Schools make sense as institutions only because stable knowledge and reasoning procedures can allegedly transfer and have value in other contexts where students will use the knowledge they learned in school. Because the context is not integral to the knowledge or skill, the isolated bodies of knowledge often hold little meaning for anyone other than the members of the community who generated that knowledge. The problems students solve in school are thus problems of the disciplinary communities from which the knowledge originated. This often makes schooled knowledge and skills less useful outside of schools. Moreover, given the

decontextualized, insular nature of the knowledge being passed on, there is generally little opportunity for students to question the claims on which the knowledge is based.

Purity and Hierarchy of Knowledge

Traditional approaches to education participate in what Latour (1993) calls the “purification” of knowledge. In fact, all knowledge is heterogeneous, woven through with the artifacts and tools used to construct it, with contributions from the others with whom the knower is in relationship and with other aspects of relevant contexts. But proponents of mainstream, individualist, decontextualizing approaches strive to purify knowledge, claiming that only knowledge separated from politics, power, interaction and other contextual dimensions can be valid. This typically has two consequences for education: homogeneity and hierarchy. Purified knowledge is usually segregated into domains, within which it is insulated from other areas. Thus schools and universities organize their curricula into disciplines. Purified knowledge also presupposes an ideal form, which often becomes the norm against which less adequate forms of knowledge or action are judged. This generates hierarchies, which are often applied to individuals and groups with a claim that their knowledge or action inappropriately deviates from the ideal. Schools implement such hierarchies constantly, through grading, tracking, discipline and other evaluations.

An Illustration

Brian Street’s (1984, 1993, 2001, 2005) research on the social construction of literacy illustrates these three aspects of individualist education. Street describes how

mainstream education adopts what he calls an “autonomous” model of literacy, in which being literate means that an individual possesses a universal, decontextualized set of cognitive skills and in which literacy instruction helps the individual acquire these skills. Literacy on this model is individual, decontextualized and pure—a universal set of skills that an individual can apply across contexts whenever print needs to be decoded. This account of literacy generates hierarchies, because educators classify a particular way of reading and writing as literate and individuals get classified as either literate or illiterate based on a narrow view of what counts as literacy. Street shows how the literacy practices favored in formal schooling tend to reflect the practices of groups in power, thus following Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), Heath (1983) and others who have shown how schools naturalize practices associated with the dominant group. Literacy is presented as a decontextualized, universal skill, but it turns out to assume a background of culturally specific literacy practices. Against this background, nonmainstream ways of using text appear deviant. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) describes how families with young children in different communities interacted with texts, showing how youth were socialized to engage in “literacy events,” including storytelling, in culturally variable ways. She shows that in some communities storytelling differs from mainstream classroom norms about reading and writing stories. Youth who competently tell stories in their home communities can thus be identified as unsuccessful when participating in classroom literacy events. This and related research on literacy illustrates the potentially disempowering character of individualist educational practices.

Mainstream education aims to enhance individual learning, and nearly all formal educational practices have this goal. However, if the assumptions about people and knowledge that undergird individualist approaches are flawed, as Gergen suggests, then we must consider alternative visions for education. Gergen (2009) asks, “if we dispense with the presumption that education is about improving individual minds, how are we to conceptualize its function?” (p. 241). Adopting a relational account of self and knowledge, he suggests that education should aim at “enhancing participation in relational process” (p. 241). In what follows we illustrate what this means. We first elaborate three central assumptions made by a relational approach to education—an account of individuals as woven into contexts and of knowledge as produced in relations, a view of knowledge as contextualized, and a vision of knowledge and action as heterogeneous. We then provide several examples from current educational research and practice that illustrate these three key aspects of relational education.

Individuals are Woven into Contexts and Knowledge is Produced in Relations

On a relational account, individuals cannot be separated from their contexts. All important dimensions of human life are mediated by relationships. Knowledge, for instance, is always mediated by the social artifacts or tools used to construct it (Cole, 1996). The categories that I use to formulate my beliefs or claims have been created by others and have their meaning within systems developed and maintained collectively. I cannot force a category to mean something only for me, so that my knowledge can be mine alone, unless I am willing to be a hermit—and even then I will depend on many

categories and tools created by others. My beliefs and knowledge claims also depend on physical and symbolic objects, like information technologies, maps, diagrams and the physical arrangement of the spaces in which action takes place. Furthermore, I depend on a cognitive and material division of labor in which I rely on others to know certain things, on tools like computers and notebooks to embed crucial pieces of information and on features of the environment to afford my activities.

A similar argument about relational embeddedness can be made about the self: an individual's values, desires, preferences and identities are mediated through tools and artifacts provided and made meaningful by others. Part of who I am, for instance, is mediated through the clothes, accessories and grooming I adopt. These are not individual features that I create out of my own autonomous self, but involve relational and physical resources that have meaning because of social systems of value. Bakhtin (1935/1981) says that the self lives “on the boundary” between self and other, not in some internal region, because the various properties that make up my self are mediated through words, actions and resources shared with others.

Contextualization of Knowledge

On a relational account, knowledge and action are woven into the contexts in which they are generated and used. This means that knowledge and action are bound up in relations—relations with others, with one's own and others' socially-derived and embodied dispositions and with culturally organized aspects of settings, including artifacts and normative ways of using them. Shifting from an individualist to a relational view of education focuses educators on facilitating individuals' participation in systems

that include both people and artifacts. Instead of simply augmenting the individual's knowledge and reasoning, we facilitate successful participation with others in various activities. This means that individuals develop relational habits and learn to participate in shared practices, relating with others around an issue and jointly combining resources to address it. A relational account of education also recognizes that people and resources move across contexts, as people learn to deploy resources (including tools, dispositions and ways of relating with others) to solve problems in new contexts. This differs from the traditional view of "learning transfer," in which individuals learn when they use allegedly stable sets of decontextualized knowledge and skills in new contexts (Lave, 1988).

A decontextualized view of knowledge assumes that it is relatively bounded and static, and therefore portable across contexts. A contextualized view implies that knowledge and action emerge in relations over time and are woven together with resources and situations. What is available to be known changes as we move across contexts. And contexts are not stable, because individuals, communities, practices and tools change over time. Thus a relational approach to education proposes that knowledge and action, and the resources that make these possible, are dynamic.

Heterogeneity of Knowledge and Resources

On a relational view, schooled knowledge and skills are inevitably hybrid. Because an individual's knowledge and self are partly constituted through artifacts, objects, concepts and embodiments that are drawn in part from relationships, the fruits of education inevitably involve learners' more productive use of such heterogeneous tools.

When a student learns to make a philosophical argument, for instance, s/he is learning to employ heuristics developed in a sociohistorical tradition and practiced in relationships with peers and teachers. S/he is learning to participate in relationships with imagined readers and with those who have used similar concepts and strategies in the past. The resulting arguments that s/he goes on to make, once she is a more accomplished practitioner, are inevitably heterogeneous—interwoven with the heuristics, artifacts, concepts and even specific expressions that constitute them. Furthermore, being the kind of person who makes this kind of argument is more than just having certain knowledge. It is what Packer and Goicoechea (2000) call an “ontological” accomplishment, a change in who the learner is as a human being. And the self that this student is becoming is also heterogeneous, partly composed of tendencies, heuristics, artifacts, physical accoutrements and other tools that come from relationships.

Schooled knowledge and the “educated person” are thus not pure, tending toward some ideal of a homogeneous knowledge, habit or standard. They are thoroughly heterogeneous, as their tendencies and accomplishments are afforded only through various habits, tools and artifacts that they have borrowed from various relationships and traditions. Sometimes standards and purity can be important, depending on the task at hand. But in general there is no one pure type of knowledge. Humans know and act successfully in various ways, using various combinations of tools, and always in ways that have been mediated by various relationships. This means that educators should be less quick to establish one way of thinking or one standard as best. It may be best for certain purposes, but for other purposes other standards may be more appropriate. Furthermore, any standard can be accomplished in various ways and relies on

heterogeneous resources to be realized. Educators should thus be suspicious of apparently natural hierarchies that may be impeding the learning and potential successes of many students.

Illustrations of Relational Education

In this section we provide several examples from current educational research and practice that illustrate the central aspects of a relational approach. Because the three aspects are related, each example illustrates more than one of them. First, we return to the topic of literacy and describe relational research and practice in this domain. Second, we describe educational research that highlights the third aspect of relational education—how learning and social identification are facilitated by networks of heterogeneous resources. Finally, we discuss practitioner inquiry, in which researchers and teachers work together to gather data and improve educational practices. These illustrations are far from exhaustive, but they highlight central aspects of a relational approach to education. For extended discussion of other relational work in education, see Wortham and Jackson (2008).

In the last section we described Street's (1984) account of "autonomous" approaches to literacy, as an example of individualist education. In contrast to the autonomous model of literacy that guides most educational practice, Street argues that all literacy practices are in fact "ideological," woven into the social contexts in which reading or writing takes place. He describes how people are recognized as competent in literacy activities in significant part because of their cultural and social histories with the literacy activities practiced in a given social context. Instead of viewing literacy as a

modular set of skills that individual minds acquire, Street sees literacies as multiple: people might develop one form of literacy in one context and another form in a different context. Street also views literacies as produced in relations. For reading and writing to occur successfully, various resources must contribute: thoughts, texts, physical settings, tools, relationships with others, and so on. Stripping away the context and focusing only on lexicon, grammar and decoding would miss these other resources that are essential for actual literacy events to occur as they do. Communities of people develop different ways of producing, interpreting, and valuing texts, and these shift over time as changes occur in the perceived functions of written text, of people's roles in communities, of norms for interaction, and so forth.

Many educational researchers have provided evidence to support Street's argument about the relational nature of literacy. In their investigation of adult literacies in an English city, David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) argue that individuals' reading and writing cannot be understood apart from the contexts in which they are situated. Barton and Hamilton describe the local character of literacy practices in Lancaster, including the specific relationships, histories, political agendas and other contexts that shape how people read and write there. For example, they describe how the political writings of one person are embedded in individual and neighborhood histories. In order to explore how, they follow this individual family over time and document members' uses of text and writing. This and contrasting cases show how different families use text in divergent ways, and how their literate accomplishments depend on activities and contexts that are to some extent specific to the family. Barton and Hamilton show how people's ability to participate in literacy events does not depend

primarily on autonomous cognitive skills, but instead on a configuration of resources, including physical and symbolic tools, others' knowledge and so on. In tracing the literacy life stories of several individuals, Barton and Hamilton also show how literacy practices have been important for these people's public and private selves, as they became both more and less "educated," "refined" and "successful."

Kris Gutiérrez and her colleagues also analyze literacy as a relational phenomenon. They support the design of “hybrid” educational spaces, in which heterogeneous resources are strategically used to support youths’ literacy development and to disrupt traditional hierarchies of knowledge and people (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999). Gutiérrez and her colleagues argue that heterogeneous linguistic resources (e.g., languages that one can speak, and registers of language that one controls) can contribute to any setting, and that this hybridity is a resource rather than a problem for youth learning to be literate. Educators can deliberately build upon these varied resources when designing learning activities. For example, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, and Chiu (1999) describe how a third grade Spanish immersion teachers purposefully used students’ multiple languages, registers and side talk to develop students’ biological understandings of human reproduction. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada (1999) show how educators used heterogeneous linguistic and technological resources to support youth’s development of literacy practices in an after-school computer club. They describe settings like these that make strategic use of heterogeneous resources as “third spaces,” and they argue that such spaces support the re-organization of activity and thus lead to “expanded learning” (Engeström, 2001). Educators who draw on heterogeneous

resources also disrupt typical power structures in classrooms, because heterogeneous linguistic knowledge are valued in such spaces.

Gutiérrez and her colleagues focus on how heterogeneous linguistic resources can facilitate literacy. Other educational research shows the utility of heterogeneous resources in different domains. Reed Stevens explores how networks of heterogeneous resources can facilitate learning and problem solving in mathematics, video-game play, engineering and family financial decision-making (Stevens, 2000; Stevens & Hall, 1998; Stevens, Mertl, Levias, & McCarthy, 2006; Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008). In one ethnographic study of families' financial problem-solving activity, Stevens et al. (2006) demonstrate how families routinely “assemble” and “coordinate” resources that are “radically heterogeneous” (p. 2). One working class mother and son who had wrecked their car “assembled knowledge of options available under an insurance policy, a network of friends and their manual skills [to ‘cannibalize’ and re-sell parts of the car], basic calculations, and a local online marketplace for the sale of used merchandise” (p. 3). In the end, they recouped the value of the car, earned additional money, learned how to disassemble a car and learned how to re-sell car parts to earn income. They subsequently went into business doing this. As Stevens and his colleagues demonstrate, resources from heterogeneous domains (e.g., finance and auto-mechanics) can be re-purposed to solve unexpected problems in new contexts. Stevens et al. (2006) contrast these assemblies of heterogeneous resources that can lead to learning in everyday life with the static, predictable sets of resources used to solve mainstream school mathematics problems. They argue that decontextualized school curricula are not the best preparation for learning in the real world.

Stevens' work illustrates the first two aspects of a relational approach to education. What individuals do to solve problems cannot be understood apart from the contexts in which they perceive and attempt to solve a problem. And the knowledge that people use are contextualized, change over time and only become relevant in configuration together with other contingent resources that become useful to solving a particular problem.

Wortham (2006) explores the interplay of social identification and academic learning. He shows how these two processes can deeply depend on each other, and in doing so he demonstrates that academic learning can depend on heterogeneous resources, including some drawn from students' social identities. He traces the identity development of two students across an academic year in a ninth grade urban classroom, showing how they came habitually to occupy characteristic roles. He also follows two major themes from the curriculum, showing how students came to make increasingly sophisticated arguments about them. The two students developed unexpected identities in substantial part because curricular themes provided categories that teachers and students used to identify them. And students learned about those curricular themes in part because the two students were socially identified in ways that illuminated those themes. Thus a network of heterogeneous resources made possible both social identification and academic learning in this classroom. Resources included the curricular themes as well local models that specify the different types of "student" one might be in this classroom, including distinctive models of gender identity that emerged locally in the classroom across several months. The two focal students' identities emerged as speakers transformed more widely circulating models of race and gender into local models of

appropriate and inappropriate studenthood, and as they contested individual students' identities in particular interactions.

In addition to illustrating the importance of heterogeneous resources to academic learning and identity development, Wortham also shows how individuals are woven into contexts and how knowledge is contextualized. The students' identities emerged as they did only because of local resources available in the classroom (e.g., particular curricular texts that supplied categories of identity which became relevant, patterns of interactions that became established between these students and teachers, like gendered expectations about academic success). The knowledge that developed over the course of the year was necessarily contextualized. It was bound up in relations between the students and teachers, between the students and the texts that were read and discussed, and so forth. The ways in which the students could be socially identified and what was available to learn academically changed over the course of the year. Both depended crucially on how various classroom resources were configured in interactions (e.g., what teachers decided to focus attention on in any given class period, how a discussion of a text proceeded).

Finally, we examine a different type of educational research and practice, called "practitioner inquiry." Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe how many educators do disciplined inquiry into their own practice. As opposed to the traditional model in which educational researchers develop knowledge that practitioners merely implement, practitioner inquiry empowers educators to gather data and draw conclusions in ways that can improve their own practice. Duckworth (1986) argues that the distinction between theory and practice often misleads us into thinking that educators do not gather data to answer empirical questions. She describes how good teaching always involves

formulating hypotheses and gathering information to assess those hypotheses. The goal may not be to discover general principles about the world, as a researcher would, but focuses instead on solving specific problems of practice. The inquiry is nonetheless often empirical and systematic, being similar in form to research done by academics.

The organized practitioner inquiry movement builds on the fact that practitioners already do inquiry that resembles educational research. It helps educators form groups and gather expertise which can make their inquiry even more systematic. This often takes place in practitioner inquiry groups that provide peer review and support. Many such groups initially include a university-based educational researcher as a consultant. Practitioners learn techniques of data collection and analysis from the researcher, who then steps aside and lets the practitioners use these techniques for practice-based inquiry. After a while the researcher is rarely needed, because the practitioner community can communicate relevant ideas and techniques to new members.

The practitioner inquiry movement shows how educational practice is in fact heterogeneous. Even before they get involved in the formal practitioner inquiry movement, educators engage in many activities that we think of more as “theory” or “research,” like developing conceptual models of experience, formulating hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data. The practitioner inquiry movement expands practitioners’ repertoire of models and tools, allowing them to do more systematic inquiry. It does so by borrowing ideas and methods from more formal educational research. Concepts like “discourse analysis,” for example, and associated techniques for recording and analyzing spoken data, can move from an academic setting where they were developed into practitioner settings where teachers use them to analyze data from their own

schools. Practitioners do not “apply” fully formed empirical generalizations or theoretical propositions that have been formulated and tested by researchers. Instead, they borrow specific analytic techniques and recontextualize them, deploying heterogeneous resources to solve contextualized problems and improve their practice.

These brief illustrations represent the growing body of relationally-inclined educational research and practice that is rethinking traditional assumptions about individuals, knowledge, forms of educational practice and the goals of education. Although they illustrate diverse forms of educational activity, each suggests how educators and educational researchers could benefit from viewing individuals as woven into contexts, knowledge as produced in relations, knowledge as contextualized, and knowledge and action as thoroughly heterogeneous. Together, they suggest what education might look like if it were designed to enhance participation in relational activity instead of developing an individual’s mind.

Conclusion

For those of us who do educational research and practice, then, there are good reasons to move from the individual to relationships, from decontextualized to contextualized knowledge and from homogeneity and hierarchy to heterogeneity. Gergen reminds us that individualist assumptions are not necessarily wrong, such that we should simply replace them with the relational alternatives. Even in our metatheory, we want heterogeneity. But he does argue individualist assumptions keep us from imagining alternatives that might help us educate better and that we should thus explore them both

theoretically and practically (Gergen & Wortham, 2001). When we stop purifying and evaluating using univocal criteria, we open up richer possibilities for action and relationship.

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