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Toward a Relational Humanism

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Brief Abstract

Humanist conceptions of the person evolve across history. While humanism has served a pivotal role in the care-giving professions, its individualist emphasis now stands as an impediment to its future. Proposed is a relational re-conceptualization of the person, placing relational as opposed to individual well-being in the forefront of our concerns.

The history of Humanism is an uneven one, marked by diverse and contradictory influences. Its philosophic assumptions, values, and associated practices have shifted markedly across centuries and cultures (Davies, 1997). During the 1600's, Renaissance humanists attempted to revive the social values of classical Greece, with their emphasis on enhancing communal harmony through education. In certain respects, this view of education is echoed in the current concept of the Humanities in higher education, and stands in significant contrast to the Sciences. In the late 1800's, however, the European humanist movement became important in defining the human being as a natural as opposed to a spiritual being, thus challenging the hegemony of the Church as the arbiter of worldly knowledge. In this sense, humanists stood firmly in the Enlightenment tradition. Humanists such as John Dewey advocated humanism as a form of secular religion. The powers of human reason, along with ethics and social equality, were emphasized (Wilson, 1995). As humanism came to find a home within 20th century social science, it carried with it a fundamental tension. Similar to the natural sciences, humanists were committed to a concept of knowledge based on reason and experience. At the same time, in contrast to the positivist science, they were deeply engaged in issues of individual and social value. Thus, as most of us would recognize it today, the humanist tradition has primarily functioned as a resistance movement to the materialist/positivist reductionism otherwise dominating the study of human behavior (Waterman, 2013). Such resistance has carried with it a range of assumptions and values that have inspired theoretical inquiry, wide-ranging research, and valued forms of practice – particularly within the fields of therapy and counseling.

To touch on central elements of the resistance, while the mainstream behavioral sciences define the mind in terms of cognitive/neuro mechanics, humanists have placed personal experience toward the center of their concerns. Where the positivists have embraced deterministic explanations, humanists have honored human agency. Thus, where behaviorally oriented scientists view impersonal experimentation as the optimal research method, humanists see empathic interpretation of others' experience as pivotal to understanding. Where positivists have attempted to avoid issues of moral and ideological significance, humanists continue to sustain the moral and ethical concerns of early humanism. Thus, humanists are often concerned with issues of social justice, and

advocate what may be viewed as compassionate understanding for others. One might indeed see the humanist orientation today as locked in a "battle for human nature", as Barry Schwartz (1987) might put it. It is a battle over whether we are to understand ourselves as machine-like creatures, inextricably driven by forces of heredity and environment, or as sentient beings who can draw from our experience and consciously decide our courses of action.

Yet, as I shall propose in what follows, battles such as this find their origins in cultural traditions. Conceptions of human nature are not driven by "what there is," so much as they emerge from historically situated, value invested negotiations among people. In this sense we may set aside the longstanding battle over the truth about human nature, and begin to inquire more specifically into the consequences of such beliefs on social life. And, while I have personally been a champion of humanist resistance to positivist reductionism , I wish now to place the humanist cluster of conceptions under critical scrutiny. This is not at all to give way to positivism; its problems remain robustly relevant. However, it is to pave the way for a further transformation in the humanist legacy. If humanism is to retain its vitality, and sustain some of it most basic concerns – including its ethical consciousness and its caring and compassionate orientation to human beings - a new turn in the historical wheel is essential. We must explore a new conception of the person, and along with it, fresh forms of inquiry and professional practice. We must move beyond the role of resistance, to join with broader movements across many fields of academic and professional endeavor, movements that emphasize collaborative, integrative processes both global and environmental. As I see it, required at this historical juncture is the emergence of a *relational humanism.*

In what follows, I will first touch on the constructed character of human nature. This will enable us to reconsider our traditions in terms of their social consequences. Here I will confront some of the major limitations of contemporary humanism. We can then explore what might be entailed in a relational re-working of the conception of the person, and how such a conception can bring about a significant flourishing of the humanist tradition. I will then touch on implications of a relational humanism for practices of research, therapy and counseling, and cultural life more generally.

The Social Construction of the Person

Any inquiry into human nature must necessarily proceed from specific traditions of understanding, their prevailing distinctions, the ways in which questions are constituted, and their agreements as to what constitute reasonable answers. The discursive conventions constituting these traditions will necessarily lay the groundwork for what it is that we can say about human nature and the ways in which our accounts will function within the culture. In a broader sense this is to say that there is no "getting it right" with respect to the nature of human nature. We cannot step outside all traditions to ask questions and offer intelligible replies. Indeed, we may say that the very inquiry into a specifically "human" nature is itself derived from a tradition of understanding. It is not a question that must be answered in order for us to achieve fundamental knowledge or an accurate picture of our condition in the world. In effect, human nature is a cultural construction.

To view human nature as a cultural construction is in no way to dismiss the significance of these discourses in contemporary life. Rather, it is to invite even more serious attention to the issues at stake. Accuracy in the matter cannot be our goal. We cannot measure our discourses about human nature – humanist vs. mechanist - against a set of observations, such that we can determine whether one account is more accurate than another. What constitutes a fact or a relevant observation in one tradition will fail to do so in another. In the mechanist tradition experience is disregarded, and agency does not exist; for humanists, environmental determination does not exist and brain states are disregarded. At the same time, conceptions of the "human being" are enormously important in their social consequences. Whether we can hold people responsible for their actions, hold scientists accountable for the moral and political implications of their work, or believe that understanding each other is equivalent to empathy as opposed to prediction, are significant issues. Discussions about what is or is not human nature are entries into moral and political deliberation. They inform our professional practices, and indeed our ways of living together. We move, then, from accuracy as our criterion of concern, to societal consequences.

The Social Pragmatics of Contemporary Humanism

As we shift our gaze from establishing the essentials of human nature to assaying the effects of such beliefs on our forms of life, we begin to ask such questions as: if we accept a given view, what is gained or lost from our lives; who is benefited and who suffers; what is brought into view, and what is rendered invisible? To be sure, there is much to be said in support of the humanist orientation in the social sciences. Both in the academic sphere and in practices of therapy, humanism has offered an invaluable counter to the hegemonic expansion of modernist mechanistics. There is already a substantial body of critique of the socio-political consequences of the mechanistic vision of the person (see, for example, Shotter, 2012; May, 1999; Taylor, 1964; Harre and Secord, 1967). However, given a more pragmatic orientation to truth claims (Hansen, 2007), it is also useful to consider the dark side of contemporary humanism, that is, ways in which its shared assumptions may be injurious to human well-being. For, in its emphasis on individual experience and personal agency, contemporary humanism allies itself closely with an individualist orientation to social life. In this sense, the humanist movement lends itself to a range of problematic outcomes. Here I touch on four of these:

Social isolation. The humanist conception of the person gives ontological priority to individual experience. In terms of what counts about me or you, it is an utterly private refuge somewhere behind the eyes. Yet, if what is most central to us dwells within this private sanctuary – mine and mine alone – then you are fundamentally "other" – an alien who exists separately from me. I am essentially alone; I came into the world as an isolated being and leave alone. Further, you can never fully know or understand my private world, for it is never fully available to you, never fully revealed. By the same token, if what is most significant about you always lies "behind the mask", then I can never be certain of you, can never know what you are hiding from me, what you truly want. Even in our most intimate moments I cannot know what you are truly feeling. In this sense, our mutual isolation is locked arm in arm with distrust. Because we cannot be certain what lies behind our words and deeds, then suspicion always lies just over the

shoulder. As Sampson (2008) adds, such an orientation militates against the realization of how much we "contain the other" in our actions, and vice versa. Further, it is this sense of isolated being that invites us to see the natural world as fundamentally separate from self.

Self-obsession. The primacy of experience in contemporary humanism is most fully exemplified in therapy and counseling practices centered on the illumination of the individual's interior – the elusive intricacies of thoughts, feelings, motives, emotions and so on. To comprehend and to gain control over the interior requires concerted attention. In a broader context we have here the basis of what social theorist Christopher Lasch (1978) viewed as a cultural narcissism, and the Wallachs (1983) see as a culturally pervasive selfishness - a preoccupation with the self and its improvement and enrichment. It is this same preoccupation that lends itself to a concern with self-esteem. The numerous measures of self esteem to which we are exposed – both directly in terms of evaluations and indirectly through the models that beckon from world of advertising – continuously remind us of what we are lacking In effect, the deep cultural concern with self-esteem owes its origin to the isolation of selves. We don't "just naturally" worry about our self-worth. If we did not construct the world in terms of the significance of the individual, worries about self-esteem would evaporate.

Relationship deterioration. Consider some common phrases: "We need to work on our relationship", "This relationship is falling apart", or "We must develop better teamwork". All of these phrases are lodged in the premise that society is made up of individual actors. And because the self is the primary reality, relationships are artificial and temporary. They must be "built", "made", or "repaired". Indeed, if one is fully developed as a self, why should he or she need a relationship? In the celebrated volume *Habits of the heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) propose that the emphasis on self expression, freedom, self-development, and self-fulfillment all undermine the kinds of social institutions that are central to a viable society. For example, "If love and marriage are seen primarily in terms of psychological gratification, they may fail to fulfill their older social function of providing people with stable, committed relationships that tie them into the larger society" (p. 85). On this account, if one finds that marriage frustrates one's desires for freedom or self-expression there is little reason to remain in the marriage. Similarly, with voluntary services or community politics, the individualist is likely to view them as siphoning off time that should be spent on achieving one's personal goals.

Societal blindness. Because of the belief in ourselves as autonomous decision makers, we also inherit a handy way of understanding untoward actions - for example, crimes or what we call "mental illness." In such cases we are led to suspect a fault in the internal functioning of the individual. We view crime as a voluntary action, or possibly a diminished "sense of right and wrong". We fail to explore the conditions in which much criminal activity originates – poverty, drugs, joblessness, and the like. Similarly, if one is suffering from depression, we focus on the individual mind as the site of repair. If one's job is boring and her boss a tyrant, why should she be treated for her feelings of depression? Why not change the working conditions? In broader terms the individualist presumption operates like a blinder. It is a crude and simplistic way of reacting to problem behavior. We fail to explore the broader circumstances in which actions are enmeshed, and focus all too intensely on the psychological condition of the single

individual. Not only is this approach highly limited, but if the broader circumstances of our lives are not addressed it could also be disastrous.

As we find, when the individual agent is the irreducible atom of society, we invite isolation, distrust, narcissism, the erosion of relationships, and a stunting simplification of the problems we confront. This does not at all mean abandoning the vision of contemporary humanism. From the standpoint of a reflective pragmatism, there is much that can be said in support of an individualist orientation. Why should we ever wish to abandon its discourse and related conventions? The challenge here is not replacement, but adding significant dimension to our forms of life. Let us, then, explore the potentials of a reconstructed humanism. It is to this possibility that I now turn.

The Priority of Relational Process

As proposed, concepts of human nature are socially negotiated constructions. Let us expand on this assumption, as we may locate here a promising route to a re-visioning of humanism. For, what has been advanced in the account of human nature, also applies to our understanding our world more generally. Whatever exists requires no particular account of it, no particular valuing, or any particular course of action. Our actions in all cases are premised on negotiated assumptions and values that in turn, point the way to what we take to be rational action. Such proposals lie somewhere toward the heart of social constructionist theorizing more generally (Gergen, 1994). The important point for the present undertaking, however, is the pivotal place of social process as opposed to individual functioning in directing the course of human action. As wide-ranging scholars now ask, can we find a means of replacing the individualist account of human action with one in which social process is primary? (See, for example, Harre, 1993; Kirschner and Martin, 2010; Burkitt, 2008; Slife, 2004; Westerman, 2013). Historically speaking, the challenge is not new. Many draw sustenance from the early works of George Herbert Mead (1934) and Lev Vygotsky (1981). For Mead, persons are related via a subjective or symbolic interdependence; for Vygotsky cultural action forms the basis of what he viewed as "higher mental processes." Yet, it is important to note that for both these theorists a dualist premise is maintained – an inside the head psychology as against an outside the head, physical world. For both Mead and Vygotsky, the inside acquires its content from relations with others. However, the "inside" retains its ontological primacy – as prior to relationship. Much the same may be said for the increasing number of humanist expansions of the relational dimension (Hansen, 2005; O'Dwyer, 2009; Spinelli, 2014). While challenging in potential, the social world is constituted by independent agents.

In my view, we proceed more fruitfully by abandoning the dualist tradition altogether. This is not only to escape the range of intractable philosophic problems inherent in dualism (Rorty, 1979). Rather, once we posit an inner world as an essence of the individual, we have already constructed a society of independent entities, with the challenge of forging a secondary existence of relationships. So let us attempt to understand relational process as primary, in which case the very idea of a private mind is a cultural construction. In effect, it is out of relational process that all meaning emerges. An illustration is helpful:

Consider: a client speaks at length of her anger at her husband's irresponsibility. How might a therapist respond? She might, for one, pause, and ask, "Can you tell me some ways your husband is actually responsible" As a second possibility, she might say, "How often do you have these feelings anger?" As a third possibility, she might inquire, "You know, I wonder if it's not really anger you are feeling, but an insecurity; it just gets expressed as anger." What then has the client expressed? The first therapist has given attention to the husband's behavior; anger recedes into the background." The second has brought the client's anger into focus, and the husband's behavior recedes in importance. Yet, the third therapist has treated her words of anger as expressions of insecurity. So, what then has the client expressed? It depends on the therapist's reply. The client furnishes the possibility for meaning, but the shape of this meaning is furnished by the therapist. At the same time, the therapist's words only make sense in light of what the client has spoken. None of these responses would make sense if the client had simply been staring at the ceiling. In effect, neither client nor therapist makes sense without the other, and the particular sense that results requires the coordination of their efforts. Elsewhere (Gergen, 2009) I have described this process as *co-action* – neither action nor reaction, but coordinated action.

Yet, neither the actions of the client nor the therapist depend on the interchange in itself. Both are participants in conversational traditions, and their ability to generate intelligibility depends on their compliance with the relevant rituals of conversation that precede them. If the client entered the room and requested a menu, this would be unintelligible to the therapist; and, should the therapist ask the client for the wine list, such an action would be similarly nonsensical. Their coordination in the therapy room is already prepared by their participation in preceding traditions. Or, more generally, we not only require each other to 'make meaning', but we also depend on a preceding tradition of social coordination.

From this account we may conclude that the individual is not the origin of the meaning of his or her actions, but meaning takes shape within a continuous process of coordinated action – one that both precedes and follows the actions themselves. Nor should we confine the process of generating meaning to linguistic collaboration alone. Coordination will often include bodily movements, such as posture, gaze, or gesture - often be more significant than verbal content. Further, the process of coordination may also include surrounding objects, along with particular contexts of space and time. In the same way that coordination in the use of words brings them into meaning, so are the various objects with which we surround ourselves brought into significance. This 'cup' becomes a vessel for drinking tea; this 'clock' a device for counting time together. Drawing from Wittgenstein (1953), meaning issues from the forms of life in which we are collectively engaged. Within this process all that we take to be real, rational and good is brought into being. All that we take to be significant in life, to be sacred, objectively true, or worthy of commitment is born within relational process.

The Humanist Vocabulary Re-visited

As I am proposing, a relational orientation sustains the humanist concern with human meaning (Hansen, 2005). However, in this case, the site of human meaning is not within the minds of single individuals, but issues from relational process. As noted, the concept

of "mental process" is essentially a construction that emerges from the process of co-action. It follows that we do not speak about "private experience," "agency," and the like because they are free-standing phenomena that demand our description and explanation. Rather, it is within our process of co-action that these become meaningful words. For many humanists this proposal would appear to eliminate the tradition. If all words that refer to the private world of the mind are cultural constructions, then what is left of the humanist tradition? Yet, it is important to realize that this lament is lodged within a dualist tradition, one that views our discourse of describing or expressing events within the mind. But what if the discourse of the mind does not refer to a mental world at all? What if that is not its function in social life?

Consider: When I report that I am feeling happy, or sad, for example, I am not somehow looking inward and giving a report on the state of my mind. Rather, these words acquire their meaning from their use within the process of co-action. If I extend my hand to you, you may well grasp and shake it in a greeting. In the same way, if I express anger at what you are doing, you may change your behavior; and if I express my admiration of your accomplishments, you may smile in appreciation. All constitute the micro-dances of social life. When we proclaim our anger, love, or depression, we are not reporting on our state of mind (or neurons), but are engaging in a full bodied relational action. Our actions from this standpoint, are not driven, motivated, intended, or otherwise fashioned by an inner world, but acquire their very intelligibility as actions only in relational process. What we take to be private experience when we "feel" anger, depression, love, and so on in the quiet of our own room is essentially a minimal form of public action. It is relational action, without public display.

From this standpoint, we do not relinquish the humanist vocabulary of the person. It is reformulated in terms of relational process. To appreciate the possibilities of this re/visioning of the mind, consider the process of rational thought. It is impossible both conceptually and experientially to identify rational thought inside the head. There is no way in which Descartes could know that he was thinking. But when we observe people's actions, there is often little problem in distinguishing between rational and irrational behavior. We see "getting an education" as rational, and "driving on the wrong side of the highway" as irrational. Our confidence in drawing these conclusions is fully dependent on our participation in social process. Our judgments issues from social traditions of which we are a part; we live in a culture that indexes these actions as rational or irrational. Now let us apply this line of reasoning to two concepts central to contemporary humanism.

Agency: Intention as Action

The conception of the individual as a free, but ultimately responsible agent is central to both contemporary humanism and Western culture more generally. We prize our capacity to choose, to direct our actions according to our decisions. And by holding people responsible for their actions, we feel the grounds are established for a moral society. The idea of an inner source of action can be traced to Aristotle. As he reasoned, there must be an active force that animates the otherwise lifeless body. To this force he assigned the concept of what is generally translated as "psyche." The psyche possesses the "power of producing both movement and rest." Over later centuries the concept was

incorporated into Christian theology as "the soul." To commit a sin, within this tradition, is to act voluntarily, thus bringing the soul into a state of impurity. With the Enlightenment, the concept of soul was secularized. The soul was reconceptualized as mind, and the concept of sin replaced by crime. One can only engage in a criminal act intentionally, that is, as an exercise of voluntary or conscious mind. In effect, we can trace the contemporary value placed on "free will" to the Christian tradition and the significance it placed on the soul as the center of being. Given the social origins of the concept, a space is now opened to reconceptualize agency in a relational frame.

While we cannot observe agency – either in ourselves or others - we do have actions in which public claims to agency (or its lack) are commonly made, for example:

That was not my intention

What are you trying to do?

I chose the second alternative.

I meant no harm.

My purpose in doing this is…

But why should we suppose that in uttering such phrases we are giving a report on an inner state of mind? Or as Judith Butler (1990) asks, why should we presume there is a "doer behind the deed"? Abandoning the presumption of intentions as "in the head," it is now useful to consider the way intentionality discourse functions in daily life. For example, the phrase, "I didn't intend to hurt you" may function to prevent retaliation; to say, "he had the best of intentions" is to give someone the benefit of the doubt; to pronounce, "I mean what I say" informs the listener to take this seriously. In effect, the discourse of intentions is critical to the contours of social life. Depending on the account, we may be forgiven, honored, or possibly executed.

Of course, we also say that we can recognize our intentions, and can do so with great certainty. If intention is a discursive activity, how can we be certain that an action is accidental (for example, backing into another car), as opposed to purposeful? Here it is useful to consider what is taking place when we "recognize our intentions." With confidence we can rely on social convention to describe what we are doing. When I am standing before a class I am justified in recognizing my performance as "teaching." Without hesitation I can tell you that I am trying to teach or intending to teach because I am engaged in the commonly recognizable performance. I couldn't tell you that what I am really trying to do is acting the part of Hamlet. This is to say that I recognize my intentions in the same way an actor recognizes he is playing the part of Hamlet and not Othello. In the same way, if a driver does not see the obstruction behind his car, we do not index the crash as intentional. To identify my intentions, is essentially to rely on tradition to identify the performance in which I am engaged.

The Social Dimension of Experience

A second pillar of contemporary humanism is individual experience. Precedence is given to the way in which the individual experiences the world for him/herself; it is on the basis of personal experience that the individual selects one course of action as opposed to another. Yet, when we honor the individual's personal experience, to what process are we lending value? At least in the case of visual experience, psychologists have long drawn a distinction between sensation and perception. The former typically refers to the mere

registering of sense data, for example, the way in which increasing intensity of light affects the nervous system. In contrast, perception typically refers to what might be viewed as meaningful experience, for example, the way in which we recognize the face of a friend, attend to whether a traffic signal is red or green, or register signs of impending danger. In my view, it is this capacity for perception from which the value we place on experience derives. Yet, if this is so, we find that our ability to perceive these things is pivotally dependent on our immersion in social process. Within Western culture we learn to attend to people's faces, for example, and not their toes or ankles. And in the case of the face, we primarily focus on the eyes, and not the nostrils. It is through the eyes, we believe, that we have access to the other's mind. Similarly, it is through cultural learning that we attend to traffic signals or darkened streets. We thus find that the act of perception is not that of an isolated mind, but is a social act.

In this light, consider the classic research in social psychology in which psychologists (Hastorf & Cantrill 1954) focused on students' perceptions of a football game between Princeton and Dartmouth. The game was an especially rough one, with significant injuries on both sides. Yet, when queried about the game, 85% of the Princeton students said that Dartmouth had started the rough play, while only 36% of the Dartmouth students believed this was so. More dramatically, when shown a film of the game a week later, the Princeton students observed the Dartmouth team made over twice as many rule infractions as were seen by Dartmouth students. As the authors conclude, "…there is no such 'thing' as a 'game' existing 'out there; in its own right which people merely 'observe.' The game 'exists' for a person and is experienced by him only insofar as certain happenings have significance in terms of his purpose." Of course, "his purpose" in this case was fully dependent on his participation in a social process. As Hanson (1958) similarly concludes in the case of science, "When peering into the microscope, the biologist doesn't see the same world we do." (p. 67) Experience is not the act of a socially isolated mind.

Yet, from a relational perspective, how are we to account for the continuous swim of what we call private experience. We gaze alone into the distance and begin to *think* about our actions, *plan* what we shall do tomorrow, or find ourselves moved by *feelings* of love, grief, anger, and so on. These experiences seem fully and uniquely one's own, inside the head and body. In what sense, then, are these relational actions? In reply, consider first that what we often call thinking is linguistic in its form. When you are thinking about a paper you might write, for example, you are likely to be experiencing language. This is so often the case that we presume that writing and speaking are outward expressions of thought. But let us reverse the assumption: let us view thought in this case as a reflection of writing and speaking. Until we learn to use language, which is quintessentially a social process, we cannot begin to think about global warming, the possibility of God, or the effects of social media on our lives. In this sense, thinking is social action carried out in a minimal way. That is, it is social performance without the full voicing, accentuating gestures, and so on.

We may extend this logic to planning and feeling. We first acquire the capacity to plan within our ongoing relationships; later we can carry out this activity without making it fully public. Planning in silence is not a natural act, but an outgrowth of one's participation in culture. Similarly with the emotions. There is a wide-ranging literature on cultural and historical variations in what are called the emotions. We do not have

emotions, and then express them. Rather, through our relationships we acquire the capacity to perform emotions (including conventions of when and where performances may occur). We are then enabled to participate in emotional life privately – without the fully embodied expressions. It is important to note that this does not mean that emotions (thought, planning, etc) are culturally determined. On the relational account, we abandon the determinism/voluntarism binary altogether. We are our relations, and private experience does not represent an exit.

Relational Humanism in Practice

Given the constructed character of the person, we must finally turn to consequences of shifting from an individualized form of humanism to one centered in relational process. In the same way that we inquired into the social pragmatics of 20th century humanism, how are we to understand the lived potentials of a relational humanism? An extended account of how a relational orientation can inform our ways of life are discussed in my 2009 book, *Relational Being: Beyond self and community*. O'Hara's (1992) discussion of relational humanism and its contribution to a pluralist world is also illuminating. In both these and other works we find a relational orientation closely allied with a pluralist view of human meaning, one that invites professionals from multiple perspectives to share ideas and practices. It is through such sharing – as opposed to competing for the Truth – that humankind can flourish. Only one outcome of such pluralism is represented in the enormous flourishing of qualitative inquiry across the social sciences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). It is to just such efforts that the counseling profession would now ally itself.

I turn finally to sketch several more specific implications of a relational shift in humanism. All of these draw from one distinct contrast between a traditional and relational orientation: while traditional humanism places a strong value on the well-being of the individual agent, relational humanism shifts the site of value to the relational process. Specifically, from the relational standpoint, the chief question is how does a given practice sustain or enrich the relational process? In my view, a relational orientation enables us to incorporate some of the most treasured aspects of traditional humanism, while adding significant new dimensions. Here I touch on practices of research, therapy and counseling, and everyday life.

Relational Research Practices

Humanist scholars in the social sciences have long decried the empiricist conception of research, championing as it does, a dispassionate and bad-faith relationship between the researcher and the "object" of his/her gaze. From a constructionist perspective the empiricist orientation is not necessarily ruled out. Again, much depends on the social consequences of such research. There are cases in which one might wish to employ such methods of research (e.g. predicting health and illness, or criminal recidivism), even while rejecting the implicit values. However, from the relational perspective advanced here, a relational orientation to research would carry a deep resonance with traditional humanism. The humanist values empathic concern for the well-being of those with whom one is carrying out research. This has often meant a shift from quantitative to qualitative

research (Miller, Nash, & Fetty, 2014). Rather than the impersonal practices of assessing the other, and converting assessments to numbers, the humanist will seek a more personal relationship with the other. Most frequently the orientation is phenomenological or interpretive, with the primary aim of illuminating the subject's lived experience.

For the relational humanist this concern for human well-being shifts from empathy with the subject, to caring for relational process. A caring respect for the research participant would be a means of valuing the relationship between researcher and the participant. However, for the relational humanist, the circle of concern then expands. For example, how will the participant's actions be represented to the academic world? This is not only to be sensitive to one's responsibility to the participant, but to one's audience. As proposed elsewhere (Gergen, 2007a) the traditional forms of academic writing distance the author from the audience, typically creating a power relationship in which the author is privileged. Further, from the relational perspective, we question the tradition of addressing only an academic audience. For example, if attempting to represent the lives of marginal or otherwise "invisible" sub-cultures, why should the account be limited to an elite circle of scholars? Should researchers not expand their potentials for presenting their work to include forms of communication - art, photography, video, theater, and more – that may reach and engage the public at large? The interested reader might explore relevant examples of performative social sciences conducted with Mary Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, 2012).

For the relational humanist, the vistas of research are expanded far beyond the focus on lived experience. If the relational process is to be honored, there is also good reason to work more collaboratively with those who might otherwise serve as "subjects" of inquiry. Working collaboratively in both the process of inquiry and writing are invited. The increasingly popular field of action research, in which the professional works with groups of people in achieving valued ends, is rife with potential (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Illustrative here is Fine and Torre's (2006) research assisting women in prison, Lykes' (2001) community building work with rural Guatamalan women, and instances in which the classroom becomes a form of laboratory in participatory action (Wamba, 2011).

Relationships in Therapy and Counseling

Humanist therapists and counselors have long provided a significant alternative to such mechanistic practices as cognitive-behavioral therapy. Rather than subjecting the client to a pre-fixed regimen, humanist therapists typically provide a context that provides maximal freedom, and enables the client full and unfettered expression. Existentially oriented therapy might serve as a prime example. As I see it, a relationally oriented humanist would offer the same freedoms. However, the care for relational process extends the therapist's engagement in several ways. At the outset, for the relational humanist, whatever becomes defined as a problem has its roots in relational process. There are no "problems" outside the particular relational context, nor are there "solutions." This means that the therapist or counselor's attentions are not fixed on the personal feelings and experiences of the client. The client's utterances do not originate within his or her independent mind, but are outgrowths of relational process. This process, then, invites caring attention. By the same token, the therapist or counselor is not

responsible solely to the client, but to the entire web of relations carried by the client into the consultation chamber. It is not enough to assist the client in moving into a new pattern of action; one must also attend to the ramifications of this pattern within the relational matrix to which the client returns.

A relational perspective, as outlined here, also transforms the conception of human understanding. Traditional humanism has inherited a dualist conception of understanding, in which the attempt of the therapist is to understand the lived experience of the client. The attempt, then, is to empathically infer from the client's words (and non-verbal communication) that which lies within the "recesses of mind". Two centuries of hermeneutic philosophy have demonstrated the impossibility of such understanding. And as I have outlined earlier, it is more useful to see meaning as emerging from the process of co-action. On this account, human understanding is not so much a matter of "penetrating the exterior," as moving dialogically in such a way that a culturally recognized pattern of understanding results. Understanding is demonstrated not by knowing what's on the other's mind, but in accommodating or affirming actions. If you are explaining a complex issue to me, and I nod affirmatively, and say, "yes, yes…" you would tend to conclude that understanding was occurring. If you tell me about a family tragedy, and I tell you a funny story about my dog, you might well conclude that I was not an empathic person. Empathic understanding is achieved – or not -within the dance of co-action.

Relational Process in Everyday Life

The implications of relational humanism extend far beyond professional practices of research, therapy, or counseling. As humanist thinkers have long advocated, humanist ideas should inform our actions throughout the course of daily life. This is not the context for an extended account of the various ways in which a relational orientation would be realized in action. Rather, I conclude with two more general points. The first is concerned with our common orientation toward human responsibility. From the traditional humanist perspective, we are individually accountable for our actions. Both our everyday orientation to morality and our practices of law embody this orientation. Yet, from a relational perspective, such an orientation is limited (Gergen, 2007b). As proposed earlier, traditional humanism is largely blind to the broader systems of which the individual is but a part. A relational humanism brings the broader context of relations back into focus. We begin to attend very carefully to the relational processes in which we participate. This first means developing alternatives to placing exclusive blame on the individual, a practice that alienates and ultimately destroys the very process of relating itself. More generally, it means expanding on the concept of *relational responsibility* (McNamee & Gergen, 1999), a concept that invites our collective responsibility for the health and wellbeing, not of individual subjects, but to the processes out of which human flourishing emerges.

At the same time, a relational orientation invites us to expand the concept of humanism to include not only human flourishing in itself, but to the ways in which human relations are embedded in the more general environment. After all, human relations depend on their viability for an array of resources – both animate and inanimate. Indeed, one may raise the question of why we presume that the skin represents the

boundary between self and environment. The world moves through us as we move through the world. Thus, we must finally see that a relational responsibility extends far beyond the network of what we have traditionally demarked as "human" subjects. It includes a commitment to the sustainability and enrichment of all those relational processes that together make up the world.

In Conclusion

In this offering I have outlined the possibilities for exploring a new historical turn in the continuously emerging conception of humanism. In particular, I am proposing a shift from a focus on the irreducible individual to one in which the individual cannot be separated from the larger relational processes of which he or she is a part. As Matthew Lemberger notes, humanists "are certainly on the precipice of ideological and practical extinction." It is important that they do not "simply fade into the margins," becoming a "relic of antiquity." (Hansen, Speciale, & Lemberger, 2014, p. 170). A relational transformation in the humanist perspective not only sustains traditional critiques of mechanistic constructions of the person, but opens new vistas of theory and practice. Traditional concepts of experience, agency, and human understanding remain, now reconstructed in relational terms.

      Yet, it must finally be underscored that a relational conception of the person is no less a social construction than the individualist account. We are not speaking here of a new truth, but a new form of understanding. As noted earlier, this does not mean abandoning the traditional view so much as exploring the consequences of a relational humanism for the profession, for the social sciences, and for society more generally. It is also to say that there are no grounds for the ethical implications of relational humanism, outside those that we can negotiate in our daily lives. There is no ultimate value in nourishing and enriching relational process (as opposed to the individual), save possibly the potential for such a value to replace the "war of all against all" with a more viable and flourishing existence.

      In this respect, a relational turn invites humanists to join a global dialogue on such issues as sustainability, health care, education, peace building, social welfare, organizational change, regional development, and governance – all of which are spurred by visions of collaborative engagement. Humanist counselors and therapists are masters in the art of dialogue (Cooper et al., 2012). By understanding these practices in relational terms, they will have much to offer and much to gain from participation in these dialogues.

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