

The Wonder of Interpersonal Relationships IV: A Pull Forward to the Social Construction of Reality

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

One of the wonders of interpersonal relationships concerns the way(s) in which we find our personal identity in the midst of our interaction with other people. In many ways we construct our sense of self when meeting with other people. Ken Gergen (2009) identifies this constructive process as the formation of a “relational self.” This might particularly be the case for those people who are pulled forward into the social world. As I mentioned in the first essay in this series (Bergquist, 2023a), this pulling and interpersonal construction of self could often be found among Extraverts—who are “experience-junkies” looking to multiple sources of inspiration and insight.

Taken to the extreme, the Extravert is inclined to find the “real world” in their relationships with other people. Leslie Brothers (2001) describes this extreme stance in her account of ways in which we construct reality within relationships. As a result, the Extravert is particularly vulnerable to “group think” and to what was first identified by Peter Berger and Thomas Luchmann as the “social construction of reality.” (Berger and Luchmann, 1966). The enmeshment that complements an Extraverted personality trait is also likely to complement a specific way in which to see and interpret the world in which the Extravert lives and works.

All of this holds several important implications for the way in which Extraverts construct their sense of self—and even their sense of the “real” world. It is tempting for Extraverts to rely on other people and institutions to define their sense of self and reality. Fortunately, the diversity that they seek is an important corrective to this compelling tendency of Extraverts to be uncritical in their acceptance of specific sources of information regarding themselves and the world in which they live and work.

Ontological Perspectives

I joined with a colleague (Bergquist and Eggren, 2011) several years ago in proposed two interrelated dimensions regarding the nature of knowledge (epistemology). One dimension concerns a distinction drawn by Julio Olalla (Olalla and Bergquist, 2008) between the static or dynamic nature of one’s notion about Being. Is “being” a noun or a verb? Are we talking about an object or about a process? The second dimension concerns the basic assumption that it is or is not possible to ultimately identify the basic nature of being—in other words, to accurately describe and validate reality. Those who believe this description is possible are called “objectivists” and those who believe it is not possible are called “constructivists.”

I propose that both of these epistemological dimensions are particularly challenging for an Extravert to address given their gobbling up of external experiences and their need to somehow make sense of these experiences.

Four different perspectives are available when one combines these two dimensions.

Four Ontological Perspectives

| | Static Notion About Being | Dynamic Notion About Being |
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| Objectivist Perspective Regarding Being | Objective and verified description of a stable reality | Screened and interpreted version of an external stable reality |
| Constructivist Perspective Regarding Being | Biased and resistant descriptions of reality | Reality created in the interplay between two or more people and/or events |

While these four perspectives are inherently of interest to those who are involved with the epistemological study of knowledge, they are also directly relevant to the exploration of interpersonal relationships and specifically to the way in which we define our own being—our sense of self in relation to other people.

Each of these perspectives defines one’s sense of self in a quite different manner. They do not simply involve different belief systems and different ways of viewing relationships. They encompass different notions about the very nature of a belief system and a relationship. In this sense, these perspectives are profoundly different from one another—and profoundly important in understanding the push and pull of interpersonal relationships.

Static Objectivism

When an ontological analysis is applied in the field of epistemology, there are two different perspectives regarding the nature of being and, more basically, the nature of reality as defined by a specific society or sub-unit of a society. One of these perspectives might best be called objectivism. The advocates for this perspective assume that there is a reality out there that we can know and articulate. There is a real, fully comprehensible relationship that we have established with another person.

We are now witnessing a parallel emergence of what might be called a “neurobiological determinism.” This is an objectivist perspective is defining human beings as an objective and stable biological reality. From this static and objectivist perspective, we begin with the assumption that our identity and our decisions are “wired in” to our neurological structures and basically pre-set at birth. The nature of our relationship with other people is pretty much determined at birth. We are either Extraverts or

Introverts. It might be a matter of Eysenck's arousal levels or Jung's sense that there is a psychological "fate" that makes us who we are. None of this really matters. We are who we are and there is not much we can do about it--except perhaps believe that some benevolent "overlord" has made us perfect (perhaps even in "their image").

In contemporary times we find that static objectivism resides in the central principles of determinism and progress. "Being" is a given that is determined at birth--perhaps with some potential for improvement. There is a static objectivism that defines truth and virtue as well as the nature and quality of interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, there is nothing to improve or change! It should be noted that the static neurobiological perspective has served us well for several centuries. It has enabled us to make great advances in medical and cultural science. However, this perspective has also created many problems with which we now live. From this objectivist perspective, the human body, including the brain, was (and is) perceived as an advanced machine that can be altered and repaired. Unfortunately (even tragically) we have done great damage to many human bodies (and souls) in the midst of this de-humanized "repair" work and on behalf of this objectivism determinism.

Dynamic Objectivism

While many of the critiques of static objectivism are societal products of late 20th and early 21st Century thought, there is a much earlier source: the voice of Socrates as heard through the writing of Plato. Socrates (Plato) offered a dynamic objectivism through an allegory of the cave. Let's briefly visit this cave. It is filled with people who have lived all of their lives chained to a wall in the cave. These people watch shadows projected on the wall in front of them. These shadows are being projected on the wall from things passing in front of a fire that remains lit behind them. The cave dwellers believe the shadows are reality—including the shadows that represent our interpersonal relations (with other cave dwellers).

Are we all living in a cave? Do we never gain a clear view of reality, but instead view only the shadows that are projected on the walls of our cave? Do we live with an image of reality and relationships (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself and the reality of interpersonal relationships? Plato concluded that we have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave. Plato thus speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy to be found in a static objectivist perspective regarding the world—since we can never know whether we are living in the cave or living in the world of reality outside the cave.

Turning back to Plato's allegory, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. There are a variety of relationships in which we engage. First, there is something or someone standing near the fire in the cave. Part of the fire's glow is blocked, thus limiting the shadow-images cast on the wall. The blocking feature can be a cultural or personal narrative that we absorb during our daily personal and collective lives.

Narratives and perspectives block out some of the light coming from the fire in the cave. Not only don't we actually see reality--something actually determines which parts of objective reality get projected onto the wall. Those holding the partition that blocks out some of the fire's light have themselves grown up in the cave but may hold a quite different agenda from other cave dwellers. We are relating specifically to the blockers and often consider them to be experts or even friends.

There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the interpreter, reporter or analyst. We actually don't have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that are projected from the fire (which we assume is the "real" world). The cave has grown very large. We often can't even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for the interpreter to tell us what is being projected on the wall and what the implications of these images are for us in our lives.

The interpreter is often personally unknown to us. They might be newscasters or those who post blogs. Regardless of their identity, we are now removed three steps from reality. We believe that the shadows on Plato's cave are "reality." We fail to recognize that someone or something is standing between us and the fire. They are selectively determining which aspects of reality get projected onto the wall. This is the second step from reality. At the third step from reality, someone else is situated inside the cave offering us a description and analysis. These three steps are all embedded in our relationships with other people—be they people we know or people from distant sources that we trust.

There are now, in mid-21st Century life, multiple fires burning in the cave and projecting multiple shadows on the wall. The so-called grand narrative (of Western European and American origins) which defined much of our reality during the 19th and 20th Century is now collapsing. We now have multiple, conflicting narratives—and multiple conflicting narrators-- that make it difficult for all but the most xenophobic people in the world to see only one set of shadows.

There is a second major change, with the advent of social media and reality television and with the purchase of goods and services directly from the source. We might now be moving back to a time when there are no "middlemen" or interpreters. All relationships are in some way "intimate" —even if they are distant and digitally-based. The term disintermediation is being used to describe this potentially seismic change in our interpersonal relationships, societal acquisition and framing of knowledge. Regardless of the shifts now occurring in our world of knowledge, we seem to remain confused about what is "real" and often don't trust our direct experience or our relationships with other people that we had once trusted.

With great reluctance (and considerable grieving), we move to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us. We need to attend not only to the constructions, but also to the interests and motives of those who tend the fire and block images on the wall of the cave. We have to be cautious in relating to and trusting those who offer us their interpretations. We must move, in other words, from an objectivist perspective (whether it be static or dynamic) to a constructivist perspective. An initial question might be posed given these changes: how do we face these challenges to objectivism—especially if we are Extraverts who wish to gobble up experiences and establish a breadth of relationships? How do we deal with multiple narratives and the disintermediation of images we are receiving?

We should also consider whether or not to step outside the cave. Can we actually leave the cave? Can we abandon or avoid relationships as Introverts are inclined to do. Is it safer to remain inside the cave than to venture outside without the help of interpreters? Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences? Where should we look for help in recognizing ways in which we still carry the cave shadows and cave interpreters with us when stepping outside the cave? As we step outside the cave, are we likely to confront some objective reality through our experience, or is the experience itself constantly shifting depending on setting, context, interpersonal relationships and the nature of our own past experience? Are we just moving to another cave?

Imprisonment In the Cave: An Expanded Version

Epistemological analyses push us to an even more challenging perspective. The allegory offered by Socrates (through the voice of Plato) is actually much more extensive than the version we just offered in this essay. Plato provides us with more details about life inside the cave and about what might occur if one cave dweller is allowed to step outside the cave and then returns to the cave. Inside the cave, its inhabitants (as prisoners) are chained so that their legs and necks are fixed, forcing them to gaze at the wall in front of them and not look around the cave.

Behind the prisoners is the fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway with a low wall. People walk behind the wall. Their bodies do not cast shadows for the prisoners to see, but the objects they carry do cast shadows. The prisoners cannot see any of this behind them and are only able to see the shadows cast upon the cave wall in front of them. The sounds of the people talking echo off the shadowed wall, and the prisoners falsely believe these sounds come from the shadows.

Leaving the Cave

What happens when one of these people is unchained and leaves the cave, discovering that the world is something more than the shadows they have always assumed were reality. This single prisoner is freed, being forced to turn and see the fire and then forced (allowed) to leave the cave and confront the outside light directly. The light would hurt her eyes and make it hard for her to see the objects that are casting shadows. She would not believe it if she were told that what she saw before was not real. Instead, the objects she is now struggling to see are real. The prisoner would be angry and in pain, and this would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms her eyes and blinds her.

The sunlight is representative of the new reality and knowledge that the freed prisoner is experiencing. Slowly, her eyes adjust to the light of the sun. Gradually she can see the reflections of people and things in water and then later see the people and things themselves. Plato continues, saying that the freed prisoner would think that the real world was superior to the world she experienced in the cave. She would feel blessed for the change, pity the other prisoners, and want to bring her fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight.

Returning to the Cave

Can this person come back into the cave and what would the "enlightened" person say to those still in the cave. How would they absorb this radically different perspective? The cave dwellers don't know what to do with the returning unchained "revolutionary" who talks about a different reality. Would she be considered a "philosopher" (as Plato suggests) or would she be identified as a "fool" or as a person who is "mad"? Her experiences terrify compatriots. She realizes that she cannot remain in the cave. She would stagnate. Other cave dwellers will not change or move forward. They perceive her as dangerous.

The returning prisoner, whose eyes have become acclimated to the light of the sun, will be blind when she re-enters the cave, just as she was when first exposed to the sun. The cave dwellers, according to Plato, would infer from the returning prisoner's blindness that the journey out of the cave had harmed

her and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Plato concludes that the prisoners, if they were able, would therefore reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave.

Why not remain outside the cave? Or is this yet another cave and another limiting version of reality? These questions lead us down a path to which Julio Olalla (Olalla and Bergquist, 2008) points. It is a pathway toward constructivism and away from objectivism. We find our personal and organizational caves. Several different ways are available by which to view the lives of cave dwellers. We can identify the cave as existing inside the occupant's head and heart. The cave mentality exists when people become trapped or caught in favorite ways of thinking and acting that confine individuals within socially constructed worlds and prevent the emergence of other worlds. Preconceived ideas become traps for people when they begin to hold onto their preconceived notions and biases that eventually become their reality.

Organizations as Caves

The cave can also be viewed as a collective experience. An entire organization can be perceived as the cave and its members as those who dwell in the cave. Expanding on Plato's allegory of the cave, we can assume that people collectively develop unconscious mechanisms and construct realities in order to handle anxiety and desire. Organizations are created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes. People can actually become imprisoned or confined by the images, ideas, thoughts, and actions to which these processes give rise. Organizations become stuck in their traditional manner of thinking. Rigid rules (often tacitly held) prevail regarding how things are done. Interpersonal relationships are similarly frozen.

Organizational life is deemed as a mode of cave dwelling because those who work in it are set in their ways of thinking and refuse to change. Then a released prisoner (as a visionary leader) returns to the cave and describes a new, blinding reality. An organization is confronted with this new reality--one that requires a new way of thinking. Members of the organization must reassess organizational norms. They must drop traditional modes of functioning. Individually and collectively these cave dwellers must develop a new identity and new ways of relating to one another and the organization's operations. The cave dwellers are offered an opportunity to be liberated from the cave by the prisoner who escapes and discovers the "real" world -- or at least a different world.

The cave dwellers are given the opportunity to discover that the world beyond the shadows of the cave is richer, more complex and perhaps more rewarding. The prisoner has escaped TO freedom and invites her colleagues to also escape to freedom. However, does the escaped prisoner (and the other cave dwellers) soon wish to escape FROM this new freedom? (Fromm, 1941; Bergquist and Weiss, 1994) Do they long for a world (inside the cave) that seems simpler, more clearly defined and ultimately less challenging? Do they blame the escaped and returning prisoner for their new-found anxiety? Does the visionary suddenly become an uninvited outsider who wants to cause pain, confusion and uncertainty?

To better frame (and gain clarity about) this set of challenging questions regarding the nature and fate of those who are returning to the cave, we must turn away from an epistemology that is based on an objectivist perspective to one that is based on constructivism. In doing so, I return to the four-fold model I offered at the start of this essay. Specifically, I describe the two remaining options in this model: static constructivism and dynamic constructivism. These two options are closely aligned with the more

fully expanded version of Plato's allegory. They also challenge our traditional and comforting assumptions about the nature and value of interpersonal relationships.

While dynamic objectivism has proved to be challenging for many philosophers, scientists and other thought leaders, social constructivism has offered Western thought an even greater challenge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). It also offers a major challenge to Extraverts who wish to gobble up experiences and interpersonal relationships. How do the Extraverts deal with a world that they can never fully comprehend or with relationships that are not based on any concrete reality?

Static Constructivism

I return to the concept of social construction. Advocates of social constructivism believe that we construct our own social realities, based in large part on societal inventions—the traditions and needs of culture and the interpersonal context in which we find ourselves. There are no universal truths or principles, nor are there any ways in which to be sure about our relationships. From this perspective, we are not sure about either the “reality” of the world in which we live (remember the cave) or the interpersonal relationships in which we are engaged (the co-inhabitants of the cave).

While this constructivist perspective on epistemology is often considered a product of late 20th century thought (at least in the Western world) the early versions of social constructivism can be traced back to the anthropology and sociology of the early 20th century. Reports from these disciplines documented radically different perspectives operating in many nonwestern societies and cultures regarding the nature of reality and ways in which members of diverse communities view themselves and their interpersonal and group relationships. This initial version of constructivism is essentially static, for these social constructions are based on deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions of specific societies and cultures. There are widely divergent communities that espouse their own unique ways of knowing. These communities may consist of people who are living together or people who are working together.

With a colleague (Bergquist and Brock, 2008) I have coauthored a chapter in which six unique cultures were described that exist in most contemporary organizations. Each of these cultures has its own stable construction of reality and is resistant to change. Specific ways of knowing within each of these six cultures are based on and reinforced by the community and do not allow for significant divergence among those living in the community. There are specific ways to envision and engage in relationships with other people that often are embedded in important assumptions about such matters as social-status, tribal affiliations, gender, and age.

In contemporary organizational setting they are often based on level of authority in the organization—as well (sadly) as gender and age. Who can construct the collective narrative and who are privileged to share the narrative with other members of the organization? Furthermore, while these ways of knowing and relating to other people may themselves change over time and in differing situations, such changes are gradual and often not noticed for many years. Those in authority and those who are privileged may change; however, the process of selecting and reinforcing the hierarchy remains in place: new people but old rules. We thus find a constructivism that is static and a process of epistemological analysis that focuses on surfacing these stable, but often unacknowledged and very powerful, societal assumptions and beliefs.

Dynamic Constructivism

While the objectivist perspective was prevalent during the modern era, and is still influencing our notions about “being,” the static constructivist perspective has often played a role as counterpoint in late 20th century social discourse. This static constructivism has been a source of many challenges that have upset a modernist stance on the nature of knowledge. Static constructivists have encouraged or even forced many of us to move from an absolute set of principles to a more situation-based relativism. Even greater challenges, however, are present. A dynamic constructivism moves well beyond the stability of broad-based societal and cultural perspectives. Interpersonal relationships are dancing on a floor of assumptions that is often moving. The emergence of a dynamic constructivist perspective represents a revolutionary change in the true sense of the term.

Language, Narratives and Self

Story and performance are hallmarks of dynamic constructivism. We live in a world of constructed realities that is constantly shifting and populated by language, semiotics and narratives. Language is no longer simply considered a handmaiden for reality, as the objectivists would suggest, nor does it construct a permanent (or at least resistant) reality, as the traditional social constructivists would argue. Furthermore, language is not a secondary vehicle we employ when commenting on the reality that underlies and is the reference point for this language.

Dynamic constructivists take this analysis one step further by proposing that language is itself the primary reality in our daily life experiences—and particularly in our interpersonal relations. Language, originally and primarily relationship-based, assumes its own reality, and ceases to be an abstract sign that substitutes for the “real” things. Our cave is filled with language and conversations. This is reality—there is nothing outside the cave (or perhaps the cave doesn’t even exist).

While objectivism is based on the assumption that there is a constant reality to which one can refer (through the use of language and other symbol/sign systems) and static constructivism is based on an assumption that there is a constant societal base for our constructions of reality, dynamic constructivism is based on the assumption that the mode and content of discourse and the relationship(s) that underlie this discourse are the closest thing we have to “reality.” We are constantly reconstructing our reality because this reality is based on the specific relationship through which we are engaged via our discourse.

We are not confined to Plato’s cave because the relationship and the discourse is itself reality—it is not just a reflection of reality. Societal narratives of our time and our sense of self is reality. We are often distant from many of the most important events that impact on our lives. We live in a complex, global community and have many connections to a vaster world. Most importantly, we may no longer have direct experience of this world. Nor can we have much influence over this world or the relationships existing in the world. If there is a cave, it has grown much larger than Plato might have imagined—or the cave might no longer even exist. The only access we have to this vast world is through language and narratives. As a result, we often share narratives about things and events rather than actually experiencing them. Language itself becomes the shared experience. And language might be the province of Introverts more than Extraverts.

On first review, this perspective does not differ greatly from that offered by Plato. The narratives may be considered nothing more than second-hand conversations about images on the cave’s walls or just the echoes that cave dwellers believe come from these images. Yet, there is a difference, for the narratives

and conversations are not just ABOUT experiences, they ARE themselves experiences. This sense of a constructed reality that is reinforced by narrative and conversation is a starting point for dynamic constructivism—just as it is a starting point for static forms of constructivism.

The key point with regard to dynamic constructivism is that each specific conversation is itself a reality. Each interpersonal relationship creates a new world. Shared narratives and language are where we actually meet with other people and our society. From this perspective, our stories about self that we shared with other people will constitute our fundamental sense of self. But simply, relationships are the building blocks of our identity. Perhaps our stories about self are everything we mean by the term “self.”

Narratives of Self

This would suggest that our stories about childhood, about major adult accomplishments, and about difficult lifelong disappointments may be the basic building blocks of self-image—whether or not they are accurate. Contemporary practitioners of therapy and coaching like Julio Olalla and David Drake (Drake, Brennan & Gørtz, 2008) emphasize the role of narrative for a good reason. As I have noted, narrative is a very powerful and influential tool not only for influencing (and even determining) reality in an organization, but also for determining reality regarding one’s sense of (and appreciation for) self. Extraverts have it over the Introverts from this dynamic constructivist perspective in that they are more likely to engage in relationships and share narratives that help to define their own sense of self. It is hard finding self within a personally constructed and isolated silo.

We are profoundly impacted by two often unacknowledged (or even unseen) forces in these narratives. First, we are influenced by the broad-based social constructions of reality which are conveyed through the stories of the society and organization in which we find ourselves. This is the contribution made by static constructivists. Second, we are influenced by a more narrowly based personal construction of reality that is conveyed through stories we tell other people about ourselves (and perhaps stories that we inherit from and about our family and immediate community). This is the contribution made by dynamic constructivism. We can expand beyond the dynamic construction of self to the dynamic construction of reality in relationships, groups and organizations—as long as we choose to enter these interactive worlds.

More than ever, our work-related (transactional) and personal (autotelic) relationships are based on and dependent on these dynamic interpersonal conversations as well as shifting, context-based narratives. Most people, resources and attention in present-day transactional work groups and organizations are devoted not to the direct production of goods or direct provision of services, but instead to the use of verbal and written modes of communication about these goods and services.

In our autotelic relationships we are likely to find greatest satisfaction in the sharing of stories, reflecting on past experiences, and providing a vision of how our relationship is likely to evolve in the near future. Given these transactional and autotelic conditions, story-telling and narrative are central to 21st century relationships. Those aligned with a dynamic constructivist perspective tell us that stories are the lifeblood and source of sustenance in our personal and organizational lives. The construction of stories about personal, group and organizational successes and failures is critical to the processes of change and transformation at any of these three levels.

Several questions arise from this dynamic constructivist epistemology. In what way(s) do the personal, group and organizational narratives and images influence or alter one another? Is there a shift in the

work group or organization's narrative when a new manager is hired, or when the team or organization itself is restructured? From the perspective of individual relationships, attention should be given to the narratives that are being conveyed and shared identity that is being created each time two people meet—be it in person or digitally.

Conclusions

Psychologists, sociologists and epistemologists provoke many questions regarding interpersonal relationships. However, their contributions might not be fully satisfying in that they provide very few answers. We must find the answers ourselves. Suggestions regarding ways to bring Introverts more fully into the interpersonal arena may be helpful but not definitive. Loneliness, in fact, might not be a bad thing—as Clark Moustakas has shown us (see my third essay: Bergquist, 2023b). Similarly, ways in which Extraverts can avoid falling into the pit of misleading social constructions will be of value to us—yet we are still left with the daunting task of avoiding the fall.

Finding strength and identity in the midst of loneliness and moving from an objectivist to a dynamic constructivism require commitment and courage—particularly courage. Our sense of self and reality is always in flux—especially when we are dancing with other people in complex relationships. How do we live with this uncertainty? The remarkable theologian, Paul Tillich (2000) has written about the existential (and theological) “courage to be.” This is the courage that is needed to acknowledge one's being and one's becoming in the world of relationships.

If human beings are minds, and not just brains, then they are also inherently spiritual in nature or at least there are spiritual demands being made on them as they confront the challenging relationships that they have established in their life. The challenge is great—for either our Platonic cave is expanding in size, or we are forced to leave it. We might even return as a leader who challenges existing mind-sets. Interpersonal relationships become particularly complex and turbulent when we are serving as revolutionary and good troublemaker. Perhaps the caves no longer even exist (if they ever did). Perhaps there is only narrative and dialogue – nothing but relationships and no permanent reality.

As courageous, spiritual beings, we have the capacity to reflect on our own experiences in relationship with other people and to place these interpersonal experiences in space and time. This is the human challenge, human opportunity—and human curse of transcendence. Our sense of a constantly reconstructed universe, based on our interactions with other people, leads us inevitably to a sense of bewilderment. How does one find the courage to stand in the face of this bewilderment? I offer some suggestions in the fifth (concluding) essay in this series that identifies the helping and healing roles to be played by containment, connections and community – as they are brought together in a societal setting of coherence.

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