

McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (and Associates)(1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 236 pages.

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“...relationally responsible actions function to sustain and enhance those forms of interchange out of which meaning is continuously generated” (199).

In *Relational Responsibility* McNamee and Gergen act upon the intellectual, ideological and pragmatic shortcomings of the Western concept of individual responsibility by proposing, exemplifying, and expanding upon a relational alternative. The authors base their proposal on the shortcomings of individual accounts of responsibility, which not only lack scholarly foundation, but when employed in practice have the negative consequences of: 1) producing a sense of isolation and independence that can have disastrous consequences; 2) threatening the “collective well-being,” or the notion of acting for the benefit of the community without a sense of individual gain; and 3) producing an understanding of our own agendas and beliefs as the most worthy, such that we don’t hear or respond to the ‘other’ individual, group, national agenda, etc. in a generative way. In proposing a relational account of responsibility, McNamee and Gergen do not call for the full abandonment of our traditions of individual responsibility, but hope that their relational account can expand upon our possibilities for engaging in transformative dialogue with others, rather than cutting off dialogue by resorting to practices such as blame and reprimand.

In contrast to a number of social constructionist writings where the reader has to extrapolate the pragmatic potential of complex theoretical arguments, McNamee and Gergen’s account of relational responsibility offers the reader specific resources, described in theory and exemplified with vignettes and actual examples from practice. Yet consistent with their social constructionist orientation, McNamee and Gergen do not treat their proposal as the ultimate formulation, but seek to expand its focus by inviting others into the dialogue. They accomplish this by inviting associates from the theoretical and practical communities (many of them well-known) to respond to their proposal. Consequently, the structure of the book is such that McNamee and Gergen propose their account of relational responsibility in Part 1, followed by the responses of their associates in Part 2, and a rejoinder with McNamee and Gergen in Part 3.

In Part 1, McNamee and Gergen claim that the concept of relational responsibility involves a shift from an individualist conception of action as grounded in subjective essences, to action as grounded in relationship. In expressing this shift, the authors draw upon theoretical traditions emphasizing the centrality of relatedness and group these traditions under four “conversational logics”: internal others, conjoint relations, relations among groups, and systemic processes. Yet, the taken-for-granted nature of our individualist heritage (which is never-the-less relativized through historical and anthropological study) compels McNamee and Gergen to also provide six “orienting practices”, or theoretical suppositions for a relational account of action, that can help participants in conversation “...generate alternative ways of indexing actions, open new domains of curiosity, and provoke catalytic questions” (19). These orienting practices function as a “philosophical stance” (a term employed by McNamee and Gergen’s colleague Harlene Anderson) that can be adopted in conversation with others.

McNamee and Gergen then return to their four conversational logics to provide performative illustrations of relational responsibility in practice. Here they rely upon actual examples from multiple forms of practice to illustrate the expanded possibilities for dialogue implied by a relational focus. In concluding Part 1, McNamee and Gergen apply their proposal for relational responsibility to the specific instance of sexual abuse (an ‘extreme’ example in the sense that it can be difficult *not* to take an individualist position of blame) and illustrate by way of their conversational logics how a stance of relational responsibility can lend new resources to understanding and transformation.

The contributions of McNamee and Gergen’s associates in Part 2 are grouped under three categories: those that concur with McNamee and Gergen’s proposal, those that are primarily critical, and those that offer parallel views and introduce new angles. By including these multiple commentaries, McNamee and Gergen seek to ‘practice what they preach’ and, indeed, the commentaries effectively enrich and expand the perspectives of the initial proposal. With McNamee and Gergen’s encouragement to respond as they please, the commentaries by the contributing authors range from practical to theoretical, playful to academic, personal to distant, and as already mentioned, critical to appreciative. McNamee and Gergen effectively respond to these commentaries in Part 3, where they discuss how each commentary can contribute to the concept and practice of relational responsibility. In this discussion, and especially with regard to the critical commentaries, McNamee and Gergen attempt to illustrate their position by responding in a

relationally responsible, rather than combative, manner. In accordance with the authors' intentions, this move serves as a contrast to traditional academic rebuttal. In concluding their book, McNamee and Gergen summarize five ways in which their initial proposal has been expanded through the voices of their associates.

Relational Responsibility represents a social constructionist account that is well written from conceptual, theoretical and practical perspectives. While written in an academic language, the book may be useful to anyone exploring and/or working within dialogues of transformation, such as therapists, organizational consultants, educators, and policy makers. The book also offers a pragmatic account of social constructionism for those interested in exploring and understanding constructionist dialogues. While McNamee and Gergen concede from the outset that their proposal does not represent the ultimate solution to issues of responsibility, their proposal effectively expands upon the ways in which we can work towards transformation in relation to others.