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Performativity in the Real World: How Playing with Purpose Informs and Inspires Social Scientists

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Performativity in the Real World: How Playing with Purpose Informs and Inspires Social Scientists

Abstract

An adventure into a realm where scholarly endeavor and artistry live in harmony, *Playing with Purpose* is an inviting, provocative, intimate exploration of the intersection between the arts and social sciences. Mary and Ken Gergen are steeped in traditional research methods and have evolved out of these into fluid expressions of their work that are academically rigorous and artistically satisfying.

Keywords

Performativity, arts, social sciences

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Performativity in the Real World: How *Playing with Purpose* Informs and Inspires Social Scientists

Laura Beer

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*An adventure into a realm where scholarly endeavor and artistry live in harmony, *Playing with Purpose* is an inviting, provocative, intimate exploration of the intersection between the arts and social sciences. Mary and Ken Gergen are steeped in traditional research methods and have evolved out of these into fluid expressions of their work that are academically rigorous and artistically satisfying. Keyword: Performativity, arts, social sciences*

Sometimes scholarly, other times teasingly personal,
Gergen and Gergen emit tones and intonings of
Art as Inquiry.
Who am I to judge?
Reader, audience, engager, reviewer,
My heart sings - My brain divides;
Right and left hemispheres take a look at each other
And decide yes, it is time to play, to perform
data as poetry, pictures, songs.
Let's re-form knowledge into creative meaning,
meaning as feeling/thinking pieces of information.
Understanding the human condition
requires humanity.

Performativity is an approach to social science research that invites provocative and intimate explorations of findings, making them accessible and directly sensed. In a performative experience the reader/audience is engaged and challenged, beguiled and entranced into thinking differently about Data Representation in all of its often-times boring splendor. In *Playing with Purpose: Adventures in Performative Social Science*, the blending of Mary and Ken Gergen's histories, struggles, and artistry is remarkable and inspiring. I came to this book already familiar with performativity and my own history of experimentation, and came away with grounded understandings and deepened dedication to enlivening my own research. As an umbrella concept, Performative Social Science (PSS) creates a field in which an investigator can creatively explore relationships and human behaviors, and theorize about implications. Important in this approach, the Gergens remind us, is that the tendency to emphasize the Truth of data is effectively counter-balanced by an artistic invitation to engage the audience in their own responses. To correctly disseminate the research is paramount, but, as the authors assert, "in terms of accuracy, science is no more objective than a poem or a short story. It simply uses a different vocabulary" (p. 25). *Playing with Purpose* splendidly affirms and expands this vocabulary via vignettes and examples of how the authors connect theory and art. Typically, we look at numbers and we make conclusions; when we look at photographs or listen to songs we form a relationship. For the Gergens, embodying the data through artistic venues in turn creates a way for the audience to respond with heart and mind. The dialogue that results is, in essence, an extension of the findings. Having a theory which frames the expression is essential; having a relationship to the theory expansive and transgressive.

Mary and Ken Gergen, through their work and also their deep, intimate commitment to each other, challenge the norms of academic behavior and thought. The Gergens' relationship serves as a microcosmic reflection of the process they seek to illuminate: their dialogue, blending of voices, and singular emanations mirror the practices and possibilities of artistic inquiry in the social sciences. In *Playing with Purpose* they encourage readers to do something, to move beyond dry writings and re-discover the juice we originally found in our data, and to make something emotive and responsive out of it. They do so brilliantly in this book, by means of innovative expressions such as duography, cartoons, haiku, and visual forms. Here, aesthetics and ethics merge and inform each other. Ways of teaching performatively become not just promising possibilities but essential and doable methods.

At one point I began to wonder where the grounding of their work was, and was satisfied to read on and into a theoretical discussion. With feminism and postmodernism as guideposts (not foundations), Ken and Mary assert the importance of relationship in the work. They deconstruct traditional methodologies so they can be re-built with constructionist safety and postmodernist blurring of peripheries. Dualisms abound in this work, and rightly so. The dualities of scholarly/artistic and impersonal/engaged can be celebrated and released when imaginatively and sensitively presented. The philosophical discussions combine with play-like snippets which enliven the reading process. I had to stop frequently to muse upon my reactions and responses. The book is intensely personal and unreservedly applicable to our multicultural, multivocal, and artistically multidimensional world.

Anyone interested in exploring creative endeavors in research is encouraged to read *Playing with Purpose*. Scholars, artists, curators, writers, and musicians who want to bring theory and art together will find it inspirational. Here is a final quote that will hopefully serve as a teaser:

The positioning of artistic modes of creativity together with issues and ideas familiar within the scholarly fields is in itself sufficiently novel and illuminating that no one seems to mind if all the highest glory of either one is not attained in the crossover. (p. 96)

Groundbreaking, trailblazers, pioneers...any way I term it, the Gergens put their hearts, souls, and professional identities on the line time and again in *Playing with Purpose*, all to our benefit. As their reader, I find merit in this work. As their audience, I applaud them.

References

Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2012). *Playing with purpose: Adventures in performative social science*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Author Note

Laura Beer is holder of a PhD, a music therapist, and a musician. The order changes on any given day. She currently serves as Director of Music Therapy at Marylhurst University in Oregon. Her interest in creative approaches to qualitative research, especially the use of music, has led her to explore mindfulness in higher education, dementia, and how learning Western therapy affects Asian students. Eclectic, focused, academic, and creative are how she describes her work. Laura welcomes dialogues and can be reached at lbeer@marylhurst.edu.

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