

Keynote Prof. Dr. Kenneth J. Gergen
and Prof. Dr. Danielle Zandzee

Meaning Making from Micro to Macro How to keep our conversations alive?

A DIALOGUE ABOUT NEWEST INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND AI
'GENOMES OF MEANING AND THE MAKING OF WORLDS'



Prof. Dr. Kenneth J. Gergen
& Prof. Dr. Danielle Zandzee

Whilst listening to this very important keynote, I felt a sort of resonance in my own system, which I like to consider as impact, generated by the substance of - or behind - the words that came from the stage. I'm not going to try and give you an objective report of what was said, and that is because of what was said. What I hope this article will do is resonate further into your actions, and if so, it would be quite a sufficient report.

Click here to see the complete keynote session on video ▶

Danielle opens the conversation by asking for attention to the 'small things' in conversation: 'We are working on better understanding of the small practices, that keep the conversations alive. These micro practices are the building blocks for the macro, to expand the flow, which brings us people further. The writing of just one book - Ken Gergen's *Relational Being* about generative processes of relating - has had a ripple effect.'

Ken is very appreciative towards Danielle. They obviously know each other for a long period. Ken: 'Our relationship too has been very generative. But let me question the suggested impact of my books. Maybe the impact is not a quality of the book, nor of the author, but merely of the reader.' Ken takes the audience to the 'illusion of the object,' defined by our nouns, and he takes us further to the illusion of himself talking: 'Where do my words come from? These are not my words. They are echoes of conversations before. What is the origin of a word? Where did it come to have meaning? And then, it's not about that one word; it's about the moments of co-ordination of words, the moments of appreciation of the words. What is the value of what we say? You have to do something with your words; you have to take them somewhere. Are my movements my movements? All I do comes out of relationships. The question is, what do you do with it? It doesn't have meaning until you do something with it.'

'You have to do something with your words; you have to take them somewhere.'

What could be those little practices in conversation that keeps us away from stopping the flow? Ken thinks that 'listening well' is a great practice. Carefully listening - of course, we all know the AI interview - is very generative; it invites the other to tell his or her story and grow by that. Danielle suggest 'laughter' and humor in the conversation. And 'generosity' is proposed as a generative practice, the act of giving, giving your time, your attention, your thoughts, the kindness of your heart.

A Smile is What We All have in Common

BY LARA EMDE

The moment Dr. Danielle Zandee and Dr. Kenneth Gergen asked about micro Appreciative Inquiry practices in their engaging keynote conversation Thursday, I immediately thought of kissing. If you've been in Belgium for some time, you might have noticed that's our way of greeting. I grew up in Brussels in a Belgian-German family, and I still find it funny to see how German family members, especially men, freeze when they're kissed hello by Belgian relatives. Same goes for colleagues. I love to visit organisations where people stand up from their computers and desks to say hello - and kiss. When I told this to two participants from the UK sitting next to me, they smiled and said 'not possible in our country.' Tapping your shoulder, touching your arm, kissing your cheek, - anyone who has ever been on an intercultural event knows how important and yet delicate it can be. Fortunately, there is at least one micro practice I've experienced at this conference - which brings together many different cultures and nations - at least a 100 times. Everyone does it. It's one of the first things you learn as a baby. It's not kissing obviously. And it's an important part of my life. In the workshop on appreciative listening today Karen Cabral and Jacques Philippaert made a wonderful drawing that I would like to share with you. They drew a conversation, an exchange of words and - on a deeper level - an exchange of smiles, connecting their hearts. What a wonderful day! Enjoy and smile.

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We see Ken and Danielle discussing the fact that we should look at more than the momentary micro practice, that we should consider the scenarios, and ask ourselves where conversations might go or grow. According to Ken, there are at several ways to respond to the remark 'I'm very angry about what you did last day.' They include giving apologies, or denying the accuse, or getting irritated. But they all kill the conversation. Afterwards, it will not be easy to turn the subject into mutual 'holiday adventures'. The conversation could raise a situation in which colleagues don't speak with each other anymore. Blame game. End of the relationship. Easily done. The question is: How can we get out of this; how do we get generative?'

Danielle and Ken do a little role play, based upon real life experiences: Ken was very late to an appointment with Danielle, in fact to prepare for this keynote session. They showed how the conversation could easily turn into being degenerative: 'Where were you? I was waiting for hours. You should have been here because I was to host our keynote!' 'Hey, if you are the host, than you should know already what to do.' 'No, it is unacceptable that you just forgot this important meeting!' Et cetera. And they showed the audience what, as they said, really happened: 'Oh Ken, I was very worried about you not turning up; are you all right?' 'Oh Danielle, I'm so sorry for showing up so late; this is something I would never do with respect to you, please accept my excuses.' And they went on with their meeting. To me, the difference between generative and degenerative in this little play seems obvious. In the first case, both showed (individual) irritation; in the second case, both showed concern for the other. 'So,' Ken says: 'It's like a dance; whatever you do, you're still connected. What worries me is that if you dig deeper, appreciation can unconsciously turn into judgment. Imagine the sentence 'Hey, you did a very good job.' It might be meant appreciatively, but it positions the speaker above the other, because apparently, the speaker is able to judge how good the other functions. And then this appreciative expression might be more disconnecting than you would expect. On the other hand, negative emotions can bring us closer to each other, for example when you share your sadness. Being aware of this is like being an artist in the field of conversation.'

The last question raised was that generative micro practices are nice, only if you don't repeat them too often. In some organisations you might hear someone sighing: 'O, not another

AI interview, please.' How to avoid manipulation? According to Danielle we need creativity, like the jazz musicians in their jam sessions, never the same: 'Improvisation is what's needed. And therefore Ken and I did not rehearse this keynote, nor design it in detail. We discussed a main line, and the rest would be improvisation.' (And maybe Ken's no-show at the meeting yesterday was a carefully planned act?).

Until so far this kind of witness report of the keynote. This article would not be complete without bringing in other voices. Like the voice of Lara Emde, suggesting the 'smile' as the mother of the micro practices (see frame). And the voice of myself, now not as a reporter, but as someone in the audience, asked by Danielle and Ken to come up with suggestions for micro practices. Here's my answer.

How to interweave micro practices in daily conversation?

Highlighted in the already enlightening dialogue between Ken Gergen and Danielle Zandee was their little play about how conversations can degenerate, and how to prevent this - or even turn them into a generative alternative. Subsequently, Danielle asked the audience to think about ways to 'interweave' or 'interlock' the micro practices into day to day conversations, and make them sustainable. Besides the fact that Ken was struggling with the challenge to keep the practices 'fresh,' one could question Danielle's question, referring to the great philosopher Richard Rorty and his theory around the contingency of language. In fact, he suggests (!) that we are simply unable to 'interlock' practices in the conversation, because conversation itself is an in-between-emerging process, causing the language to develop, including the interpretations and meanings. You could say then that we have a solution to Ken's struggle, because conversation itself undergoes renewal. But I'm afraid this renewal does not always move into a generative direction, so to speak. I love Rorty's book title "Take care of freedom, and truth will take care of itself."

Prof. Dr. Danielle Zandzee



Prof. Dr. Kenneth J. Gergen



Imagine micro practices taking care of their generativity themselves...!

Let me give you an example. Until the age of 50 years or so, I used to talk about 'non-profit organisations'. And I was very unaware of the degenerative substance of my vocabulary. Until that afternoon in Ghent, where I attended the closing conference of the First Flemish AI Learning Network. On a certain slide I read the word 'social profit organisation' and the words struck in my mouth. The Belgian next to me said: 'Ala, you Dutch people, you call this non-profit, don't you?' I was flabbergasted, in a positive way that is. From that day I never used the word 'non-profit' anymore. How silly can it be, calling an organisation by what it not is? (Do we call a human being a not-dog?) This micro practice, referring to 'social profit instead of non-profit' is so strong that it does the trick itself. And as far as I can recall, everyone I told this story to, adopted the 'social-profit' alternative immediately.

I would like to call this a self interweaving micro practice. The question is: How do we find the strong, self-emerging ones? My suggestion would be to approach this quest in a sort of Darwinian way: let the strongest, the most intelligent and the ones most adaptive to change be the surviving micro practices. And let us – as Koen Vanmechelen said – keep on making new combinations to fill the linguistic evolution as appreciative and as generative as possible.

What do you think of 'birth-line' instead of 'deadline'? Is it going to survive? Yes, as far as the WAIC Media Crew is concerned. During Diana Whitney's great performance I received an SMS from Arno Vansichen: 'What about a Warm Idea instead of a Cool Idea?' My reply: 'Idea, I dear, You dear, We dear... What about a Wedea in stead of an Idea?' Arno: 'Windeed!'

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