Human ageing, a social collaborative itinerary…?[1]

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The number of elderly people in Europe continues to increase and the old continue to become older. Both scientists and healthcare providers are increasingly aware of the need for change in elder care. If nothing changes in the way elderly care is organized, we will soon no longer be able to provide good care to any of them.

Change in care for the elderly requires an open view of the scientist. In addition to traditional theory and evidence-based research, research into experiences of elderly people, their family, caretakers, managers and policymakers is also required. It is the interaction between all participants that makes innovations succeed in practice. It helps to tell the stories of older people, their family, professionals, managers and policymakers and to give a thorough analysis. Scientific research also focuses too often on increasing the professionalism, profitability and the development of (technical and medical) care criteria. The *needs* of stakeholders – for example, the need to feel at home, the need for social contact, cohesion and community building, the wish to have control of one's own life, remain in the background in research and practice these days. A problem with these needs are that they, even for elderly people, may change and can differ from situation to situation. In this paper, I analyse some important aspects of a social theory that help to take into account the human side of care in a humane way.

My main argument is that in a society where individualism and *entitatism* (the thinking in entities like *the* market, *the* institution, *the* policy, *the* technology) are hailed, one is forgetting that most times in our lives we (young and old people) are in a collaborative or relational process with other people. Through interaction and communication, the world and our identity come to be what they are for us. As a consequence, in defining ourselves we position the other person who is positioning us – thus it is an ongoing process in multiple contexts, places or spaces at different times. In this paper, I elaborate what such a perspective could mean for research into ageing and the relating process between inquirers and elderly in particular.

Social constructionist perspectives

When it comes to ageing, it is also important to study and compare insights on social construction. In particular, the contributions of Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, John Shotter, Peter Dachler, Dian Marie Hosking and John van Dongen offer us a perspective to generate a social theory that can support us to manage the care of large numbers of ageing people and in a global context where interdependency in and between care organisations increases. Here, I restrict my exploration to a brief sketch of two perspectives: the social construction approach of Kenneth and Mary Gergen and the matter of difference approach by van Dongen et al.

Kenneth Gergen

Gergen is among the first to develop a critical attitude towards mainstream psychology and suggest an autonomous social theory that has as a basis *an actor-in-connection with others* (Gergen, 1973). He considers the four following working assumptions as basis for his approach:

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1. The terms by which we understand our world and ourselves require nor ask for "by what there is, or something outside us." Man is not essentially independent. S/he is not living in a world driven only by a biological clock that makes a man feel and act in characteristic ways. Martin Buber (1996) summarizes this principle gracefully when he suggests: "In the beginning was the relationship." For a good understanding of the world, ourselves and other cultures surrounding us, *social interaction is a human condition.*

2. Our ways of describing, explaining and/or representing are derived from the relationship between people. In the relationship with others, *we use language and other means to construct time and place with a specific meaning.* This will give words a different meaning. "Give me a pan! No, that other one, fool!" are *not* the words of two early lovers, nor are these words to be shared between a grandparent and a grandchild, but it could be "everyday language" in a marital cooking situation in the kitchen, or between two cooks, or in the Netherlands (where pan has the double meaning of tile) on a roof between two workmen. In each situation, these words will hold another meaning that requires further investigation (see also Hosking, 2007).

3. If we describe, explain, or otherwise represent, so do we change our future. As our practices of language are bound to a specific relationship that we have in a detailed context, so are relationships interwoven with broader patterns, like rituals, traditions or other life forms. The world of ageing people depends on a discourse of an "elderly", "their family", "care professionals", "care programmes", "management" and "policy issues". Without these shared languages of description and explanation, care organisations would fail to exist in their present form. *At the same time. social life challenges the generating of new meanings, of becoming activists who sometimes feel the need to transform social life and to build new futures.*

4. Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital to our future well-being. *An actor-in connection will play in the social interaction between context-specific conventions and the search for non-paved paths*. We will constantly search their premises, suspend the obvious, and listen to other ways of constructing reality together (Gergen, 1994, 1999).

He understands the ongoing production of meaning through common activities of one actor in connection with another actor, as well as between actors as a central activity of human life, and summarizes this process as "social construction." Such a starting point helps to look at reality with new eyes, for example to the construction of meaning, meaning making (Gergen, 1999) or sensemaking (Weick, 1995). As we just have illustrated in the pan episode, an individual expression of someone has no meaning. The potential for meaning making becomes only visible as someone else responses to the manifestation (or utterance) (Bakhtin, 1990). In the example, the answer "which pan?" offers an alternative behaviour and knowledge exchange than when one throws a pan saying, "Here, catch!" This example also illustrates that the action itself also asks for a supplement, a response, or will result in action or other activities. Together, human beings construct meaning making by what precedes and follows in a conversation between people. For Gergen, human life is a permanent process of interaction, human relating, or interpersonal communication (Gergen et al, 2009). We have a *lively conversation with someone or others*. As the conversation continues, the result will be an entirely unique creation. We can agree to play the situation or to "fool around" and make one or more jokes. We say and do unconventional things and produce original words and phrases that generate novel sequences of behaviour. Together, we laugh profusely in the situation. And, as a consequence, new insights and ideas may even be created.

Gergen explicitly makes it clear that we should not speak of an "I" as an entity. He prefers to talk about "a relational self" (Gergen, 1985, 1999), an actor in the making, *an actor in becoming*. Our thoughts, feelings, desires, memories and the like find their origin in relationships with others. Outside this relationship, outside this social use, these thoughts, feelings, desires, memories, etc., become meaningless. We have various behavioural repertoires to attract attention. This is not only the case because we have many brain activities, but also because we live in a complex and interwoven web of social relations and, therefore, develop our opportunities for diverse behaviour. The communities in which we live and are active direct most of the forms we look at in the world. We usually describe events from a particular perspective of communication, but we can perform conversations from multiple conventions. We, therefore, have the possibility of reconstruction.

Another consequence of Gergen's argument is that we, besides language, use facial expressions and body movements to express something. In other words, behaviour and emotions also matter. The result? As words are dependent on the context in which they are utilized, so are our thoughts, behaviour, feelings, etc., interwoven with the *"here and now" of the relationship with another actor or others actors*. Throwing a pan may keep the other indifferent, but also may make the other angry or prompt a joke. It depends on the context in which both "live".

Kenneth and Mary Gergen
We create in connection with another or others and ourselves a reality that is always associated with dynamism and has various degrees (Gergen et al., 2009). In this complex context, Kenneth and Mary Gergen tell us that another consequence of thinking in relations (or relating) becomes visible. In a sport situation, sporting rules are frequently followed by the sportsmen; at the least, there is a mutual understanding that a participant of a sports game is approachable. Our communications in everyday life are rarely in accordance with set rules. When we communicate, we use repertoires of different contexts that can be combined in a variety of ways.
Our concrete decisions and social behaviour in daily practices build on decisions and practices of family, neighbourhood, work, newspaper, TV, film, etc. A conversation is not only a two-way communication process between a speaker and his conversation partner. Any word, any phrase of someone tastes of the context and contexts in which they have led a particular social life. Words or phrases may in the conversation with someone "fall into place" or show "communication breakdown or tension." It not only helps us to "survive" in a different culture, but also helps us to (re)construct our common future(s) in technological, economic or social innovations, crises, natural disasters, and so on.

On the one hand, this "social construction argument" has inspired many professionals in the course of time. On the other hand, there is much criticism on this perspective. I briefly want to elaborate one criticism in particular; social constructionists would regard ethical standards from a relativistic position. Gergen et al. (2009) suggest that moral standards are generated within the context of certain communities, and thus will be different from context to context, culture to culture, and so on. In their eyes, moral standards are not necessarily "given by God", "rationally necessary", or "universally binding." Because they themselves are members of different communities where various traditions and moral principles are involved, they emphasize another characteristic of moral principles. These principles help, in particular, non-dominant groups in society and in organisations to speak openly and to have dialogues with other participants in the same context and in different contexts. Here, social constructionists take a different position than fellow researchers.

Henk van Dongen, Willem de Laat and Alexander Maas
Van Dongen and his group take a different position that both amends and supplements the positive and constructive theories of Kenneth and Mary Gergen. Based on knowledge and experience in organisation and change processes, they develop a social behavioural theory in which social interaction and the production of difference prevails.
Studying the manifold manifestations of social life in organisational context and comparing these with the ways they are described produces three striking, important postulates that cannot be proved (van Dongen et al., 1996):

- Stress *difference (and similarity)* as a basic building block for social processes,
- Pay attention to *reality construction as a social production process,* and finally
- Recognise the importance of the *relational nature of this process.*

Social and cognitive difference and similarity matter! Many approaches to sense-making presume some kind of "shared meaning" or the existence of consensus. This sheds little light on how new meanings unfold or change. At the same time, such positions provide hardly anything to hold onto in situations in which "non-dominant" or "weak signals" of sense-making gradually develop into "dominant" or "strong signals" and start to replace or supplement existing meanings.

Taking this social dynamic of (re)producing differences seriously permits van Dongen et al. to pay attention to both *consensus* and *dissensus*. Both processes can be viewed as *co-genetic;* each enables the birth of the other. Generating consensus stimulates dissensus and vice versa. Dissensus can be related to the introduction of a third actor, meaning or relationship. In cases characterised by consensus, differences can also be recognised. At the same time, antagonists and antagonisms must also be guarded.

Reality construction can be understood as a social process! Sense-making is rather socially constructed in relations-to-another. Such a social, relational perspective has consequences because, in essence, it generates a "disclosure" strategy ("Let's investigate further in order to see how it is or might be."). Such a strategy is characterised by the fact that slowing down, reflection, temporality and postponement are potentials. It can help detect differences within and between configuring people. So, the strategy becomes a *relational and active methodology* for organising and change and can be applied both within and between social settings at any time and without any restrictions on frequency.

The social production process can be understood as a relational process between two people, open for one or more "possible contexts" ("a third", "thirdness")! To illustrate this position, van Dongen et al. take a pragmatic stand (e.g., a conversation in the context of a dynamic organisation). How do we structure such a conversation as researcher? We might ask for some observations of the situation, we might search for the antagonism of the observation, and finally we might look for other possible way(s) to view the situation. In social settings (e.g., ageing), researchers may follow these strategies in all kinds of conversations. The diagnosis and analysis would pay special attention to the social production process actors-in-interaction use to *organise their reality differently*, and to *trace future needs they have*.
They develop a behavioural theory that examines how people in a relational process produce "similar patterns" and "differences." Then they ask how they can handle this variety in sense-making, behaviour, rule setting, perspective and approach. Besides, they wonder whether similar patterns and

differences in a relating process may be appreciated as constructive or destructive.[2] In particular, four implications of their thought I briefly consider:

1. An interaction or conversation process between two people will be understood in its *context – that is, in relation to "a third" or "thirdness"* that we can described as other actors, meanings, interactions, rules, contexts, artefacts (like technologies, instruments, methods), etc. While one actor is talking to another one, there is continuous interaction between the first and his context ("a third") before the other. Without the others or "that others", those directly involved in a conversation would act and live as in a vacuum. Each of the three involved (actor 1, actor 2 and the social context) is connected synchronous in different ways to its context(s). And each actor is both actor, partner and context in the relating process. In this way, around the permanent interaction between people, multiple and synchronous contexts and thus different rules will manifest themselves simultaneously. Synchronising is a main characteristic of ongoing interaction. Multiple perspectives actively operate simultaneously. They "become" at the same time. One of the implications of this observation is that a synchronous analysis of "organisational contexts" is self-evident. Only synchronous analyses can visualise plurality and heterogeneity. In a triadic concept of interaction, contextuality is a facticity from the beginning. In the relationship between a mother and her newborn baby, the father is present from the start – even if he has fainted!

2. In their behavioural theory, van Dongen et al. develop a methodology that helps to diagnose social dynamics between people in interaction in an organisation context by observing the *social cognitive* c*onfiguring* (Maas, 1988). This methodology permits access to the process of social production in configurations. Looking at the social dynamics, we detect two extremes as basic for the understanding of social processes: a configuration as well as an aggregate. In short, a configuration refers to a "network of people" *who* for outsiders of the network are strongly organized with *what* constructions and rules of the relating process (*how*), *when* and *why*. An outsider (e.g., an observer, researcher, consultant or manager) decides which elements are parts of the sum and how it is made. Studied as a snapshot, social-cognitive configurations are characterised by matching and relatively stable ongoing interaction patterns and shared cognitions. In short, an aggregate is essentially a "collection of people" or "(social or cognitive) elements without ongoing interaction".

Both social situations must be interpreted as studies of an instantaneous exposure or random indication (that are often only recognisable and knowable in retrospect). They both refer to a process. Thus, configuration must be understood as configuring and aggregate as aggregating. Both concepts portray the extent to which people employ patterns of ongoing interaction and sense-making, whether solid or not. Such configurations and aggregates are stretched by people in their various relating processes. People develop in their relating process meanings in a configuration, while they are going in other configurations. In other words, configuring does not develop in a social vacuum of configurations. Multiple contexts continuously matter. Emerging configurations unfold from interaction. They develop in relation to the backgrounds of multiple social contexts. In that sense, a third or thirdness also matters in the process of configuring as an indication of the variety of contexts. Using this methodical concept offers a researcher opportunities to explore how people in and between various configurations produce synchronously multiple realities.

3. Van Dongen et al. particularly raise the question of valuing the relational process: Are there moral moments or spaces in relational processes? As long as participants are able to generate new interaction possibilities of organizing, as long as their interaction or relating process continues,

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[2] Their argumentation is different from the Gergens. See van Dongen et al. (1996), *Kwestie van verschil* (in Dutch), *A Matter of Difference* (to be published in English later).

"differences between participants" are positively valued. When people follow this pattern, they each can make a meaningful connection to the context in which they work or live. *People live with a constructive difference*. For example, when we try to determine what interaction between people exactly means, we may see that in a specific social setting many definitions for concepts like quality, effectiveness, flexibility, happiness, truth and so on are possible and are under conversation (van Dongen, 1983). The issue here is sought-after differences. It is about those differences from which we can learn to develop ourselves, play, organise, bargain, negotiate, etc. In this situation, the relating process or ongoing interactions between people remain a possibility.

The moment people harm or damage cognitive or social opportunities, however, they notice that violation of a relationship is indicative for the continuity of the other. This criterion refers to the "hindrance of othering" or safeguarding the "continuity of othering", and is therefore an ethical procedure. Differences of interpretation mean that a third or thirdness is excluded, forbidden or violated, and immediate attention is required. Here, van Dongen et al. (1996) speak about a blocked or fixed relating process. *People live in a destructive difference*. For example, when participants in a relating process do not succeed in establishing a connection to the context and thus remain stick to their own world, this situation will be valued differently. Depending on the status quo of the blockades in the relating process in a configuration, further action is required. Van Dongen et al. argue to address this destructive difference with priority through an ethical procedure. This procedure may differ from configuration to configuration. There is not one standard ethical procedure under destructive circumstances. In each configuring situation, people in cooperation with a "fourth party" or mediator (Van der Zijde, 1998) follow together a methodical trajectory to achieve in each situation a unique ethical judgment that binds those involved to "a limit in their relating process." These ethical boundaries can be interpreted negatively as "non-values" (or in Dutch, *wanwaarden*). They can differ from configuration to configuration, from community to community and from culture to culture. In relating processes, ethics become thus an ethics of a becoming process in motion that again and again will call for maintenance and monitoring.

In practice, the different validation means that "ethics as a positively defined criterion for behaviour ('truth')" is replaced with "an ethical procedure in which a possible violation of interaction is specified in negative terms." In an operational strategy, the hindrance, violation, fixation and obstruction of social relations has priority over the production of variety in interaction. An ethical procedure thus precedes the production of realities, or ethics precedes ontology (Levinas, 1996).

4. Based on this distinction in differences, two possible intervention programs can be generated. If the difference in a relating process between actors is positively or constructively validated, van Dongen et al. speak of functional differences or conflicts. An intervention in constructive differences demands a methodology of strengthening, empowering, and one that develops feedback and reflexivity. Intervention is directed towards keeping social interaction going. This involves the development of learning situations (Wierdsma, 1999) in which players try to manage their diversity in a constructive way, with or without the help of a mediator. If the difference in a relating process between actors is negatively validated as destructive, we speak of dysfunctional differences or conflicts. Here people disqualify, hinder or violate their relating process with another actor or actors. An intervention in destructive conflicts demands methodical strategies of resolving blockades, fixations, exclusions or violations. Most of the time by a mediator or fourth party who will be in a double somersault: how do I stay in (the situation), without finishing outside (the situation), and how do I stay outside (the difference), without going into (the difference)? The mediator start to operate beside the destructive difference, is not disconnected to the destructive situation and is aimed at an invitation strategy that "seduces" parties to introduce another context or space. Fixation and continuity of interaction can be tested and defined in terms of access to third(s), thirdness or other

context(s). A dearth of third(s) or thirdness means lack of reflexivity and, therefore, takes priority. In an instrumental way, this reasoning implies that in a specific situation, we explore *first* in particular the production of differences on non-reflection (irreflexiveness) (Slagmolen, 2004) and fixation. Having discussed these moments of non-reflection together, in a second stage of the process we may be able to restore in the relating processes the opportunity to produce variety. Multiple strategies of these kinds show people the ways to produce differences and similarities.

Towards a grammar of social ageing as humane condition?

In mainstream research, scientists struggle with the question whether research is scientific or not. In a social constructionist approach (i.e., of ageing), we follow Fay (1996) who raises the question whether we may understand behaviour of other people, especially if those others are different. In this draft paper, I conclude in looking for forms of social relating in ageing theory and research. A key question for researchers in ageing and elderly care is whether they lump everyone and everything together, or address differences within the elderly group and between the elderly and other stakeholders. In short, does literature recognize many shades of grey? An overview of this literature makes clear that especially gerontologists develop dominant standards for ageing; they search in a rich variety towards universal rules and standard concepts that doctors use approaching ageing. Philosophers, social gerontologists, sociologists, political scientists and some doctors ask attention for the development of accents and rules with political and societal relevance. Also, psychologists and geriatric nurses pay attention to the subject. A debate between these various scientific communities does not often take place. This conference can become a turning point in this way of relating! However, nowhere does an elderly take the floor, or she or he has to take it indirectly.

I was interested in weak signals in the literature about ageing and behavioural studies. Kenneth and Mary Gergen publish a bimonthly *Positive Ageing Newsletter* in which they give attention for positive findings in ageing research: "It is within these communities that new ideas, insights, factual support, and practices of caregiving and growth enhancement are likely to emerge. Productive dialogue between research and practitioner communities is infrequent. Research tends to circulate within scientific journals, and knowledge of practices within communities of practitioners. Our aim here is to reduce this distance, and to provide a vehicle for mutual enlightenment" (Issue 1, 20-4-2001). Furthermore, they devote attention to "positive aging." In an early article they focus mainly on the public above the poverty line They explore other possible constructions of ageing, like the principle of eternal youth (the cosmetic active life), as elderly retaking opportunities people need to generate more value for family, neighbourhood, organisation or society, and again making fun (Gergen et al., 2000). Happiness of the elderly becomes an important issue (see also Becker, 2003). Then they shift the perspective to life themes; the elderly may focus on oneself, on the relationships with others, or on contributions to the community. In a number of personal stories of elderly, they illustrate these life attitudes extensively (Gergen et al., 2003). Finally, they come with a life span diamond in which they ask attention for how people (especially women) can enrich their ageing process positively; contributions can be expected from relational sources (attention from family, friends, acquaintances and friends), physical well-being, positive mood and active participation in mental and physical activity. They show that especially the interaction between these aspects is crucial (Gergen et al., 2006). Their studies are mainly written from an elderly perspective via their real life stories and an overview of the ageing literature. Some questioned their findings and used fiction stories to prove their point (Juengst, 2004).

In the Netherlands, we see more and more practitioners in health care organisations (managers as well as professionals) struggle with problems of how to manage ageing behaviour. Here I note two types of reactions. The first is that they consider *their own management principles*. They come with alternatives such as "inspiring managing" in which they ask attention for ethical reflection and moral deliberation with professionals in the workplace using a mix of top-down and co-design bottom-up approaches.
The second type of reactions refers to concern about the *broad organising principles in an organisation*. In this context, I mention a few. In the Humanitas Foundation, Hans Becker (2003) developed a humanistic answer to the problem as just outlined. The emphasis is on steering the culture of the organisation, which occurs within a symbiosis where concepts such as "yes-culture", "use it or lose it", "management by storying around", "the art of living", "the Humanitas Extended family" and "age-proof" have an important place (Becker, 2006). It is a model in which human happiness is generated through a two-sided approach: both individualistic and community based.
Letiche (2008) protested against the complexity of the system. On the basis of various cases, he makes clear that "the system" governs where patient or client, family or other person involved expect that professional caretaker and manager hold onto the helm. He presents some simple guiding principles that could help to manage this crisis in the system.
Thé (2005) examines the fragile relationship between residents and staff in a nursing home. She shows how pressure in the organisation can lead to impotence, indifference, lack of attention, making mistakes and rough behaviour towards clients. There is no evil intent, she claims, but due to workload, a decreasing level of education, a gap between management and workplace, and rising expectations of outsiders (policymakers in local and national government agencies). In particular, the consequences she outlines for employees and management are penetrating.

My preliminary conclusion? As transdisciplinary critical thinkers on ageing, we should find ways to *bond* and *bridge* differences, *connect to* each other and *cooperate*. Besides, we as scientists should inquire methods to relate to the elderly and those who construct everyday ageing organisations. An inquirer enters the only world we know. We ask people to speak, we give them a voice, we learn to listen, negotiate, do not avoid debates, etc. In this way, we learn to see connections and explore potential differences and opportunities. We will conclude that we only can live in this world around us as we are aware of the relationship between us and the world. In this world, a researcher not in relation with the field is actually unthinkable.
In the follow-up of this paper, I elaborate on what such a perspective could mean for elderly in particular. Who are the stakeholders in the relational practice of an ageing man or woman? How do older people work together to shape their world and what is their relational context? I also explore what such a relational stand means for elderly entering a new or unwanted context, how a relational perspective can be connected with changes and transformations that ageing people encounter, and which implications such a stand has for the way we have (dis)organised especially our communities, these melting pots of intergenerational and intercultural people coming from various histories, countries and places where ageing people sometimes have lived throughout their lives and that seems not to be connected any longer to their life. There is a main perspective: How can we reconnect our elderly homes to community and organize communities in cities and villages in such a way that people who are ageing within the community are not taken for granted? The concept of *Community Sourcing* based on a social relational perspective offers opportunities for the future, as I then will elaborate.[3].

[3] This is a draft paper. Please do only quote after a contact with the author. Comments, questions, and literature overview on demand (ajja.maas@uvh.nl).