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# Performative Social Science and Psychology

*Mary M. Gergen & Kenneth J. Gergen* \*

**Abstract:** »*Performative Sozialwissenschaft und Psychologie*«. This article presents an overview of “Performative Social Science,” which is defined as the deployment of different forms of artistic performance in the execution of a scientific project. Such forms may include art, theater, poetry, music, dance, photography, fiction writing, and multi-media applications. Performative research practices are in their developmental stage, with most of the major work appearing in the last two decades. Frequently based on a social constructionist metatheory, supporters reject a realist, or mapping view of representation, and explore varieties of expressive forms for constructing worlds relevant to the social sciences. The performative orientation often relies on a dramaturgical approach that encompasses value-laden, emotionally charged topics and presentations. Social scientists invested in social justice issues and political perspectives have been especially drawn to this approach. Performative social science invites productive collaborations among various disciplinary fields and between the sciences and arts.

**Keywords:** art forms; multi-media; performance; social sciences; social construction; social justice.

## 1. History and Disciplinary Dispersion

The term “performative” is drawn from J.L. Austin’s work, “How to do Things with Words” (1962), in which he refers to the way in which utterances perform various social functions over and above conveying content. Performative social science involves the deployment of different forms of artistic performance in the execution of the scientific project (M. Gergen, 2001). Such forms may include art, theater, poetry, music, dance, photography, fiction writing, and multi-media applications (Madison & Hamera, 2006). Performance-oriented research may be presented in textual form, but also before live audiences, or in various media forms (film, photographs, websites).

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Within the social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology, researchers have studied performances, such as rituals, games, dances and dramas, in hundreds of cultural settings. These studies have generally been represented in traditional textual form. This summary excludes these types of performance studies because they are not, in themselves, examples of performative research (cf. Carlson, 1996; Conquergood, 1992; Schechner, 1985, 2002; Turner, 1986).

The exploration of performative research practices is in its nascent stage, with most of the major work appearing in the last two decades. However, interest in performatively oriented inquiry has been increasing rapidly. Lively controversy surrounds such efforts, in part because they raise significant questions regarding the nature of science (Marcus, 1994). Further, such exploration calls attention to the various ways in which all methods of inquiry and representation are performances. Questions thus emerge as to their comparative efficacy in terms of achieving social ends (K. Gergen, 2009). The use of theater in communicating about the nature of prejudice, for example, has a far different impact on one's audience than a graphic or statistical form of representation. A performative orientation to research often relies on dramaturgical theory in its approach to human action, although a commitment to such a theory is not required by this orientation (Goffman, 1959; Newman & Holzman, 1996).

The performative orientation to social research has many and varied roots, both within the social sciences and without. In philosophy the distinction between science and art has long been questioned, with scholars pointing to the various ways in which scientific theory and descriptions are suffused with literary tropes (e.g. metaphors, narratives), and guided by visual imagery (e.g., waves, matrices). In this vein, science is not defined by virtue of its contrast with performance; it is itself a form of performance (see, for example, Arnheim, 1969; McCloskey, 1985). Sociologists have also had an interest in performance-oriented research. The field of visual sociology, emphasizing photography as a major means of illuminating the social world is but one realization (see the International Visual Sociology Association). For example, Mark De Rond, (2008a) in his ethnographic research of the University of Cambridge rowing team, produced a flash video called "From Nausea to Method: The Dark Night of the Ethnographer's Soul" as well as a nonfiction book, "The Last Amateurs: To Hell and Back with the Cambridge Boat Race Crew" (2008b); De Rond describes his performative work as "carnal sociology." Further, sociologists invested in liberation politics, have found dramatic performance a major means of engaging people in social change movements. The work of Augusto Boal (1995) is seminal in this respect. Jonathan Shailor's work with prison populations (2010) is a recent realization of liberation theory. Many Participatory Action researchers also rely on performance practices in their studies (cf. Reason & Bradbury, 2000). For example, in her work with Guate-

malan women suffering from violence, Brinton Lykes has made extensive use of photography.<sup>1</sup> In psychology, the earliest uses of performance were largely those of therapists. Jacob Moreno (1947), Joseph Wolpe (1969), Eric Berne (1964) and George Kelly (1955) all played an important role in demonstrating the ways in which performance may be used for exploration, both of one's past life and of potentials for future action. Outside the social sciences, the late 20th century emergence of performance art has brought to attention the potentials of uniting art and social commentary for stimulating social change (Carlson, 1996).

These early contributions paved the way for a more recent flourishing of performance oriented inquiry across a variety of disciplines. In Women's Studies, such developments have been stimulated in particular by the view of gender itself as a cultural performance – as opposed to a biological given (see especially Butler, 1990, 1993). Thus when we engage in culturally appropriate sex role behaviors, we are enacting roles as we have been taught to play them. Other feminists have explored sexuality, embodiment, and power through performative means (Lockford, 2004; Ronai, 1992). Issues of health and medical treatment for women with breast cancer became the focus of a Canadian theater production. This work, using patients playing roles related to their own disease, was later published as "Standing Ovation" (Gray & Sinding, 2002). Performance forms have also been developed by scholars in Gay and Lesbian studies. For example, after Colorado voters excluded homosexuals from state anti-discrimination laws, psychologist Glenda Russell (2000; Russel & Bohan, 1999) transformed filmed interviews from the event into a television program. This show, "Inner Journeys, Public Stands," was then nationally televised. The interview materials were also used as the basis for an oratorio, "Fire," composed by Bob McDowell and performed on several occasions (see Russell, 2000).

In the field of communication, important developments in performance have emerged in ethnographic study. As scholars have developed autoethnography to illustrate or illuminate various issues, so have they frequently experimented with forms of expression (Ellis, 1991; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; McCall, 2000; Pelias, 1999; see also Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010). Commonly, autoethnography takes on the qualities of dramatic writing (Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 1997). With his graduate students, James Scheurich has produced a "research happening," designed to illuminate issues in immigration by bringing audience members into interactive relations with artifacts and activities related to Mexican immigrants, as well as a movie, "Labores de la Vida/The Labors of Life," with Miguel Guajardo and others (Scheurich, Guajardo, Sanchez & Fineman, 1999) about migrant farm workers. Moving toward full-blown performance,

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www2.bc.edu/~lykes/voices.htm>>.

Johnny Saldaña, professor at Arizona State University, has transformed a story from his adolescence into a theatrical piece called “Second Chair” (2008), with his music as well as prose. Online presentations allow for greater visual impact, with diverse forms of dramatic forms, music and text. A Special Issue of FQS included 42 contributions, emphasizing performative research projects (Jones et al., 2008<sup>2</sup>).

In psychology, performance studies were highlighted at symposia presented over a five year period, 1995-1999, at the American Psychological Association national meetings. Sessions were composed of dramatic monologues, dance, multi-media presentations, plays, and poems, all treating a significant topic of psychological concern. Another major innovator in performance studies is the East Side Institute, where dramatic productions are integral to educational, therapeutic and community building functions (Newman & Holzman, 1996). Kenneth J. Gergen (2009) has co-created graphic and poetic representations of theoretical views with artist, Regine Walter. Mary Gergen’s dramatic monologues and textual formats, lodged at the intersection of social construction and feminist studies, are among the earliest performative presentations in psychology (K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2001; M. Gergen, 2001).

As many qualitative researchers find, the traditional distinctions among departments of knowledge are both artificial and insulating. Thus emerging are a variety of publication and presentation venues that are non-disciplinary. The annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry organized by Norman DENZIN at the University of Illinois is illustrative; over two thousand researchers gather to present their work, much of it of a performative nature. Conference themes are generated around the idea that qualitative methods should serve social justice goals.

## 2. Theoretical and Methodological Premises

Developments in performance inquiry have been primarily stimulated by the emergence of a social constructionist alternative to traditional empiricist view of science. From the constructionist standpoint, one’s observations of the world make no principled demands on the forms of communication used to represent these observations. There are no words – or other symbolic forms of representation – that are uniquely suited to account for whatever exists. From this standpoint, inquiry is invited into the limitations of traditional forms of social science writing (along with graphic and tabular representations of the world), and the potentials of alternative modes of expression. The use of performance

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10>>; see also Kip Jones, <<http://kipworld.net/>>.

as a form of communication in the social sciences is largely based on the following proposals:

- Traditional communication in the social sciences is highly specialized. Theory and research findings are largely unintelligible to audiences untrained within the disciplines. If a scientific text can easily be read by the general public it is typically viewed as “unscientific,” and discounted by gatekeepers in a discipline. Thus, not only do social scientists largely suppress forms of communication that might engage those who are the subject of study, but their work is generally ignored by those whose deliberations affect the future of the society.
- By expanding the possibilities of representation – using theater, art, or multi-media, for example – scientists invite a more fully embodied response from their audiences; performances can more effectively motivate interest and action, and they can enhance dialogues on important societal issues.
- All forms of description and explanation provide models for action. In this sense, written forms of social science communication are highly limited in what they offer as models for action. Essentially one exposed to a limited rhetorical style. By expanding the range of communicative possibilities, so do the sciences expand the repertoires for social action. Employing drama or film, for example, not only teaches about a given topic, but it also provides new images for representation and action.
- Traditional forms of representation in the sciences are realist in their rhetoric. They suggest that the discourses in use are reflections (i.e. mirrors) of existing realities. By using performance as one’s mode of communication, these assumptions are undermined. The use of theater, fiction, poetry, or art, for example, suggests their aesthetic nature – that they are created by people and are not “mirrors of nature.” In this way, performative representations are capable of conveying the sense of truth, but simultaneously undermining its grounds. They are not declarations of what is the case, so much as invitations to “consider this way of seeing the world.” Challenged are the distinctions between science/art, serious/play, and truth/imagination.
- Traditional forms of scientific writing radically truncate the potentials of the language. Typically they rely on declarative prose. A performative orientation invites the writer to explore the full potentials of the medium, including, for example, irony, metaphor, humor, and more. While traditional writing seeks to bring the full content into a logically coherent whole, a performative orientation invites explorations into ambiguity, subtle nuance, and contradiction.
- Traditional communication practices in the sciences suppress or disregard the value investments and implications of the research in question. They sustain the misleading presumption of value-free research. Performative modes of communication typically make apparent the investments and implications of one’s work. They often rely on dramatic tension to carry their

message, demonstrating that the scientist deeply cares about an issue and wishes to share these concerns with others.

- When used in academic settings – for example, the lecture hall or professional journal – performatively orientated work challenges the traditions that have defined these locations as “truth zones,” that is locations honoring the expression of those who possess the truth. The sciences thus become more opened for the inclusion of multiple traditions, and thus they become more polyvocal, dialogic, and democratic.
- Performative social science allows for close collaborations among various disciplinary fields, from the humanities and the arts, as well as the other sciences (Jones, 2006).

### 3. Current Conditions and Future Potentials

Although drawing from a rich history, the performative social sciences are in a fledgling state of development. At the same time, the number of journals featuring qualitative research has rapidly expanded; see for example, *The Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, and the on-line journals, *FQS*, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *Qualitative Sociology Review*, and *The Qualitative Report*. All these journals discuss or feature experimental writing, poetry, visual images, dramatic scripts, and other forms of performative expression. Further, the Centre for Qualitative Research at the School of Health and Social Care at Bournemouth University, UK, offers graduate study with a performance component. Also a listserv related to performative social science is available through a Sage Publications website.

Both the enthusiasm for performative work and its contribution to social science deliberations are substantial. There is also ample reason for optimism in terms of the future of such efforts. This is not only the case in terms of the present burgeoning of qualitative research across the social sciences, but as well in terms of the opportunity that such research represents for the fledgling scholar. Performative inquiry, as we have seen, invites the scholar to engage with issues that have significant personal value. Thus, rather than being forced by the profession to join dialogues the parameters of which are already fixed, the performative domain invites the scholar into passionate inquiry. Further, the domain invites scholars to use communicative skills (e.g., in music, art, theater, dance) that have otherwise been excluded from their professional life.

This is not to say that the future of such work is unproblematic. Of all the developments in qualitative inquiry, performative practices are the most radical. This is so because, unlike most qualitative practices, they challenge the identity of the discipline. By blurring the boundary between science and art, fact and fiction, seriousness and play, they challenge “normal science” activities and standards. And, within the domain of the performative there remain

important questions. Three of these are prominent. First, there are difficulties in judging the quality or merit of performatively oriented work. Traditional standards for evaluating research (e.g., validity and reliability, statistical sophistication) are not applicable, and new and more ambiguous criteria must be considered. Standards, such as cultural significance, communicative power, and aesthetic value, for example, are all subject to debate. To illustrate this challenge, a recent PhD dissertation from the University of Bournemouth (Zoë Fitzgerald Poole, 2008) was encased in a wooden box, inscribed with a brass nameplate, in which were placed two books, each page illustrated in colorful graphics, denoting the outcomes of interviews, synthesized by the author, into a poetic form. Also included in the box were DVDs with visual and auditory expositions of the interview materials. As appreciative gifts to the readers, the box contained music, a mermaid figurine, a large doll representing a stuffy old-fashioned professor, chocolates, and hundreds of tiny wrapped up scrolls each with a saying inscribed with elegant calligraphy. There was a map to describe how to take in this collection, which had all been organized into small wooden sections of the box. The dissertation oral, itself, proved to be somewhat controversial as questions arose about the scientific merits of the research process and the representations of the results.

The second issue is that of the accumulation of knowledge and the progress of the discipline. Traditional social science prized itself on these capacities. Performative approaches are less committed to these goals, but more invested in the meaningfulness of the research, and the ethical issues related to the research process itself (Keen & Tordes, 2007). In the case of performative inquiry, there may be accumulation in terms of communicative efficacy, but an investment in increments in knowledge and disciplinary progress is typically replaced by a concern with making an immediate impact of cultural significance. Performatively oriented scholars note that because patterns of social life are continuously transforming, the emphasis on accumulation is misleading. The social sciences acquire their significance not from attempting to predict the future from observations of the past, but from entering into those deliberations that create the future.

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