

~My reflections on human development of TCKs in relation to reciprocity~

Introduction to The Reciprocating Self – An Integrative View of Human Development

The Reciprocating Self is written to weave together understanding of human development with Christian theological perspective. The three authors—Jack Balswick, Pamela King, and Kevin Reimer, have professional backgrounds from sociology, psychology, religion and social sciences. Though the specific theological tradition of these authors were not stated in the book, we know from their self-introduction at the preface, that all of them acknowledged their developmental issues even at adulthood, and at least two of them are ordained ministers in churches, and their professional selves are involved with teaching in evangelical seminaries (Fuller Theological Seminary) or universities (Azusa Pacific University, California).

Summary

The authors purposed to provide an integrated lens to look at human development psychology with theological underpinnings. They do so by first proposing “the reciprocating self” as the human development teleology (p.49) and defining the *reciprocating self* as “the self that in its uniqueness and fullness of being, *engages fully in relationship with another* in all its particularity” (p. 21). In the first part of the book, they presented how Trinitarian anthropology helped provide an analogy to explain one’s being and becoming in reciprocal relationships between the divine and other relationships. They drew upon the doctrines of the Trinity and the *imago Dei*, to explain how human beings reflect the image of God, in ways that reflect the communion of the Godhead which does not compromise the uniqueness of the three persons of the Godhead.

Hence, they suggested that *particularity* and *relatedness* can co-occur through perfect reciprocal interrelations, explaining the theological term, *perichoresis*, where mutual indwelling exists between Father, son, and Spirit. The book also included briefly, theologian Martin Buber's theory of relatedness. The authors also expounded on selected human development theories that contributed to the understanding of their overall argument. For instance, the authors discussed Klein's Object-relations theory about the *cohesive self* (the emergence of the reciprocal true self who is comfortable with his own uniqueness yet permeable to the influence of others in a healthy way), Bandura's Social Learning Theory ("*reciprocal determinism*"), Symbolic Interaction Theory (*self in symbolic interaction* as the sum total of self-concepts developed through communication via language and symbols and one's belief of self from perceptions of what others think), and Piaget's cognitive development (which specified our ability to view self as an object during childhood).

In the second part of the book, the authors applied the concept of reciprocal self onto lifespan development from infancy to childhood, adolescence, emerging and young adulthood, and middle and late adulthood, outlining the developmental tasks or dilemmas at each stage to overcome to move on to the next. The authors explored many theories attachment to psychosocial development theories, and included theories that focused on the interactions of development in sociocultural contexts—Vygotsky's context theory, Learner's developmental systems theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (multiple levels of influence).

In the third section of the book, the authors focus on the application these integrative concepts of theology onto human development psychology, in ministry settings, namely in moral development, spiritual and religious development, and how religious community can be scaffolds for development.

Reflections and Ideas for TCK Reciprocity

First, I like how the authors have integrated the lenses from two disciplines, theology and psychology to look at how we live and grow as human beings in this world. From understanding the concepts of economic and immanent Trinity which describes how the trinitarian God relates to the created world as well as within the three persons as one, I can now better see where the desire for human beings to connect with and form relationships, come from. As we are created to reflect the image of a relational God, we naturally have the deep desire to connect and form relationships. It is also through these dynamic, reciprocal interactions with God and others that we develop our self-concept through differentiation and maturation processes. It was a moment of realization for me that we begin our developmental growth as infants by first growing the *capacity* for relational reciprocity in *the image of God* (Stern's infant self-development theory), and afterwards, towards maturity after interactions with people through adolescence and adulthood. It was a helpful for me to ground my concept on why we operate as relational beings, from a foundational basis in the relational understanding of *imago Dei* and Trinitarian Theology.

By encountering the relational Trinity, we also have a role model to emulate for living in harmony and union with others. The authors posited how “we are most human when jointly united to Christ through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to participate in the Son’s union with and glorification of the Father (p. 39),” hence, we reflect the ultimate expression of the *imago Dei* and the ultimate telos for human creation. Applying the overall argument to my research, I agreed with the authors’ position that human development does not take place in a vacuum but as a reciprocal self in relation with God, others and self. However, I wondered if there is reciprocity also with one’s connections to places, nature, and inanimate objects. Especially for the target population that I am researching—Third Culture Kids (TCK)/ Third-Culture Adults (TCA), who are people who have lived in cultures significantly different from their parents’ or home cultures during significant developmental periods, they have often reported significant grief in relation to the losses of possessions, homes, or identity, along with relationships. It is not uncommon that some suffer from depression, anxiety, identity confusion, misfit and adaptation issues from repatriation back to their home cultures as well. Often, there are hidden losses, unknown to TCKs/TCAs about these cross-cultural moves, that result in unresolved grief. In their story of loss, it seems that there is something beyond just an attachment to places and objects that undergirds this unresolved grief. I began to conceptualize this loss as something tied more deeply to the meaning that represented one’s longing to have closeness with again. For instance, the loss of not being able to physically see *padi* fields anymore brought sadness to my friend, Belinda, as she moved back as a missionary kid to Los Angeles from a countryside in Korea. Even seeing mere similar scenes of *padi* fields now would bring out memories of her childhood that

‘touched her soul’, an inner core of who she was. This reminded me that even inanimate objects and nature interact with us to bring about responses, just like how conversations with people work.

In relation to the above point, the book discussed Symbolic Interaction Theory, which posits *self in symbolic interaction* as the “sum total of self-concepts that an individual has gained” through communication via language and symbols (p. 81). This concept seemed helpful in expanding the reciprocal self with interactivity beyond God or other human beings, but also of places, things, and nature, through symbolic meaning. I wonder how one’s self-concept can be developed through interactions with these symbols, and how these interactions work to bring out and shape a person’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors. For example, being in touch with nature often remind us of our creator and helps bring us into intimacy with God. Even though inanimate objects were not assumed to be directly created by God, I wonder if memories of experiences with these objects or symbols reflect similar relational experiences with other human beings, hence develop significant interactivity and meaning. If this is so, would these meaningful instances thus emulate the reciprocity of how we relate to God in knowing and experiencing him, and reflect *imago Dei* as a reciprocating self as well?

Another relevant question relates to the context of the recent evolution of virtual realities. Since human’s use of social media has expanded tremendously, how will interactivity with or via a virtual world, affect human development as a reciprocating self? It seems that the internet has opened up much opportunities to connect beyond the constraints of geographical time and space, and penetrated the daily lives of most human beings. This would be a valuable area the authors could address. Would this therefore mean that the potential for human

development has expanded such that humans can develop much faster and in more sophisticated ways across developmental stages? On the contrary, we know that opposing voices have risen over the years about the harm that the virtual world might bring psychologically and relationally. Do the interactions or reciprocity experienced in the virtual world limit our 'real' growth instead? Most importantly, I am deeply curious: What does theology say about this?

To respond to my curiosity, I embarked on a second part to this exploration project to explore the reciprocity of TCK development with places, nature, and inanimate objects, in addition to God, self, and others.