

Relationalism

OSMO KIVINEN and TERO PIROINEN

University of Turku, Finland

Dozens of sociologists and social theorists, drawing from a variety of influential figures such as Pierre Bourdieu, John Dewey, Norbert Elias, and Charles Tilly, have announced themselves as relationalists in recent times. For most of them, relationalism is a standpoint which involves realist ontological convictions, but there are also epistemological, methodological, and other views of relationalism. The various relationalisms do not constitute a single unified school of thought, but there are significant similarities and overlaps between them, and there have been attempts to collaborate, resulting among other things in a couple of edited books (Dépelteau and Powell, 2013; Powell and Dépelteau, 2013).

To be sure, “relationalism” is a term which could well be used to characterize most sociological outlooks: starting with Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel, sociology has always dealt with relational research topics – even methodological individualists admit that one needs to pay at least some attention to relations between individuals. What exactly the sociological relations to be emphasized are, and the motives for emphasizing them, depends on the specifics of the standpoint. Many relationalist approaches are variously connected to a number of other branches of sociology, such as social network analysis (SNA), actor-network theory (ANT), cultural sociology, and sociology of knowledge; many are also connected to social psychology, gender studies, or some other field of relational research. Different relationalist sociologists also draw on different philosophical outlooks, including American pragmatism, varieties of ontological realism, and such explicitly relational philosophies as Ernst Cassirer’s.

Looking at European sociology from the 1970s onwards, relational ideas can be found in Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory; in the attempts by Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias,

Anthony Giddens, and Bruno Latour to overcome individual–society dualism; in Pierpaolo Donati’s relational realism; in Manuel Castells’s theory of network society; and in the intellectual movement dubbed “critical realism,” which arose around the philosopher Roy Bhaskar’s ontologically emergentist interpretation of the Marxian idea that society consists not so much of individuals as of relations. Of course, the said theories do not constitute any one coherent school of thought, but differ among other things with respect to whether they advance some kind of relational ontology, with respect to exactly what kind of ontology that would be, and with respect to how much weight they place upon it. Meanwhile, in the United States, there were relational elements in the works of Andrew Abbott, Craig Calhoun, Randall Collins, and Mark Granovetter, for example; then, in the 1990s, an academic network emerged that would later come to be called the “New York school of relational sociology” (Mische, 2011). It developed around Charles Tilly and Harrison White, combining influences from social network analysis, historical studies of social structures, and cultural sociology. Mustafa Emirbayer is one well-known figure in that network.

The recent, more intense, and self-aware relationalist movement then started around the turn of the century, launched by Emirbayer’s oft-cited “Manifesto for a relational sociology” (1997) and other contemporary declarations of need for relational thinking, coming from a variety of theoretical standpoints (e.g., Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Ritzer and Gindoff, 1992; Somers, 1994; Abbott, 2007; Vandenberghe, 1999; Fuchs, 2001). They are still a miscellaneous, pluralistic group: aside from underlining the importance of some sort of relation, all the different relationalisms share little more than family resemblance. A few major subgroups can be distinguished, each a broad church in itself.

One group of relational sociologists, like Abbott, Elias, Giddens, and Tilly, has been motivated by “process-metaphysical” views of social reality. Emirbayer (1997: 281) explicated that starting point when he announced that it is a fundamental question in sociology whether to

conceptualize social reality in terms of “static” entities or “dynamic” processes. The latter was the view Emirbayer himself was advancing, drawing from a number of sources like Tilly, White, Elias, and the Deweyan pragmatist notion of “transactions.” Several others have advocated similar positions, aiming to overcome individual–society dualism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of people and the ontological interdependence of structures and agency, viewing the social world as a network that is deeply relational and constantly changing, more fluid than fixed, where everything is what it is because of its location in this network (see, e.g., Somers, 1994, 1998; Dépelteau, 2008, 2015). These may be rather modest, “pragmatic,” and “minimal” ontologies closely coupled with research practice – “problem driven” (instead of “theory driven”), to use a term from Somers (1998) – but they are still realist stances, presumed to capture not just instrumentally useful descriptions but also what the social world is really like.

There are other kinds of relationalisms, however, which do not start with ontological convictions; some exponents of methodological relationalism argue against the very idea of such philosophical foundations of social scientific research; they even propose turning the relationship around, suggesting that our understanding of philosophy could benefit from (relational) social scientific research more than the latter can from armchair philosophy (Fuchs, 2001: 1–11; Kivinen and Piironen, 2006; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 15–16, 155–162, 178–190, 224–235; Ritzer and Gindoff, 1992). Most representatives of methodological relationalism can agree with those who advocate process-metaphysical relationalism that it is futile to try and reveal the intrinsic, essential nature of entities, and that the focus should be on relations instead; but for methodological relationalists this is not based on an ontological theory. Rather, it is a methodological commitment which could be premised on the view that the only way to know anything is through symbolic descriptions, the meanings of which depend crucially on their inter-relations. The view is reminiscent of some postmodernist outlooks, but has its roots in pragmatism and differs from postmodernist linguistic idealism in that it emphasizes above all the practical, empirically testable usefulness of

scientific descriptions: theoretical concepts are seen as tools for handling (systems of) relations, and their worth is measured in practice, in how useful the operationalizations they allow are for empirical research.

Most representatives of process-metaphysical and methodological veins of relationalism share an opposition to substantialism or essentialism and to many traditional dualisms, especially to the categorical individual–society (agency–structure) dichotomy, if not also to the Cartesian subject–object (mind–world) dualism. This separates them from many other approaches, including “analytical sociologists,” who do not identify themselves as relationalists but nevertheless acknowledge the importance of relations. Analytical sociologists started with methodological individualism but have recently come to appreciate the explanatory necessity of relations among individuals (“structural individualism”), while still holding on to the idea that there is something particularly important and substantial about individuals and their minds, that these are ontologically more real than relational structures (see Hedström and Bearman, 2009; compare Abbott, 2007).

There are also some theorists, like critical realists, who identify themselves as relationalists but nevertheless embrace essentialist ontology. Critical realism is a good example of this. Their Bhaskarian philosophy starts with a categorical distinction between the fallible subject and the real nature of objects to be known, and insists that scientific inquiry depends on the assumption that the objects – including the structures investigated by sociologists – have mind-independent essential natures to be studied which involve *sui generis* causal powers irreducible to their components. Thus, social structures, like people and other agents, constitute emergent levels of entities interacting with their constituents (Archer *et al.*, 1998). This is relationalism insofar as critical realists say the natures of emergent entities are relational, that an entity is emergent precisely when it consists not just of its components but of those components in inter-relations that are essential to the entity’s nature and causal powers (e.g., Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010). This is in express contrast to both process-metaphysical and methodological relationalism, neither of which postulates ontological

levels – the first because it advocates flat process ontologies, the second because it avoids ontology altogether.

SEE ALSO: Actor-Network Theory; Critical Realism; Pragmatism; Social Network Analysis; Symbolic Interaction

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