

Briefing paper on relational analysis in academic discourse¹

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Abstract: *Since the 1970s, use of the term “relational” has become increasingly common across a wide range of academic disciplines, and particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Arguing that relationships were largely overlooked in public policy debate, Schluter and Lee (The R Factor, 1993) developed relational proximity² as an analytical tool and explored its application to a number of important policy areas. The book gave rise to the Relational Thinking movement, which seeks to set out a coherent framework for institutional goals and structures and policy development. The purpose of this paper is to position the underlying relational analysis as a distinctive contribution to the social sciences, and to invite academics to further explore relationship as a concept across a range of disciplines. While defining a broad direction of research, relational analysis distinctively uses relationship as the primary construct in understanding social systems, and explores this proposition as a basis for re-evaluating social connectivity and influence, the measurement of social value, and the nature of individuality.*

¹ This paper was undertaken by Relational Research (relationalresearch.org) to stimulate further research into the relevance and application of relational analysis in the social sciences and humanities. It is being simultaneously published by the Relational Thinking network, which is a global movement promoting the application of a specific set of relational categories and norms within relational analysis to build a society that is strong, free, fair, prosperous and sustainable.

² Relational Proximity is a trademark of Relational Research, registered in multiple jurisdictions. The 5 dimensions of Relational Proximity (directness, continuity, multiplexity, parity and commonality) are proprietary terms first used in The R Factor (Michael Schluter and David Lee, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

The term relational analysis describes a cross-disciplinary approach to social science which uses relationship as the primary construct in understanding social systems and in shaping organizational practice and public policy.

Background and context

The appearance of the term “relational” in the social sciences during the late twentieth century marks something of a new departure. Up to that point, many professions – including business, education, politics, diplomacy and psychiatry – had depended on the use and understanding of human relations; yet the very ubiquity of relationships, combined with the difficulty of applying standard metrics to something so complex, diverse and intangible, also meant that relationships seldom came into the direct path of scientific inquiry. As a result, no consensus emerged on a systematic framework or basis for measurement, and little progress was made analytically.

Current interest covers several disciplines and has moved in a number of different directions, some of which lie outside the social sciences – for example, Nowak’s suggestion that cooperation is “the secret behind the open-endedness of the evolutionary process,” which has implicitly brought relationships into the debate over evolutionary biology.³ Relationships came into the purview of sociology and psychology during the 1970s, when a number of researchers began to explore the nature and function of relationships with a view to furnishing an adequate descriptive base from which general theories could be developed. Robert Hinde, in particular, assembled perspectives of intimacy, perception, commitment, dissonance, similarity and reciprocity in an attempt to understand the biological, psychological and cultural variables affecting interpersonal relationships.⁴ During the same period, the publication of Jean Baker Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women*⁵ marked the birth of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), which brought relationships to the forefront of human psychology by using the concepts of connection and disconnection to examine the complexity of human relationships and the sociological implications of psychological theory. By 1992, Alan Page Fiske was developing Relational Models Theory in anthropology, suggesting that human interactions and social structures can be

³ Martin Nowak, “Five rules for the evolution of cooperation”, *Science*. Dec 8, 2006; 314(5805): 1560–1563. In a different discipline, in 1970 E.F. Codd brought the term “relational” into information technology to describe the now widely-employed model of organizing data into cross-referenced and searchable rows and columns rather than using hierarchies or networks. See Codd, E.F. (1970), “A Relational Model of Data for Large Shared Data Banks,” *Communications of the ACM* 13 (6): 377–387. Also, the term “relational thinking” has recently been invoked to describe a particular approach to calculation in primary school mathematics. See Stephens, M. (2008). “Some key junctures in relational thinking,” in M. Goss, R. Brown & K. Makar (eds.), *Proceedings of the 31st annual conference of the Mathematics Education Group of Australasia: Navigating current and charting directions* (Vol. 2, pp. 491-498). Brisbane, Australia: MERGA.

⁴ Robert Hinde, *Toward Understanding Relationships* (London: Academic Press, 1979).

⁵ Dana L. Comstock, Tonya R. Hammer, Julie Strentzsch, Kristi Cannon, Jacqueline Parsons, and Gustavo Salazar II, “Relational-Cultural Theory: A Framework for Bridging Relational, Multicultural, and Social Justice Competencies”, *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Summer 2008, Volume 86, 279-287.

understood as a set of four biologically innate mental models (communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, market pricing) that combine into complex computational mechanisms operative within relationships.

Perhaps the strongest thread of academic interest in relationships, however, originates in biologist Ludwig van Bertalanffy's 1951 article describing general systems theory. Central to a systems approach is the notion that elements in a system are interdependent, and that systems themselves have open boundaries, are adaptive, nested in larger systems, and combine features that are simultaneously structural and dynamic. It is hard to underestimate the impact of systems theory on fields as diverse as political science, public relations and environmentalism. Both relationships and the systems that contain them are understood not as static entities but as processes. Thus, according to Ledingham *et al*, "relational communication scholars suggest that mutual adaptations forms the essence of all interpersonal interaction."⁶ Similarly, family therapy focuses on the social ecology of the family rather than the behavioural issues of the individual patient.⁷ A different response to systems theory has appeared in geography, where "relational thinking ... challenges human geography by insisting on an open-ended, mobile, networked, and actor-centred geographic becoming",⁸ marking a recognition that economic actors occupy social and institutional contexts and participate in economic and social processes capable of being analysed from a spatial perspective.

Partly under the influence of systems theory,⁹ practical interest in relationships has boomed in the public and private sector organizations for which pro-social and anti-social behaviours are seen to have a measurable impact on outcomes. Substantial bodies of literature have accumulated around subjects like trust, accountability and transparency.¹⁰ Management and communication studies relevant to business have been reframed in explicitly relational terms, so that, for example, public relations is seen as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends." In particular, the term "relational risk" has emerged strongly in business studies aimed at tackling uncertainties associated with joint ventures, supply chains and retention of intellectual capital.¹¹

A concern with relationships – in essence if not always in name – emerged during the mid-twentieth century in the form of Personalism, the philosophical foundation of European Christian Democracy, which developed a rich definition of personhood to include an individual's close personal connections with friends and family.¹² In a more recent context, the King III corporate governance code launched in South Africa in 2009¹³ requires companies to report on stakeholder relationships – though finding

⁶ John A. Ledingham, Stephen D. Bruning (eds), *Public Relations As Relationship Management: A Relational Approach To the Study and Practice of Public Relations* (Taylor and Francis, 2000), p.15.

⁷ See, for example: Agazarian, Y., *Systems centered therapy for groups* (NY: The Guilford Press, 1997).

⁸ Martin Jones, "Phase space: geography, relational thinking, and beyond", *Progress in Human Geography*, August 2009 vol. 33 no. 4 487-506

⁹ See, for example, Gittell, Jody Hoffer, Rob B. Seidner and Julian Wimbush (2010), "A relational model of how high performance work systems work." *Organization Science*, 21(2): 490-506.

¹⁰ Mark Scholefield, *A Guide to Trust: A Review*, Relationships Foundation, 2004. Among many examples is Ken Blanchard, *Trust Works* (One-Minute Manager series), (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013).

¹¹ See, for example, Mervyn King and Leigh Roberts, *Integrate: Doing Business in the 21st Century* (London: Juta, 2013).

¹² See Emmanuel Mounier, *The Personalist Manifesto*, 1938.

¹³ *King Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa*, Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, 2009, Chapter 8.

adequate measures of quality of relationships remains problematic. Also representing an implicitly relational approach is restorative justice, which redefines crime as a breaking of relationships rather than as an offence against the impersonal state, and treats punishment as restoration rather than retribution. Popularized in the 1990s by American Mennonites like Ron Claassen and Howard Zehr,¹⁴ restorative justice generates new objectives and procedures, being characterized as “a process where all stakeholders affected by an injustice have an opportunity to discuss how they have been affected by the injustice and to decide what should be done to repair the harm.”¹⁵

The nature of relational analysis

Because these various strands of thinking differ in context, scope and methodology, Hinde’s comment in 1979 that “in spite of all these sources of knowledge, it cannot yet be said that we have an integrated science of interpersonal relationships”¹⁶ is probably still apt. The central proposition of relational analysis as defined here – that relationship be used as the primary construct – on one level simply recognizes the ongoing need for integration. On another level it responds to the paradox that relationships, while universally acknowledged as important, have in Western culture remained largely invisible at the points where social theory has been generated and crystalized out into the political and economic institutions that are increasingly globally dominant.

The starting point for relational analysis is the observation that relationships themselves are intrinsically and functionally important, not only at an interpersonal level but also systemically in the way that role expectations, rights and responsibilities are defined in statute, in organizational code and practice, and in custom and tradition. In this sense, society is “always a dense network of relationships,”¹⁷ where relationships act both as a means (to growth, a skilled workforce, effective coordination, and so on) and as an end in their own right.

While relationships cannot be understood independently of individuals or groups, bringing them into focus analytically has wide-ranging implications. For instance, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that relationships are the medium through which human beings are educated and socialized, and from which they construct their sense of identity and self-worth.¹⁸ Attachment theory has identified deprivation in the infant-caregiver relationship as a significant risk factor in a child’s later ability to manage future relationships and function successfully across a range of domains.¹⁹ Life satisfaction correlates closely with breadth and depth of social connections,²⁰ with evidence showing that those who have close family, friends and confidants, friendly neighbours and supportive coworkers are less likely to

¹⁴ Zehr, Howard. *Changing Lenses – A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: 2005, 268-269).

¹⁵ Braithwaite, John (2004), “Restorative Justice and De-Professionalization”, *The Good Society* 13 (1): 28–31.

¹⁶ Robert Hinde, *Towards Understanding Relationships* (London: Academic Press Inc., 1979), p.3.

¹⁷ Margaret Wheatley, *Relationships: The Basic Building Blocks of Life* (2006), <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/relationships.html>.

¹⁸ Michael Argyle, “The effects of relationships on wellbeing” in Nicola Baker (ed.), *Building a Relational Society: New Priorities for Public Policy* (Ashgate Publishing, 1996).

¹⁹ See, for example, Pearce, J.W. and Pezzot-Pearce, T.D., *Psychotherapy of abused and neglected children* (2nd ed., New York and London: Guilford Press), pp.17ff.

²⁰ Helliwell and Putnam, “The social context of well-being” in Huppert, Baylis & Keverne (eds.), *The science of well-being*, 2005.

experience sadness, loneliness, low self-esteem and problems with eating and sleeping.²¹ Even the material components of wellbeing like income have a strong relational context. There is a sense in which individuality itself is a social product; that "...the Self exists only in dynamic relation with the Other;"²² and that individuals, like quantum particles, cannot be fully comprehended in isolation from their connections and interactions. Margaret Wheatley, whose view of management was transformed by her study of quantum physics, concludes: "Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation."²³

At an organizational level, relationships can be said to have agency and exert influence. They are the means by which systems evolve and interact, and through which leaders mobilize social, intellectual and technological capital. Sensitivity to the impact of relationships on business outcomes now permeates management literature.²⁴ Brand and reputation management consist almost entirely of overseeing a company's relationship with stakeholders. Weak relational links mean that knowledge is lost, not gained or misunderstood, that mistakes go unchallenged and accountability breaks down. Relationship coordination is a major factor in multi-agency service failures, examples including the well-examined case of Victoria Climbié or the Bristol heart deaths.²⁵ High relationship workloads in care professions – which effectively mean more relationships being managed at less depth – can squeeze out the vital opportunities for one human being to make a real and lasting difference in the life of another. Where relationships are weak or attenuated, trust becomes a central issue. Xerox has estimated that the lack of trust in their buyer/supplier relationships cost them seven cents in the dollar.²⁶ A large proportion of company valuation now rests on goodwill, which in reality is a partial proxy for the quality of its internal and external relationships. For business and political leaders, such relationships come increasingly into focus as systems grow in size, interconnectedness and complexity, and the progression from cause to effect moves, in terms of Snowden's analysis, increasingly toward chaos.²⁷

The implication is that interpersonal and inter-group relationships are a fundamental asset in society, with an infrastructural role that demands conscious maintenance of the kind that is normally applied to education, health or the environment. In relational terms, Western and non-Western cultures have diverged, with Western economic and political models generally reflecting a view of social order that is less dependent on traditional family and community ties. Discussion of the Western transition from pre-modern to modern society has been amply discussed, and is relevant to relational analysis mainly because patterns of relating have changed. As Seligman argues, "What modernity has involved has been precisely the replacement of the criteria of familiarity with those of trust in and of the individual..." It is

²¹ Diener and Seligman (2004), "Beyond Money: Toward an economy of well-being," in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 1-31.

²² John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p.17.

²³ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to one another: simple conversations to restore hope to restore hope to the future* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), p.19.

²⁴ For example, Evert Gummesson, *Total Relationship Marketing* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2nd Edition, 2002).

²⁵ See Meads, G. and Ashcroft, J., *The Case for Interprofessional Collaboration in Health and Social Care* (Blackwell, 2005).

²⁶ John Ashcroft, "Releasing the dividends of 'new' partnerships" in Geoff Meads and Tricia Meads (eds.), *Trust in Experience: Transferable Learning for Primary Care Trusts* (Abingdon, Radcliffe Medical Press, 2001), ch.4.

²⁷ Snowden, David; Boone, Mary (November 2007). "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making". *Harvard Business Review*: 69–76.

understandable, from Seligman's viewpoint, that problems associated with establishing trust in a global society are now a recurring theme in politics and commerce.²⁸

Distinctive features of relational analysis

1. Relationship as the medium of connectivity

In his landmark study of relationships, Robert Hinde noted that "Relationships involve a series of interactions between two individuals who know each other such that each interaction can be influenced by past interactions and by expectations of interactions in the future."²⁹ Relational analysis takes the broader perspective of social connectivity. The growth of communications and information technology means that individuals are increasingly highly connected, with one individual's actions (for example as a voter or tax-payer or capital-supplier or consumer or user of fossil fuels) contributing incrementally to unknown and often unforeseen impacts on other individuals elsewhere in the system. In the vast majority of cases, such influences occur across large populations without one individual even knowing that the other exists. Nevertheless the transmission of influence establishes a slender but real connection between them.

Each person is tied into society by a spectrum of social links consisting, at the one end, of these billions of minute connections and, at the other, of a limited number of personal relationships characterized by higher levels of interaction and attachment. Most research has focused on the latter, and some systems have been suggested for measuring how "close" two individuals are. In 1993, Napier and Ferris proposed a multi-dimensional system for measuring relational distance in organizations using affect, decision-making latitude and relational quality, linking these to underlying factors that were structural (office design, spatial distance, opportunity to interact) and psychological (demographic difference, value difference, power distance).³⁰ In the same vein, more recently Jody Gittel has put forward a theory of relational coordination that aims to enable better organizational outcomes through shared knowledge, shared goals and mutual respect.³¹

In relational analysis, a parallel approach has led to the development of a metric available through Relational Analytics and used successfully over the last two decades by more than thirty public and private sector organizations worldwide.³² There is an urgent need for robust metrics in the study of relationships because variation in the quality and significance of relationships make many statistical tools inadequate for evidence-based analysis. Relational analysis enables an understanding that connections of all kinds can be assessed in terms of a distinct and multi-layered framework called

²⁸ Mervyn King and Leigh Roberts, op.cit.

²⁹ Hinde, Robert *Relationships: a dialectical perspective* Hove: Psychology Press (1997) p.48.

³⁰ Napier, B. J., & Ferris, G. R. (1993), "Distance in organizations", *Human Resource Management Review*, 3(4), 321-357.

³¹ Jody Hoffer Gittel, *Relational Coordination: Guidelines for Theory, Measurement and Analysis* (Brandeis University, Relational Coordination Research Collaborative, 2012), p.3. See also Laura Erskine, "Defining Relational Distance for Today's Leaders", in *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, Vol. 7 Issue 1, 2012, 96-113.

³² These include KPMG, UNEP, the Scottish Prison Service, and the World Wildlife Fund. For further information see relational-analytics.com.

relational proximity (the basis of the Relational Proximity® Framework).³³ The concept is analogous to bandwidth, and focuses not on the content of the relationship but on the constraints within which relating occurs. To do this it uses five independent categories: the degree of directness in contact; the degree of continuity in time; the degree of commonality in purpose; the degree of breadth in context; and the degree of easing in power differentials.³⁴ In terms of relational proximity, interpersonal relationships (as opposed to simple connections) involve not only influence across a power gradient, but also some degree of actual encounter, track record, mutual knowledge and overlap of goals.

Relational proximity is established and maintained dynamically through individual decision making, but also, crucially, through the rules of engagement imposed on individuals through organizational structure and practice and national and international legislation. Thus an individual who would like to have more open communication with a line manager, supplier, relative or customer service desk may be prevented from doing so by the relational proximity limits set by others, by company rules, or by the impact of economic policy on labour mobility. Relational proximity can be assessed both objectively (in the presence or use of constraints), and subjectively (how the individuals on either side of a connection feel about the constraints), which means that it has consistent relevance not only across different sectors but also across different cultures. It has analytical and predictive value, and is scalable, working with inter-organizational and international relationships as well as inter-personal relationships and role-based classes of relationship within organizations and systems. It also applies to networks and multi-agency situations where high costs are associated with the breakdown of communication and coordination between professionals.³⁵

2. Relationship as a source of value

The value of “good” relationships is so widely accepted as to be almost axiomatic, and numerous studies have linked it to positive outcomes in fields ranging from child development to leadership and business productivity. There is less consensus on the exact definition of “good” and on how to measure or improve relationship quality at a systemic level.³⁶

In practice, much of the effort to create good relationships has approached individual behavior from the direction of ethics or incentivisation. By contrast, relational analysis directs attention to the behavioural impacts of relational proximity. It is well-documented that pro-social behaviours are more likely to occur

³³ For a more detailed understanding of relational proximity, see Michael Schluter and David John Lee, *The Relational Manager* (London: Lion Hudson, 2009), ch.2.

³⁴ The original description of and rationale for relational proximity can be found in Michael Schluter & David Lee, *The R Factor* (London, Hodders, 1993), chs. 1-3. The phrase “easing of power differentials” suggests more than just a reduction in power-distance. It also addresses the protocols and behaviours through which the numerous, finely-nuanced, sometimes contradictory, and often socially-legitimate power differentials between individuals are handled or abused.

³⁵ In this way, relational proximity differs markedly from approaches like Lewin’s Field Theory Rule, which looks at similar situations as a “constellation of interdependent factors” influencing individual action. See Lewin, K., *Resolving social conflicts & Field theory in social science* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2008 (original edition, 1946)).

³⁶ An example is business ethics. See Phillip V. Lewis, “Defining ‘business ethics’: Like nailing jello to a wall”, *Journal of Business Ethics*, October 1985, Volume 4, Issue 5, pp 377-383.

where relationships are close. Superficially this can be explained by the fact that people tend to be more generous to those they like. But there is also an operative distinction between the content of relationships (the affective and cognitive processes generating behaviour) and the formal or informal rules of engagement that determine relational proximity. The influence runs both ways. Feelings of affection will prompt one individual to get “closer” to another; at the same time, even small changes in relational proximity (for example, negotiating face-to-face, holding an office party, increasing parental involvement in schools, setting up CCTV in city centres, or moving to a different neighbourhood) will alter patterns of interaction and influence how participants think and behave.

From this perspective, pro-social behaviour is a product of two sets of relational drivers: on the one hand, the immediate impact of external forces like labour markets or company HR policy; and on the other, the long term effect of relational context on moral, affective and cognitive development. The two are linked. In many instances, what commentators loosely refer to as “damage to the social fabric” reflects a broad acceptance that the distant but pervasive connections created by the economy take precedence over the close interpersonal relationships through which moral awareness, emotional support and cognitive ability are passed on and maintained.

3. Relationship as foundational to individuality

Western culture, thought, and institutions have assigned to the individual a place of particular importance. “I think therefore I am,” perhaps the best known statement in Western philosophy, draws on a long tradition of understanding of what it means to be a person.³⁷ In the political realm, a dominant narrative in the last millennium has been the shift in the locus of power away from absolute rulers and toward government by the consent of the governed. Thus, for example, the American Declaration of Independence asserts as self-evident that “all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...” Jefferson’s formulation, based on Locke, is well known, and offers a vision of society composed of individuals equally invested with the right of self-determination – a freedom unimpeded (in the later liberal view) so long as no harm is done to others in exercising it.

The cultural ideals of freedom and equality have become deeply embedded in the West, although in practice they are often constrained by other considerations, including security, economic growth and the interests of ruling majorities. Lukes cites the strength of individualist ideology in the United States as an explanation for the nation’s “lack of a real socialist tradition.”³⁸ Certainly it has shaped major institutions, which in most modern Western states directly address the individual – as taxpayer, consumer, voter, worker, patient, claimant, saver or investor. Given that modern societies are usually

³⁷ For example, the sixth century philosopher Boethius (480-525) whose writing influenced much medieval thought defined a person as ‘an individual substance with a rational nature’: originally ‘Rationabilis naturae individua substantia’ Boethius *De Persona at Duabas Naturis*, c.2

³⁸ Steven Lukes “The Meaning of Individualism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.32, No.1 (1971), p.61.

low in relational proximity, this means that individuals often confront large organizations to which they are visible mainly as members of a given psychographic profile, social class or interest group.

Relational analysis suggests that ideals like freedom, equality, justice and dignity can only be approached as lived relations, and that to theorize about or to build social structures without addressing the individual's relational context is, as John Kenneth Galbraith once said of socialism, simply failing to "accept men and women as they are." It may be that the Western account of the individual as a complete and self-sufficient unit is not sufficiently well-rounded or realistic. Much of the debate in political philosophy, for example, has tacitly accepted a dualism of individual and group – a tug-of-war between personal liberty and social conformity, with voluntary association emerging as an uneasy compromise. Framed in this way, the right of the individual is often perceived as a threat to the group (with individualism, said Lamennais, "what then remains but a terrifying confusion of interests, passion and diverse opinions?")³⁹ just as the call of duty may appear to "amount to the demand for the submergence of the individual in society and the state."⁴⁰

In contrast to this, a focus on relationships allows an understanding of the individual as simultaneously unique, self-determining and vitally interconnected. This has two implications. First, there are states of relationship – like connectedness, reliability, understanding, shared purpose and fairness – in which all individuals have an interest, and the presence of which could be said to define an experience of a good society. Second, in the constant and fluid adjustments that move societies forward, advantage is conferred by seeking appropriate levels of relational proximity. Individuals within any social order exist in a state of both dependence on and tension with wider society, and it is often in relational contexts that they best negotiate the contradictions, balancing liberties with obligations, competition with cooperation, diversity with unity, privacy with transparency, rights with responsibilities, innovation with continuity, and individuality with community. On that basis, in a global society a crucial role will be played by associations where relational proximity is high – notably what de Tocqueville called "intermediary groups"⁴¹ (families, local and personal communities) and cross-linking relationships that bring larger organizations into juxtaposition.⁴²

Relational proximity as a tool in relational analysis

The relational proximity model applies to interpersonal, inter-organizational, and role-based connections, with increases in each category of relational proximity tending to produce a distinct state in the relationship. The effect is felt even in remote connections (for example, news coverage of a disaster increases directness and stimulates a sense of connection to victims). From a policy perspective, in a highly individualized society the challenge is usually to increase levels of relational proximity,

³⁹ F. de Lamennais, *Des Progrès de la Révolution et de la Guerre contre l'Eglise* (1829), ch.1, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1836-7), IX, 17-18.

⁴⁰ T. Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Berlin, 1918), p.267.

⁴¹ See A. de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (1935), bk.II, ch.II, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. J.P. Mayer (Paris, 1951-), I,II,104-6.

⁴² What is true of individuals is often also true of groups in their relationships with one another and with larger organizations.

although the perception of appropriate levels will vary between individuals, organizations and cultures, and is often specific to the institutional context within which the relationship occurs.⁴³

CATEGORY⁴⁴	SOME MAIN ISSUES	DOMAIN	RELATIONSHIP STATE
Directness	Contact, mediation, technology	Communication	Connectedness
Continuity	Frequency, past/future, story	Time	Enduring coherent meaning
Multiplexity	Context, transparency, privacy	Knowledge	Mutual understanding
Parity	Authority, fairness, advantage	Power	Respect and worth
Commonality	Priorities, competition, identity	Purpose	Shared purpose and identity

Even if the overall concept of relational proximity is well-established, it opens up many detailed avenues of research: for example, how a person's presence in a relationship is varied and mediated; what exactly is carried over from one interaction to the next and why this is important; what is appropriate and beneficial to know about another person; how willingness to participate in a relationship is influenced; or how people negotiate competing or conflicting goals and identities.

Relational analysis as a policy framework

At a policy level, relationships have been largely neglected. A Prime Minister may aver that "Wellbeing can't be measured by money or traded in markets ... it's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture, and above all the strength of our relationships."⁴⁵ In reality, however, the search is still on for robust metrics, and meanwhile efforts to improve strength in relationships at organizational, sectoral or national level are usually approached indirectly by way of budget allocations. Yet because most major global issues are driven by relational processes (including carbon emissions, international debt, migration and terrorism), and nearly all economic and political transactions can be understood from the perspective of relational risk, it could be argued that most of the policy issues informed by social science are at root relational issues with relational solutions. It makes a substantial difference to outcomes in criminal justice, for example, whether prisoners are located within 25 miles of their dependents (as required in Scotland) or 300 miles away (as can be the case in England and Wales), and a substantial difference to the effectiveness of welfare if poverty is understood as a relational, and not just a financial conditions.⁴⁶

⁴³ For example, a company's will deal with the regulator in a way quite different from the way it deals with suppliers.

⁴⁴ These five categories are as originally developed in Michael Schluter & David Lee, *The R Factor* (London, Hodders, 1993), chs 1-3.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Allegra Stratton, "David Cameron aims to make happiness the new GDP," *The Guardian*, 14 November 2010.

⁴⁶ For further information on Relational Poverty, Relational Justice, Relational Finance and other policy applications of relational analysis, see relationalthinking.net.

Conclusion

Relational analysis makes it possible to examine a wide range of issues from a different conceptual starting point. Large parts of social science and the humanities (including economics, law (constitutional, civil and criminal), international relations, rights theory, political science, literature, geography and history, psychology, sociology, business and medical ethics, philosophy, theology, organizational design and business strategy) deal explicitly with the structure, evolution and conduct of relationships, and yet relationships do not feature prominently as a concept, as a basis of interpretation and measurement, or as a principle guiding practice. Most systems of criminal justice make the offender answerable to the state rather than to the victim, and are relatively inefficient at addressing the relational causes of crime, or at helping prisoners maintain essential support networks and reintegrate into society when released. Rights theory sets out to protect the interests of the individual, but generally does not recognize the third-party impact of asserting rights claims, and may have the effect of escalating conflicts through litigation rather than resolving them. For the most part, economics has not explored debt finance, markets, public service delivery or company structures from the standpoint of the type of connections they create between stakeholders, and the impacts these have on the relational infrastructure on which economies depend.

It may be that, in the search for new policy initiatives, “relational” is a more useful concept than “social”. It gets closer to individual lived experience than aggregate terms like “family” or “community”; and, in practice, other sources of value – intellectual, social, technological and even financial – can only be realized when relationships are working. It may also be that relational analysis offers an orientation for public policy that goes beyond the utilitarian by defining good relationships not simply as an input to political, social and economic processes, but as their overarching goal.

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Postscript

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