Chapter 2
The Relational Turn in Social Sciences

Recent times have witnessed relational sociology, as arguably the major form of relational scholarship, gain considerable scholarly momentum. There is a forthcoming major handbook (Dépelteau, 2018), significant edited collections such as *Conceptualizing relational sociology* (Powell & Dépelteau, 2013), *Applying relational sociology* (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013), and in the broader leadership literatures *Advancing relational leadership research* (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). In addition, there have been key texts from Crossley (2011), the work of Donati (1983, 1991, 2011) has become more accessible in English (to which he thanks Margaret Archer for, stating she "greatly encouraged and assisted me in presenting my theory to an international audience (Donati, 2011, p. xvii)), and—although less engaged with by English-speaking audiences—Bajoit's (1992) *Pour une sociologie relationnelle*. The Canadian Sociological Association has established a research cluster for relational sociology, with regular symposia, meetings, and events. Significantly, in 2015 the *International Review of Sociology/ Revue Internationale de Sociolgie* published a special section on relational sociology. Edited by Prandini (2015) and with contributions from Crossley (2015), Dépelteau (2015), Donati (2015), and Fuhse (2015), this special section sought to ascertain whether an original and international sociological paradigm entitled "relational sociology" could be identified. Prandini (2015) argues:

> A new and original social paradigm is recognizable only if it accedes to the world stage of the global scientific system constituted and structured by networks of scientific scholars, scientific contributions published in scientific journals, books, internet sites, etc., fueled by a vast array of international meetings, seminars, conferences, and so on. It is only at this global level that we can decide if a new paradigm is gaining a global stage or not. Put in other words: are we really witnessing a new and emergent sociological 'school', or are we observing only a sort of 'esprit du temp' which is able to catalyse similar intuitions and sociological insights? (pp. 1–2)

At the end of his paper, Prandini (2015) contends that there is less a paradigm (in its precise Kuhnian meaning) and instead it is better to speak of a "relational turn" in sociology. Built on a strong and clear convergence toward a common critique of classic sociological theories, it is possibly the early stages of an emerging paradigm but such a label is currently premature. The real breakthrough of this turn is in

forcing social scientists to specify "accurately the ontology of society and social relation and to discover new methods and research techniques well suited to study it" (Prandini, 2015, p. 13).

Relational theory is, as Emirbayer (1997) declares, beyond any one disciplinary background, national tradition, or analytic and empirical point of view. Outside of the major centers of Europe and the USA, Yanjie Bian hosted the *International Conference on Relational Sociology* at the Institute for Empirical Social Science of Xi'an Jiaotong University, and Jan Fuhse hosted the international symposium *Relational Sociology: Transatlantic Impulses for the Social Sciences* at Humboldt University of Berlin. Donati (2011) claims that interest in social relations can be found in philosophy (from the metaphysical point of view), psychology (from the psychic point of view), economics (from the resource perspective), law (control by rule), and even biology (bioethics). The interest is also not limited to the social sciences, with Bradbury and Lichtenstein (2000) noting:

> The interdependent, interrelated nature of the world has also been discovered by physicists in their study of quantum reality. In their quest to identify the basic building blocks of the natural world, quantum physicists found that atomic particles appeared more as relations than as discrete objects (Capra 1975; Wolf 1980), and that space itself is not empty but is filled with potential (Bohm 1988). Heisenberg's discovery early this century that every observation irrevocably changes the object being observed, further fueled the recognition that human consciousness plays an irreversible role in our understanding of reality (Bachelard, 1934/1984; Wilber 1982; Jahn & Dunne 1987). (p. 552)

Apart from its widespread contemporary appeal, relational thinking has a long history. The North American stream arguably finds its roots in the New York School, European scholars such as Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Gabriel Tarde, Norbert Elias, Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, among others, have long argued for various relational approaches (even if not using that label), and Emirbayer traces the tradition of privileging relations rather than substances to pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus. What is consistently germane across these various scholars is a critique of substantialism in classic sociological accounts. This also arguably speaks to the proliferation of relational scholarship in the past few decades as globalized forces are causing a rethink of spatio-temporal conditions (e.g., the nation state and geographic borders). In breaking down the substantialist approaches, and their underlying analytical dualisms, relational scholarship asks questions of the ontological and epistemological as much as the empirical.

Contemporary thought and analysis in social theory is overrun with "turns." In this chapter, rather than be seduced by contemporary attention to a relational turn in the social sciences, I seek to highlight some major events, trajectories, or streams of relational thought. In doing so, I am critically aware of the difficulty of arguing for relational understanding and then constructing significant events as though they are entities in and of their own right. Within the confines of a single chapter, and mindful of the role that this chapter is playing the book (e.g., setting some context/trajectory for developing my argument), my goal is to cite key developments and how they relate to one another and my argument. Given my particular

interest in organizing activity, my focus is on the Human Relations Movement of the early twentieth century, the New York School of relational sociology, and then contemporary developments in sociology, leadership, and to a lesser extent, the natural sciences. While I concede that there is increasing interest in what has come to be known as "relational sociology" (see also the following chapter), relational scholarship has a long and diverse intellectual history. Importantly though, as Powell and Dépelteau (2013) note, relational sociology is not a heterogeneous label and as a collection of scholars, is still quite some way from achieving any form of consensus. Whether consensus is required, or even desirable, for relational scholarship is questionable. The diversity of ontological and methodological starting points allows scholars to investigate a wide range of phenomena. This diversity, complexity, depth, and vitality enable dialogue and debate without requiring consensus. What binds them together is their scholarly focus on relations rather than alignment with a specific empirical object and/or method of inquiry.

The Human Relations Movement

Relationships have been influential in management and leadership research since the early 1900s. As a counter narrative to the dominance of Taylor's (1911) *Principles of scientific management* (and also the work of Henri Fayol and Lyndall Urwick) and its attention to structure and supervisory oversight, Follett (1927, 1949) argued that hierarchical position-based (e.g., bureaucratic) conceptualizations were not appropriate and that it is the "relationship" of the leader and followers that is essential to organizational success. Recognizing the role of relationships within structures is arguably why Weber (1978[1922]), whose contribution to educational administration is often reduced to articulating the bureaucracy, discussed the influence of "charisma." Recently, and demonstrating an enduring interdisciplinary legacy of the argument, Daly (2010) claimed that the social ties among teachers and leaders were more potent than strategic plans to facilitate or impede education reform. In *Creative experience* (1924), Follett argues that the fundamental problem of any enterprise is the building and maintenance of dynamic, yet harmonious, human relationships—with great emphasis on coordination. Making a normative argument however is not enough to advance theoretical understanding. It generates some potentially insightful lines of inquiry but requires further refinement and development.

Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprising (see Wallin, 2016), Follett's work is often overlooked or rarely discussed in any depth in many texts outlining the Human Relations Movement in administration/management literatures. Instead, most of the attention goes to the work of Mayo (1933) and what is commonly labeled the "Hawthorne Studies." It should however be noted that while Mayo gets the attention for the work, the bulk of the experiments were conducted by Roethlisberger (a graduate student of Mayo) and Dickson (Head of the Department of Employee Relations at Western Electric). Built on a series of experiments (e.g.,

the rates of employee productivity based on manipulating length of rest/break periods, lighting, and piecemeal payment plans) undertaken at the Hawthorne Works, a large factory complex of the Western Electric Company in Cicero Illinois, Mayo argued that productivity was partly dependent on the informal social interactions within work groups. This was a very different insight into that of Taylor who stressed the role of effective supervision for improving performance and provided an alternate focus for interventions hoping to leverage organizational actors for greater performance. Although it is to be noted, despite outlining a different focus to Taylor (although there are connections with some of Taylor's claims around "soldiering"), that Sheppard (1950) labeled Mayo's work as "managerial sociology," a body of work that serves the desires of management (see also Muldoon, 2017), and in that sense, it is not too dissimilar to critiques raised against Taylor. Conceptually though, Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) note:

> Many of the actually existing patterns of human interaction have no representation in the formal organization at all, and others are inadequately represented by the formal organization. … Too often it is assumed that the organization of a company corresponds to a blueprint plan or organizational chart. Actually, it never does. (p. 559)

The work of both Follett and Mayo and colleagues explicitly sought to bring the human back into the study of organizations. Relationships, and particularly interpersonal relations, were of central focus in the attempt to move beyond strict structural accounts of organizations. As part of this broad Human Relations Movement, scholarly attention shifted from studying the organization as a rational model that emphasized how it ought to behave through to a new natural (social) system emphasizing how is the organization functioning (Hanson, 2003). A concurrent, but equally important shift was in seeing the organization not as a series of smaller parts but as a whole. This did not however go so far as to denounce substantialist accounts of organizations and for the most part shifted from individualism to collectivism without resolving the underlying theoretical issues.

Significantly influenced by the work of the early Human Relations scholars (particularly Mayo), Barnard's (1938) classic *The functions of the executive* continues the emphasis on informal organizations and the complexity of human motivation (particularly the limitations of financial incentives). This informal organization is also central to Mintzberg's (1973) *Nature of managerial work* (which was incidentally the basis for a stream of observational studies in educational administration in the 1980s). Some specific tasks of the executive as articulated by Barnard are to continuously obtain coalitions within the workplace and to maintain a system of communication. Once again, the normative orientation of the work led to a rational empiricism (particularly behavioral science) and his attention to matters such as motivation led to a privileging of psychological approaches for understanding organizational activity. The trajectory of this argument is often reported to be followed/extended through the work of McGregor (1960) on Theory X and Y, Ouchi's (1981) Theory Z, and Likert's (1967) systems four model. While sometimes (arguably mistakenly) referred to as one of the first sociologies of organizations (e.g., Wolf, 1995), Barnard's work has more in common with

psychological experimentation than sociology. As a system thinker (and friend of Talcott Parsons), this affiliation with psychology goes part of the way to explaining its influence on Simon's (1945) *Administrative behavior* (see Wolf, 1995)—a canon of the Theory Movement in educational administration.

The genesis of the Human Relations Movement was a recognition that relationships matter as much, if not more so than, organizational structures and official titles. This was not to denounce the influence of structures on human behavior, but to some extent it recognized that such structures are nevertheless the product of human actions. As this tradition of scholarship advanced, this original logic was substituted with the logic of system thinking and psychological studies. Theoretically, organizations remain the collection of individuals working together on a common task or for a common purpose (and this belief remains in many contemporary definitions of "leadership"). Methodologically, this is significant as the relationships between organizational actors are reduced to a measurement between analytical categories such as trust, autonomy, fit, and the like. These categories become variables within system approaches to organizations and open to manipulation in the pursuit of higher performance (with this manipulation being frequently conceived of as "leadership"). Therefore, despite recognizing the importance of relationships to organizing activity, the Human Relations Movement never fulfilled its potential for a relational approach as it could not overcome a focus on categories. To overcome this substantialist approach requires the analytical resources to explicitly engage with the relations. One such approach, at least in its intent, is social network analysis.

The New York School

Following the germinal work of Barnes (1954) and Bott (1971), sociological studies mobilizing network analysis have appeared with increasing frequency (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). Theoretical precursors for contemporary network analysis include Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, but network analysis is rather diverse with many versions. It was during the 1990s that social network analysis emerged as a serious intellectual trend with handbooks, software packages and substantive grow in professional associations. However, as Mische (2011) notes, much of the work was technical and somewhat inaccessible to those without a strong mathematic background. In addition, there was a perception that social network analysis was a positivist exercise as relationships were reduced to measurement constructs (e.g., a series of 1s and 0s) and devoid of any sense of context/culture. This was taking place at the same time as cultural studies, or cultural sociology, at least in the USA, was shifting its attention from artistic production to a much broader view of cultural practice.

The arrival of Harrison White at Columbia (via Harvard and Arizona) in 1988 to take on the directorship of the Paul F. Lazarsfeld Center for the Social Sciences (later renamed the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy—ISERP)

marked a significant moment in the development of relational sociology (of the US-based network analysis kind). Under the leadership of White, the Center sponsored a number of interdisciplinary workshops, mini-conferences, ran seminars, and interacted with key graduate faculty from the New School for Social Research (e.g., Charles Tilly). Researchers from other universities nearby such as NYU, Princeton, Yale, CUNY, SUNY, Rutgers, Penn, among others contributed to the various ongoing conversations and developments. Beyond this group, Chicago, Toronto, Stony Brook, Arizona, UC Irvine, Michigan, Berkeley, UNC Chapel Hill, and Stanford have been important centers for relational sociology. The spatio-temporal conditions are significant here. As Mullins (1973) argues, local or regional concentrations are important for new intellectual movements to emerge. Mische (2011) notes:

> the effervescent "New York Moment" described above was one formative conversational hub in a recent movement that returns sociology to its relational and pragmatist roots, while suggesting a new agenda for studying the dynamic interplay of networks and culture. (p. 91)

White's work predates his time at Columbia. It was arguably first laid out in an under-graduate course at Harvard in the mid-1960s (Fuhse, 2015). A memo from the course (e.g., Santoro, 2008; Schwartz, 2008; White, 2008[1965]) was circulated among students and others in the area that introduced White's account of social structure and key concepts such as "catnet" ("cat" from category and "net" from network), structural equivalence (following up catnet, and sometimes called "regular equivalence," the basic idea is that relations in a network are ordered by categories that make for observable—though not necessarily connected—structural equivalence) and blockmodel analysis (an inductive method to identify structurally equivalent actors in a network). Scott (2000) labeled the development of blockmodel analysis as the "Harvard breakthrough" in the history of social network analysis.

In short, White was pre-occupied with the lack of theoretical understanding of ties as the basic measurement unit in orthodox sociological network analysis (Mische, 2011). Describing White's theory of social structures Fuhse (2015) notes:

> As in the theories of Parsons and Luhmann, White views all interaction as driven by uncertainty (1992, p. 3 ff.). Due to this uncertainty, identities attempt to establish "footing" and to gain "control" in social contexts. These control attempts leave a trace in social space in the form of "stories". Stories are told about identities, thus defining both the identities and their relations to each other. Since story-telling is itself a social activity, stories remain subject to competing control projects. (p. 18)

The distinction from Parsons (and others) is that White saw—and was comfortable with—chaos and turbulence. This is in contrast to the neatness and stability of Parsons. As ties are multiple, fluid and narratively constructed (and re-constructed), White argues that the challenge for network analysis is to understand the link between temporality, language, and social relations.

Working with graduate students, he carried out an intensive reading of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and theories of linguistic change. What emerged

was a perspective that straddled positivist and interpretivist positions, stressing the mutual constitution of networks and discourse, the communicative nature of social ties, and the interplay between multiple relations in social action (Mische, 2011). The idea of trace is not a phenomenological inquiry of subjective meaning but in meanings that circulate through communication (Fuhse, 2015). This is a key distinction from Nick Crossley's work on social networks and culture as he (Crossley) grants far greater importance to the subjective meanings of actors. Network theory, particularly of the White tradition, builds its explanations from patterns of relations. It is "anti-categorical" (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994). As Boorman and White (1976) argue, network analysts

> take serious what Durkheim saw but most of his followers did not: that the organic solidarity of a social system rests not on the cognition of men, but rather on the interlock and interaction of objectively definable social relationships. (p. 1415)

It is to be noted that many network analysis, including White (e.g., White, Boorman & Breiger, 1976), retain functionalist notions such as "roles." However, the New York School of relational sociology did not conceive of individuals as the essential building block of the social. They did not attribute actions and their consequences to individuals or their internal dispositions (as is often done with elementary Bourdieusian analysis). It sought to capture causal matters without granting attribution to actors temporally located in particular social positions (Burt, 1986). The significant intellectual shift offered by White and those working around him was that social networks could/should be studied in conjunction with culture and not abstracted from it.

Identity, agency, and culture came together in networks within the New York School and in doing so, some of the methodological flaws, blind spots, or holes in strict mathematical accounts of social relationships were engaged with, even if not overcome. This arguably brought Homans (1986) to describe network analysis as one of the most encouraging new developments in sociology. This is important for the ongoing trajectory of the work. Rather than falling victim to its own goals, the New York School focused on addressing what it saw as the problem theoretically, and resulting methodologically. In shifting representations beyond categories, network approaches opened up relational and positional analysis, including the role of history in accounts of social structure. Contemporaries (especially those that studied with White or Tilly at Columbia) such as Ann Mische and Jan Fuhse, among others, continue to advance the trajectory of the work.

Contemporary Relational Sociology

While the New York School was/is US-centric, evidenced by the inability of descriptions of the movement to recognize work from outside of the USA such as network analysis coming out of Manchester in the Mitchell Center for Social Network Analysis (formerly the Manchester Social Network Group), relational

sociology is an international movement. There is a strong relational thread in the social theory of Georg Wilhelm, Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Ernst Cassier, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Gabriel Tarde, Niklas Luhmann, Seyla Benhabib, Bruno Latour, Nancy Chodorow, among others.

In addition to the forthcoming handbook (Dépelteau, 2018), *Conceptualizing relational sociology* (Powell & Dépelteau, 2013) and *Applying relational sociology* (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013) are the two most ambitious attempts to capture the state of play in contemporary relational sociology. However, these texts are not without critique. Donati and Archer (2015) argue that the texts read like:

> frenzied rhetoric for "radical relationality", without coherence or consistency. The rhetoric behind this theoretical jihad simply corrals any past contributions—from Barnes and Bloors' "strong programme", Marx, Foucault, Bourdieu, Garfinkle, Dorothy Smith, and Latour—that might increase the decibels of the clarion call. This is more like "product placement" than serious theorizing; most of the above have been strenuously critiqued by those they have opposed, but theirs is a book of assertions rather than arguments. (p. 23)

Apart from misspelling "Garfinkel," they raise a point that is not missed on the editors. Dépelteau and Powell (2013) note that relational sociology is somewhat of a patchwork of knowledge about social relations. What it has done as a turn/aspiring paradigm/collection of scholars is revisit some of the basic ontological assumptions of the social sciences. But this is both the greatest potential and constraint on the advancement of relational sociology. There is a danger that in engaging with but not necessarily overcoming enduring debates (e.g., determinism, conflationism), relational sociology might simply be reworking old tensions with new concepts/vocabularies. To get at this issue, some insights are offered through the ontological. Archer (2000) contends:

> Every social theorist or investigator has a social ontology. This may be quite implicit but it is also unavoidable because we can say nothing without making some assumptions about the nature of social reality examined. (p. 464)

No great congruence at the ontological level is found in the major contributors to contemporary relational sociology. Neither, as Prandini (2015) observes, is there a clear methodological toolbox. The critical realism of Donati, pragmatism of Dépelteau, constructivism of Fuhse, and Wittgenstein inspired lifeworlds of Crossley, among others, reflect considerable diversity—as Dépelteau and Powell (2013) noted, a patchwork. There is a clear belief in the importance and centrality of relations, but beyond that there is no consensus or coherent research program. What is evidenced is a struggle for an ontology of relations. Durkheim's pursuit of social facts and his desire to treat them as "things" sought to construct a distinct object of investigation and grant sociology a place among the (natural) sciences. This substantialism came at the cost of the relational. It is also why numerous relational scholars (e.g., Donati, Powell) have reworked Durkheim's first rule to argue that the core focus of sociology is not social facts but social relations. As Donati and Archer (2015) contend, it is "difficult to see how there could be a sociological theory not concerned with relations in some sense of the term" (p. 3).

In his synthesis of the special section of *International Review of Sociology/Revue Internationale de Sociologie,* Prandini (2015) notes that even some of the identified scholars "seem not to be so interested in belonging to or participating in a unique history" (p. 2) of relational sociology. To that end, it is not surprising that there is an absence of coherence in the broader research agenda. Yet, the distinctions among the various perspectives of relational sociology facilitate ongoing dialogue and debate of the theoretical, methodological, and empirical principles of work, but only if perspectives are located relationally. As I have stated elsewhere in this book, relational scholarship is not a theory to be applied or a method to be used; it is a way of doing research. Dépelteau and Powell (2013) note:

> Relational analysis is always "conceptual" since it involves a re-casting of the basic terms of our perception, and always "applied" since it invites us to use different modes of perception and orientation in this world. (p. xvi)

An enduring trend, and potentially significant limitation, of contemporary relational sociology is the appropriation of great thinkers. To some extent, this was captured in Donati and Archer's (2015) critique of the two Dépelteau and Powell texts—and a similar critique can be raised against a substantive section of the forthcoming handbook. The appropriation of great thinkers can simply be to add greater weight to the relational turn, as suggested by Donati and Archer. This curating of history is not uncommon when trying to demonstrate a (potentially increasing) volume of work in an area. It is however more problematic than that. Bringing a voice from the past (e.g., Pierre Bourdieu) into conversation with issues of the present makes a number of assumptions about the spatio-temporal nature of their contribution. If we take serious the idea that knowledge is relational, then authors are writing under particular spatio-temporal conditions that cannot necessarily be assumed to be similar (or even the same) as contemporary ones. This is particularly the case given that many past social theorists were writing in a pre-globalized world. While there is potentially some merit in appropriation, namely for students and those new to the area, the actual contribution of such for advancing knowledge is questionable at best. Direct appropriation that which simply maps the existing conditions with a voice from the past does not achieve the type of relational understanding that relational theorizing demands.

When discussing the position of relational sociology within contemporary dialogue and debate in social theory, Emirbayer (2013) notes that it:

> began by swimming against the current (recall Marx's relational critiques of classical political economy) and most likely will continue swimming against it for all the foreseeable future—all in the name of getting social inquiry right. Substantialist assumptions are incorporated deepling into our everyday and scholarly discourses alike (going back to Aristotle), and in the present day enjoy clout both inside and outside the academy; it is difficult to imagine their being supplanted anytime soon. (p. 210)

Although relational theorists claim that all social theory has a relational focus on some level, the substantialist position remained hegemonic. The diversity of contemporary relational sociology is both a strength—leading to a potentially increasing volume of work—and a limitation—due to the lack of a clear consensus

or core beyond the somewhat abstract belief in "relations." As is often the case in the social sciences, exciting work takes places on the periphery while the center changes little (Ladwig, 1998). With increased interest and scholarly activity seeking to legitimize the relational turn in contemporary sociology, or at the least advance a version of sociology under the label of "relational sociology", it has gained sufficient traction that it needs to be located (relationally) with other perspectives and there is a trajectory of key contemporary authors who could potentially serve as a canon.

Contemporary Relational Leadership

Relational scholarship in leadership studies is an emerging literature. Best captured in Uhl-Bien and Ospina's (2012) *Advancing relational leadership research*—a collection of 18 chapters designed to encourage dialogue and debate among perspectives. Whereas relational sociology emerged as a critique of, and alternative to, substantialism, in relational leadership studies there is significant time and space spent debating and/or classifying work as entitative (substantialist) or constructionist. The former group includes the likes of David Day, John Antonakis, Boas Shamir and the latter Bill Drath, Gail Fairhurst, Dian Marie Hosking, and Sonia Ospina. As these groups of scholars inhabit different paradigmatic spaces, rarely do they come into contact or engage with one another. Interestingly, arguably the most recognizable relational scholar in leadership studies is Mary Uhl-Bien (e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2006), an entitative trained researcher, who locates herself between the realist (entitative) and constructionist (post-structuralist) perspectives (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012, p. xxxiii).

Throughout *Advancing relational leadership research,* many chapters advocate for "relational leadership"—which is not surprising given the title of the text. The mobilization of the adjective is important. It is not as much relational scholarship, but a normative argument for a form of relational leadership. This is why entity-based approaches, what would be dismissed as substantialist and contrary to relational approaches in sociology, can still be considered relational. This relationalism is instead based on a belief in the importance of relations. In doing so, the approach applies or maps relations onto organizational events. Relations become a formal way of describing the current state of affairs within organizations. Such methods leave the received terms (e.g., leadership, organization) of those events entirely intact. As a key distinction from contemporary relational sociology, relational leadership research devotes far more attention to matter of epistemology than ontology. Specifying the ontology of organizing and social relations is rarely, if ever, engaged with, yet Prandini (2015) saw the specification of an ontology of society and social relations as the significant breakthrough of the relational turn.

A telling example is Shamir's (2012) chapter in *Advancing relational leadership research* (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012), where he is critical of critics of leadership (particularly the post-structuralist kind) for their inability to offer a viable alternative

to leadership. Apart from highlighting the normative embedded in his position, it also stresses the immovable object "leadership" and that what is relational is how we come to understand it, or even more pragmatically, how it is enacted. The possibility that leadership is a social construction, an epistemic rather than empirical (e.g., Eacott, 2013), is not entertained by Shamir. The defaulting to an adjective is not uncommon in leadership, management, and administration studies (see the following chapter). But it does raise questions about the nature of relational leadership studies. This holds for dominant researchers from both the entitative and constructionist traditions.

Even for the constructionist among the leadership studies group, the relations between the researcher and researched are rarely called into question. An underlying structuralism prevails with leadership unquestioned. As I have argued previously (Eacott, 2015), and again in Chap. 4, the complicity of the embedded and embodied scholar warrants attention. Although hegemonic relational leadership research does not engage with such matters, there is work that does. Hosking (e.g., Hosking & Morley, 1988; Hosking, 1988, 1991) has consistently argued that rather than studying leadership within the physicality of organizational structures, we need to pay attention to the social construction of organizing. Cuncliffe and Eriksen (2011, p. 1433) go further, locating their work within "a social constructionist ontology, which posits that we exist in a mutual relationship with others and our surroundings and that we both shape, and are shaped by, our social experience in everyday interactions and conversations" (see also Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999).

Relational leadership research has retained a strong normative position despite the increased volume of scholarship identifying as relational. A strong, and unwavering, belief in leadership remains in such work, and this goes part of the way to explaining why the focus is often limited to the quality of relationships (e.g., Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000). Dominant approaches still do not get at the nature of relations and/or a relational understanding of organizing. Despite the best attempts of germinal texts such as *Advancing relational leadership research*, there is no consensus or clear trajectory apart from an argument that relations are important. More significantly, there is, and this is consistent with relational sociology, no emergent or sustained dialogue and debate across perspectives.

The importance of relations for understanding leadership and organizing activity is commonly accepted within relational leadership research. It remains however a contested disciplinary space, and the work of this chapter (and the next) is to provide a means of contributing to these ongoing debates by constructing a framing that enables the reader to understand the different streams relationally. What the relational leadership research demonstrates is the identification of a potentially fruitful line of inquiry (relations) but as yet not been able to engage with matters of ontology, and to some extent epistemology, at scale to bring about substantive intellectual shift focused on relations rather than distinctions of normative positions. The momentum is building however and if sustained holds considerable potential.

Relational Theory and the Physical Sciences

Although attention to relational matters, particularly those engaging with the subjectivity of the observer, appears at odds with orthodoxy in the physical sciences, this does not negate its potential value. It has been long recognized that social and physical reality is both mediated by its social context and in need of active interpretation (Bartunek et al., 1997; Bradbury & Litchenstein, 2000). Rather than focus on discrete, external, knowable entities (a substantial position), relationality orientates inquiry to what Buber (1981[1923]) terms the "space between." Relational reasoning becomes of greater importance in understanding the physical world than what at first may be thought. A useful example here is in the understanding of time, or more specifically temporal periods. As Resnick, Davatzes, Newcombe, and Shipley (2017) argue, while novices can typically place events and phenomena in a correct sequential order, they fail to understand the magnitude in-between. Complex temporal relations are often conflated with mathematical categories. In many cases, scales are based on temporal duration (e.g., units of the clock), whereas time in geologic scales is based on the occurrence of important events, what is often called event time (e.g., the Mesozoic = age of reptiles; the Cenozoic = the age of mammals). Due to the mathematic hegemony of understanding temporality as an external entity—a thing—there is a tendency to assume that these time periods are equally spaced or captured through a base concept (e.g., unit of the clock). Resnick et al. (2017) elaborate:

> … a common analogy when explaining the geologic time scale is to map geologic time onto a 24-hour clock. The geologic time scale is a system of chronological measurement of Earth's history. Divisions of time are hierarchically organized based on major geologic events. The geologic time scale conventionally depicted as a spatial representation, with Earth's formation (4.6 billion years ago) located at the bottom of a column(s) and present day located at the top. However, there are a number of salient differences between the geologic time scale and a clock. One salient difference is the temporally equal divisions of the clock (60 s = 1 min; 60 min = 1 h), which may lead novices to erroneously believe that the periods of Earth's history are also evenly spaced (which they are not). In this example, students are focusing on making an analogy between the distribution of divisions of time, and, thus failing to make an analogy between the relative magnitudes of time between events (e.g., to understand humans appeared relatively recently). (p. 5)

Relative understanding is difficult, if not impossible to achieve, from a substantialist position. After all, relational approaches find their origins in a critique of substantialism. However, to introduce, or more importantly re-orientate, relations call into question the distance between the observer and observed. The distance or separation that has come to legitimize knowledge claims in the physical sciences (primarily through logical empiricism) is destabilized. Returning to Bradbury and Litchenstein (2000):

> Over the past three decades systems thinkers have described an emerging worldview that is relational and systemic at its core (Ashmos & Huber, 1987; von Bertalanffy, 1968; Churchman, 1979; Fuller, 1969; Miller, 1972). Although some have critiqued systems models for being overly objectivist and positivistic (e.g., Lyotard, 1984), relational, systems

thinking allows researchers to study "not just observed systems but also the observing system, the context from which knowledge emerges" (Montuori & Purser, 1996, p. 185). In this way a relational approach can focus on the integration of the observer into the process of knowing (Keeney, 1983), on the plurality of perspectives that constitute organizational experience (Bartunek et al., 1997), and on understanding the extensive interdependencies within and between organizations and the environments in which they are embedded (Shrivastava, 1995; Dyer & Singh, 1998). (p. 552)

Relational reasoning therefore calls into question objectivity and possibility of identifying external discrete knowable entities. The space between—which incidentally does not actually remove the separate entities merely shifts focus of inquiry/analysis—becomes of increased significance. Rovelli (1996) takes up the challenge of relational thinking in quantum mechanics, arguing that a relational quantum mechanics is an interpretation of quantum theory which discards the notions of absolute state of a system, absolute value of its physical quantities, or absolute events. Teller (1986) adds, non-relational properties are internal to a thing (entity) and are independent of the existence or state of other objects. In contrast, relational properties are more outward looking and blur the boundaries of what were previously conceived as entities. For hegemonic scientific thinking, the relational is challenging as the absence of a base concept (e.g., units of the clock) makes it difficult to identify an explicit structure and therefore almost impossible to establish connections between entities. That is, mapping an existing terrain using a relational approach is insufficient. To enact a relational approach involves a different set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological resources. These are not incompatible with the physical sciences, but little more than peripheral. What is arguably more common is the relational charting of the contribution of different scientific fields (e.g., Glänzel, Schubert, & Braun, 2002).

Although this section may appear to have simply stated the peripheral location of relational thinking in the physical sciences, my point is that they are not impossible. There has been attention to, even if limited, introducing relational approaches to thinking through a variety of matters of the physical world. This is an important issue to have engaged with as often alternate lens are dismissed as only of use in the "social" sciences rather than of greater value to the scientific community. In raising the possibilities of relational approaches to the physical sciences, my goal has been to demonstrate a broad interdisciplinary interest in relations.

Conclusion

While I believe it is important to be cautious about labeling "turns" in the social sciences, there has been sufficient trajectory and tradition in multiple areas to claim that relations have been evident for some time. Without a doubt, there is momentum building in relational sociology and relational leadership research. The interdisciplinarity of social scientific research, or at least that dealing with complex social problems, requires intellectual resources that embrace the complex rather than seek

to bring an artificial order to it. Is it therefore surprising that a scholarly area that embraces complexity and messiness would then also be complex and messy?

The absence of a distinctive unified position however means that relational scholarship arguably gives the appearance of being messy. Various versions call upon different canons. In taking serious a call for relational scholarship, it is appropriate to seek to impose a conceptualization of it seeking to identify core features of it as though it is an entity. To do so would arguably destroy that which relational approaches seek to achieve. What we have seen throughout this chapter however is that relational scholarship, in all its forms, offers a potentially rich stream for illuminating the problems and possibilities of the social world. This is arguably why there has been sustained interest in relations across the social sciences. Whether one locates work in the stream dating back to pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, or Georg Simmel's *Wechselwirkung*, or any other trajectory, there is interdisciplinary momentum relational theory. Donati (1991) takes this even further by engaging with Durkheim's first rule that the subject matter of sociology is "social facts" offering the corrective that "social facts" are "social relations." The result being that the subject matter of sociology (or the study of the social world) is social relations.

All of this said, arguably the attention to relations is less of a turn and more of an enduring project by a set of scholars working at the margins of their respective fields or subdisciplines. But, as noted on a number of occasions throughout this chapter, while the center of a field may change little, the most exciting work often takes place on the periphery. This book, as with the work of interdisciplinary networks of scholars on a global scale, holds the potential to shift relational scholarship from the margins to a more prominent position in the social sciences. Achieving such contribution will be dependent on engaging with other positions, and relational scholarship provides the intellectual resources to facilitate dialogue and debate across positions and be a productive offering for advancing knowledge claims.

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