Manifesto for a Relational Sociology

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Manifesto for a Relational Sociology[1]

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Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or processes, in static "things" or in dynamic, unfolding relations. Rational-actor and norm-based models, diverse holisms and structuralisms, and statistical "variable" analyses continue implicitly or explicitly to prefer the former point of view. By contrast, this "manifesto" presents an alternative, "relational" perspective, first in broad, philosophical outlines, then by exploring its implications for both theory and empirical research. In the closing pages, it ponders some of the difficulties and challenges now facing relational analysis, taking up in turn the issues of boundaries and entities, network dynamics, causality, and normative implications.

Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static "things" or in dynamic, unfolding relations. Large segments of the sociological community continue implicitly or explicitly to prefer the former point of view. Rational-actor and norm-based models, diverse holisms and structuralisms, and statistical "variable" analyses—all of them beholden to the idea that it is entities that come first and relations among them only subsequently—hold sway throughout much of the discipline. But increasingly, researchers are searching for viable analytic alternatives, approaches that reverse these basic assumptions and depict social reality instead in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms.

The purpose of this "manifesto" is to lay out the essential features of this latter point of view. It begins by presenting the relational perspective in broad outlines (by way of a comparison with competing substantialist

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approaches), then explores its implications for both theory and empirical research. In the closing pages, it also ponders some of the difficulties and challenges now facing relational analysis. (The essay focuses throughout upon ontology, largely—but certainly not exclusively—bracketing associated questions regarding epistemology.) I do not claim to have been the first to elaborate any of these themes; on the contrary, many distinguished sociologists, from a wide range of theoretical and empirical perspectives, have long been working within a relational framework of analysis. Indeed, this framework itself has long been propounded by social thinkers and philosophers, arguably going as far back as the pre-Socratics. Nor do I claim to be exhaustive in either my textual discussions or bibliographic references. "You can be assured that, for each idea, quite a number of substantial, and often independent, discussions and implementations could be cited: Ideas that have any importance, any impact, do, after all, come in company, not as isolates, and the essayist is mostly a transcriber of ideas abroad in his networks" (White 1994*a,* p. 4). What I have done here is merely to bring together the various lines of reasoning in this perspective (philosophical, theoretical, and empirical); to clarify how they present an overarching challenge to reigning assumptions; and to seek thereby to prevent the sort of eclecticism, the easy mixing together of substantialist and relational assumptions, that renders even many innovative studies today partially problematic.[2] The key question confronting sociologists in the present day is not "material versus ideal," "structure versus agency," "individual versus society," or any of the other dualisms so often noted; rather, it is the choice between substantialism and relationalism.

SUBSTANTIALIST AND RELATIONAL THINKING

The relational point of view on social action and historical change can most usefully be characterized by comparing it with its opposite, the substantialist perspective. The latter takes as its point of departure the notion that it is *substances* of various kinds (things, beings, essences) that constitute the fundamental units of all inquiry. Systematic analysis is to begin

[2] Given these purposes (together with severe limitations of space), it has been necessary to suppress two other sorts of analysis that would be integral to any fuller scholarly treatment: careful, judicious consideration of the substantialist alternatives (of promising developments in substantialist lines of theorization, enduring strengths of these approaches, and so on) and discussion of internal differences among relational thinkers themselves: the issues, in other words, that divide them as well as bring them together. In other writings (Emirbayer and Mische 1995; Emirbayer 1996; Emirbayer and Sheller 1996; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1996, 1997), I attempt to develop one specific mode of relational theorizing, which I term *relational pragmatics,* and to argue for its strengths vis-à-vis alternative relational as well as substantialist approaches.

with these self-subsistent entities, which come "preformed," and only then to consider the dynamic flows in which they subsequently involve themselves. "Relation is not independent of the concept of real being; it can only add supplementary and external modifications to the latter, such as do not affect its real 'nature' " (Cassirer 1953, p. 8). One social theorist, Norbert Elias, points out that substantialist thinking corresponds closely to grammatical patterns deeply ingrained in Western languages. An extended quotation regarding these modes of speech and thought serves nicely to introduce this perspective in general terms:

> Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character is now changing. For example, standing by a river we see the perpetual flowing of the water. But to grasp it conceptually, and to communicate it to others, we do not think and say, "Look at the perpetual flowing of the water"; we say, "Look how fast the river is flowing." We say, "The wind is blowing," as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if a wind could exist which did not blow. This reduction of processes to static conditions, which we shall call "process-reduction" for short, appears self-explanatory to people who have grown up with such languages. (Elias 1978, pp. 111–12)

In a little-known but important discussion, John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (1949) distinguish between two varieties of substantialist approaches. The first they term the perspective of *self-action;* it conceives of "things . . . as acting under their own powers" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108), independently of all other substances. The relational matrices within which substances act provide, in this view, no more than empty media for their self-generating, self-moving activity. Dewey and Bentley see such a perspective as most characteristic of ancient and medieval philosophy. "Aristotle's physics was a great achievement in its time, but it was built around 'substances.' Down to Galileo men of learning almost universally held, following Aristotle, that there exist things which completely, inherently, and hence necessarily, possess Being; that these continue eternally in action (movement) under their own power—continue, indeed, in some particular action essential to them in which they are engaged" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 110).[3] The Christian doctrine of the "soul," culminating in the theological system of Thomas Aquinas, epito-

[3] One commentator provides further explication: "In Plato's concept of the soul, the capacity for self-motion or self-action is the essential feature of the soul, and Aristotle tells us quite explicitly in his *Physics* that of those things that exist by nature . . . 'each of them has *within itself* a principle of motion' " (Bernstein 1966, p. 81).

mized this viewpoint.[4] But after Galileo's time, advances in physics and in the natural sciences eliminated most such traces of self-action from the study of inorganic matter.

In modern philosophy, however, the notion of self-action lives on in various doctrines of "the will" and in liberal political theory (since Hobbes, Locke, and Kant), while in the social sciences it retains surprising vigor in the form of methodological individualism. "All the spooks, fairies, essences, and entities that once had inhabited portions of matter now [take] flight to new homes, mostly in or at the human body. . . . The 'mind' as 'actor,' still in use in present-day psychologies and sociologies, is the old self-acting 'soul' with its immortality stripped off" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 131). One increasingly prevalent approach begins with rational, calculating actors but assumes the givenness and fixity of their various interests, goals, and "preference schedules." Rational-choice theory takes for granted, as Jon Elster puts it, that "the elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals" (Elster 1989, p. 13). When actors become involved with other actors whose choices condition their own, yielding results unintended by any one of them taken alone, rational-choice theorists have recourse to game theory. Here again (in at least *some* of its versions), pregiven entities are seen to generate self-action; even as actors engage in game playing with other actors, their underlying interests, identities, and other characteristics remain unaltered. Game theory assumes that "there are two or more *players.* Each of them has the choice between two or more *strategies.* Each set of choices generates a set of *rewards.* The reward of each player depends on the choices made by all others, not only on his own decision. The players are assumed to make their choices *independently* of each other, in the sense that they cannot make binding agreements to coordinate their decisions" (Elster 1989, p. 28). With its analytic sophistication and rigor, the rational-actor approach (together with complementary versions of game theory) is fast becoming the major alternative to the relational approach that I shall outline below.

Another popular approach, only *apparently* the chief rival to rational-choice models, takes norm-following individuals, or more specifically, the vital inner forces driving them, as its basic unit of analysis. It depicts individuals as self-propelling, self-subsistent entities that pursue internalized norms given in advance and fixed for the duration of the action sequence under investigation. Such individuals aspire not to wealth, status, or power, but rather, to action in conformity with the social ideals they

[4] For Aquinas, God Himself was the most perfect self-acting substance.

have accepted as their own. Nonrational action thus becomes the special province of this mode of analysis, long a staple of sociological inquiry. To mark itself off from economics, which endorsed the rational-actor approach early on, sociology had from its beginnings "a fundamental need of a theory of action that defined different types of action on the basis of their specific difference from rational action. It required a theory of society as a complex of interrelated actions that was more than the unintended interconnecting of self-interested actions. . . . As a safeguard against the utilitarian dangers of the theory of rational action, the founding theorists of sociology [had to] have recourse to Kant and his notion of free, moral action" (Joas 1993, pp. 246–47). To this day, the norm-following, neo-Kantian perspective lives on in various forms of critical theory, value analysis, and microsociology.

In a very different way, the idea of self-action also insinuates itself into social thought by means of holistic theories and "structuralisms" that posit not individuals but self-subsistent "societies," "structures," or "social systems" as the exclusive sources of action. Proponents of these approaches, from neofunctionalists and systems theorists to many historical-comparative analysts, all too often fall back upon the assumption that it is durable, coherent entities that constitute the legitimate starting points of all sociological inquiry. Such entities possess emergent properties not reducible to the discrete elements of which they consist. Not individual persons, but groups, nations, cultures, and other reified substances do all of the acting in social life and account for its dynamism. In some cases, even *sequences* of action may discharge such a function: social movements or nationalist struggles, for example, are seen as propelling themselves along trajectories "that repeat . . . time after time in essentially the same form" (Tilly 1995*a,* p. 1596). Processes as well as structures thus appear as self-acting entities in many concrete instances of social inquiry.

The second key category of substantialism that Dewey and Bentley consider is that of *inter-action.*[5] This approach, which is frequently confused with more truly relational points of view, posits "thing [as] balanced against thing in causal interconnection" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108), where entities no longer generate their own action, but rather, the relevant action takes place *among* the entities themselves. Entities remain fixed and unchanging throughout such interaction, each independent of the ex-

[5] My use of hyphenation here follows Dewey and Bentley's own practice and underscores that I am employing their terminology differently from how such words as "interaction" and, as we shall see, "transaction" are used in everyday language. (Often, e.g., interaction and transaction are employed as synonyms, whereas here they represent very specific—and distinct—philosophical positions.) This point should be borne carefully in mind even when these words reappear without hyphenation later in the essay.

istence of the others, much like billiard balls or the particles in Newtonian mechanics. Indeed, it was Sir Isaac Newton who actually gave the interactional perspective its consummate expression. "For many generations, beginning with Galileo after his break with Aristotelian tradition, and continuing until past the days of Comte, the stress in physical inquiry lay upon locating units or elements of action, and determining their interactions. Newton firmly established the system under which particles could be chosen and arrayed for inquiry with respect to motion, and so brought under definite report. . . . The inter-actional presentation had now been perfected" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, pp. 105, 111).

The idea of interaction finds its home today in a viewpoint that explicitly or implicitly dominates much of contemporary sociology, from survey research to historical-comparative analysis. This is the so-called "variable-centered approach," which features, as Andrew Abbott (1988, p. 170) points out, a compelling imagery of fixed entities with variable attributes that "interact, in causal or actual time, to create outcomes, themselves measurable as attributes of the fixed entities."[6] What decidedly do not do the acting in this perspective are the substances in question; all of the relevant action takes place *among* them—they provide merely the empty settings within which causation occurs—rather than being generated *by* them. If anything, it is the variable attributes themselves that "act," that supply initiative, in interactional research; "disadvantaged position leads to increased competitiveness," for example, without any particular actor engaging in competitive behavior. "It is when a variable 'does something' narratively that [analysts] think themselves to be speaking most directly of causality," notes Abbott. "The realist metaphysics implicit in treating variables (universals) as agents was last taken seriously in the age of Aquinas . . . but in this [approach] the 'best' causal sentences are clearly realist ones in which variables act" (Abbott 1992*a,* p. 58). Variable-centered researchers employ a variety of quantitative methods to test their causal hypotheses, including multiple regression, factor analysis, and event history approaches.

Fundamentally opposed to both varieties of substantialism is the perspective of *trans-action,* "where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements' " (Dewey and

[6] In Abbott's (1988, p. 181) portrayal, the interactional approach further assumes "that these attributes have only one causal meaning at a time; [and] that this causal meaning does not depend on other attributes, on the past sequence of attributes, or on the context of other entities."

Bentley 1949, p. 108). In this point of view, which I shall also label "relational," the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, seen as a dynamic, unfolding process, becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves. Things "are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but . . . gain their whole being . . . first in and with the relations which are predicated of them. Such 'things' are terms of relations, and as such can never be 'given' in isolation but only in ideal community with each other" (Cassirer 1953, p. 36). Although it can be traced back to the writings of Heraclitus, this transactional mode of theorizing first becomes widely influential with the rise of new approaches in physics, mathematics, and the natural sciences. Most strikingly, Einstein's theory of relativity "brought space and time into the investigation as among the events investigated [and] prepared the scene for the particle itself to go the way of space and time. These steps were all definitely in the line of the transactional approach: the seeing together, when research requires it, of what before had been seen in separations and held severally apart" (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 112).[7]

Relational theorists reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pregiven units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis (as in the self-actional perspective). Individual persons, whether strategic or norm following, are inseparable from the transactional contexts within which they are embedded; as Michel Foucault puts it, the "soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge" (Foucault 1979, p. 29).[8] By the same token, structures

[7] In his masterful history of modern science, *Substance and Function* (1953), Ernst Cassirer distinguishes between the "relation-concepts" pertinent to this transactional approach and the "thing-concepts" central to substantialist ways of thinking since Plato and Aristotle. He charts the rise of relational theorizing in a multiplicity of problem-areas, including the theories of space and number, geometry, and the natural sciences. Today the most sustained and philosophically subtle exploration of the transactional perspective can be found in the writings of Margaret Somers (1993, 1994, 1995; see also Somers and Gibson 1994).

[8] Relational thinkers are relentless in their critiques of such concepts as "the soul" or "person." Consider, e.g., Harrison White (1992, p. 197, n.21): "Person should be a construct from the middle of the analysis, not a given boundary condition. Personhood has to be accounted for. . . . But in most present social science 'person' is instead taken as the unquestioned atom. This is an unacknowledged borrowing and transcription of the soul construct from Christian theology. . . . The ultimate fixity of the soul, carried over to hobble social science, was a Pauline theological imperative." Or consider Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 106–7): "When I talk of [any given] field, I know very well that in this field I will find 'particles' (let me pretend for a moment that we are dealing with a physical field) that are under the sway of forces

are empty abstractions apart from the several elements of which they are composed; societies themselves are nothing but pluralities of associated individuals. Transactional theorists—starting, in fact, with some of the "founders" of sociology—are in virtually complete agreement on this point. Karl Marx (1978, p. 247) argues, for example, that "society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand." Near the end of *Capital,* volume 1, he further observes that "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things" (Marx 1977, p. 932). Georg Simmel, the classical sociologist most deeply committed to relational theorizing, notes that "society is the supra-singular structure which is nonetheless not abstract. Through this concept, historical life is spared the alternatives of having to run either in mere individuals or abstract generalities. Society is the generality that has, simultaneously, concrete vitality" (Simmel 1971, p. 69). And even Émile Durkheim, the "founder" most identified with substantialist ideas, acknowledges that "the force of the collectivity is not wholly external. . . . Society can exist only in and by means of individual minds" (Durkheim 1995, p. 211; see Emirbayer 1996).[9]

Variable-based analysis (as in the interactional perspective) is an equally unviable alternative; it, too, detaches elements (substances with variable attributes) from their spatiotemporal contexts, analyzing them apart from their relations with other elements within fields of mutual determination and flux. As Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson (1994, pp. 65, 69) point out, "While a social identity or categorical approach presumes internally stable concepts, such that under normal conditions entities within that category will act predictably, the [relational, transactional] approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space and thus precludes categorical stability in action. . . . The classification of an actor *divorced* from analytic relationality is neither ontologically intelligible nor meaningful" (see also Somers 1994; Bates and

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of attraction, of repulsion, and so on, as in a magnetic field. Having said this, as soon as I speak of a field, my attention fastens on the primacy of this system of objective relations over the particles themselves. And we could say, following the formula of a famous German physicist, that the individual, like the electron, is an *Ausgeburt des Felds:* he or she is in a sense an emanation of the field."

[9] In the present day, Niklas Luhmann (1995, pp. 20, 22) suggests in similar fashion: "There are no elements without relational connections or relations without elements. . . . Elements are elements only for the system that employs them as units and they are such only through this system." And Harrison White (1992, p. 4) turns to material science to make a similar point, likening sociocultural reality to dense, partly fluid matter within which no self-subsistent entities ever fully crystallize: "There is no tidy atom and no embracing world, only complex striations, long strings reptating as in a polymer goo."

Peacock 1989; Breiger 1991; for a summary of this line of critique, see Wellman [1988], pp. 31–33). A corollary to this view calls into question attempts by statistical researchers to "control for third variables"; all such attempts, too, ignore the ontological embeddedness or locatedness of entities within actual situational contexts.[10] Even as statistical models grow ever more complicated, even alert to the "interaction effects" among variables, these problems, rooted as they are in fundamental assumptions, fail to go away.

What is distinct about the transactional approach is that it sees relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances. "Previously constituted actors enter [transactions] but have no ability to traverse [them] inviolable. They ford [them] with difficulty and in [them] many disappear. What comes out are new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts" (Abbott 1996, p. 863).[11] The imageries most often employed in speaking of transactions are accordingly those of complex joint activity, in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa). Dewey (1929, p. 142), for example, states in *Experience and Nature* that "the import of . . . essences is the consequence of social interactions, of companionship, mutual assistance, direction and concerted action in fighting, festivity, and work." Dewey and Bentley (1949, p. 133) further point out that "no one would be able successfully to speak of the hunt*er* and the hunt*ed* as isolated with respect to hunt*ing.* Yet it is just as absurd to set up hunt*ing* as an event in isolation from the spatio-temporal connection of all the components." In *Social Organization,* Charles Horton Cooley (1962) supplies a vivid analogy to "joint music-making" to convey similar insights,[12] while Norbert Elias (1978, p. 130) invokes "game playing" to explicate his key concept of fluid "figurations": "By figuration we mean the

[10] "Nothing that ever occurs in the social world occurs 'net of other variables.' All social facts are located in contexts. So why bother to pretend that they aren't?" (Abbott 1992*b,* p. 6).

[11] Actually, social actors, the parties to ongoing transactions, can just as well be communities, firms, or states as they can individual persons (although the latter is what one typically has in mind). Indeed, they can even be *events:* any actor, after all, is but a series of "events that keep happening in the same way," events with "stable lineages" (Abbott 1996, pp. 873, 863).

[12] "Whether, like the orchestra, [social organization] gives forth harmony may be a matter of dispute, but that its sound, pleasing or otherwise, is the expression of a vital cooperation, cannot well be denied. Certainly everything that I say or think is influenced by what others have said or thought, and, in one way or another, sends out an influence of its own in turn" (Cooley 1962, p. 4).

changing pattern created by the players as a whole . . . the totality of their dealings in their relationships with each other."[13] One might just as well speak here of *negotiations* or *conversations;* the underlying idea would remain the same—regarding the primacy of contextuality and process in sociological analysis.[14]

To be sure, the transactional viewpoint—like its two main substantialist rivals—rarely corresponds with exact precision to any one school of thought or individual's life work; what is often of great interest, in fact, is exactly how these ideal-typical approaches, on the one hand, and actual authors, texts, or research traditions, on the other, crisscross one another: how, for example, a given thinker shifts back and forth (often implicitly) among several different points of view.[15] This is evident in the case of both classical and contemporary thinkers. Marx, for instance (as the earlier quotations from him suggest), was a profoundly relational thinker; this is clear from his early analyses of alienation (Ollman 1971), his discussion of commodity fetishism, his keen insights into the internal relations among production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, and, indeed, his understanding of the capital/wage-labor relation itself.[16] And yet, even Marx exhibits substantialist tendencies, most notably in his reification of class interests, in his assumption that actors within the same class category (to the extent that they are a "class-for-itself") will act in similar ways even when differentially situated within flows of transactions or "relational settings" (Somers 1994). Meanwhile, from the opposite direction, the now classic theorist Talcott Parsons exhibits tendencies seemingly in line with substantialism. His theory of action strongly tends in the direction of self-actional, norm-based reasoning, while his ideas about order often suggest holism and the reification of system goals. Yet, even Parsons,

[13] Zygmunt Bauman (1989) underscores the "remarkable affinity" that this imagery of gamelike figurations bears with Anthony Giddens's "structuration theory." "Game-playing" clearly means something quite different here, of course, from the self-actions of game theory (although see the paragraph that follows).

[14] The preeminently *agentic* nature of the above-mentioned analogies, their emphasis upon transformation as well as iteration, might be noted; this opens up questions, too seldom addressed, regarding the normative dimensions of social action. I shall take up such issues below.

[15] Perhaps the theorist who most firmly grasped this distinction between the analytical and the concrete was Talcott Parsons (1937). "At no point . . . [did] Parsons claim that theories which actually existed in history are identical to the different logical positions he has outlined. Most of them are in fact opaque versions or combinations of several of these logical alternatives" (Joas 1996, p. 12).

[16] "Within a relational view [such as Marx's], the working class is defined by its qualitative location within a social relation that simultaneously defines the capitalist class. . . . Classes as social forces are real consequences of social relations" (Wright 1979, pp. 6–7).

especially after the development of his later "interchange model" and theory of "generalized media" (Parsons 1953, 1969), moves decisively in the direction of a relational, transactional point of view.[17] And finally, among contemporary theorists and research traditions, game theory is emblematic of rational-actor (i.e., self-actional) models, as mentioned above. And yet it, also, often sounds emphatically transactional themes, as in studies of repeated games within which temporally embedded actors engage with each other in sequences of mutually contingent action (see Kreps 1990; Macy 1991).

Despite these various concrete examples, however, the point still holds that substantialism (in both its self- and interactional forms) and relationalism (or transactionalism) represent fundamentally different points of view on the very nature and constitution of social reality.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the transactional approach are far-reaching. In what follows, I shall specify these implications from two different points of view in turn: those of key sociological concepts and of levels of inquiry—from "macro" to "micro."

To begin with, the central concepts in sociological analysis—for example, power, equality, freedom, and agency (to mention several of the most pervasive)—are themselves open to extensive reformulation in terms of relational thinking. Take the key concept of *power,* which is typically seen in substantialist terms as an entity or a possession, as something to be "seized" or "held."[18] In the transactional approach, "the concept of power [is] transformed from a concept of substance to a concept of relationship. At the core of changing figurations—indeed, the very hub of the figuration process—is a fluctuating, tensile equilibrium, a balance of power moving

[17] As Jeffrey Alexander points out, it becomes quite illuminating to see how such discordant trends in the classical theorists—e.g., Marx and Parsons—later manifest themselves in their followers' writings: "The members of a sociological school change the founder's thought as much as they faithfully articulate it, and . . . they change it, moreover, in a manner that can be systematically related to the analytic tensions in the original theoretical position" (Alexander 1983, p. 277).

[18] This conceptualization is still popular to the extent that Weberian understandings of power retain (explicitly or implicitly) their influence in political sociology. "Max Weber proceeds from the teleological [i.e., self-actional] model of action in which an individual or a group has a set purpose and chooses the means suitable for realizing it. The success of the action consists in bringing about a condition in the world that fulfills the purpose set. To the extent that this success depends on the conduct of another subject, the agent has to dispose of the means that instigate the desired conduct on the part of the other. This manipulative power over the means that afford influence on the will of another Max Weber names power" (Habermas 1983, p. 173).

to and fro. . . . This kind of fluctuating balance of power is a structural characteristic of the flow of every figuration" (Elias 1978, p. 131). Contemporary social-network analysts define power in similarly relational terms, as an outgrowth of the positions that social actors occupy in one or more networks (Knoke 1990). So too do theorists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. "Relations of power," in Foucault's words, "are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations" (Foucault 1990, p. 94). Bourdieu similarly argues for a relational view: "By field of power I mean the relations of force that obtain between the social positions which guarantee their occupants a quantum of social force, or of capital, such that they are able to enter into the struggles over the monopoly of power" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 220–30). Far from being an attribute or property of actors, then, power is unthinkable outside matrices of force relations; it emerges out of the very way in which figurations of relationships—as we shall see, of a cultural, social structural, and social psychological nature—are patterned and operate.

The idea of *equality* can also be recast in transactional terms. Typically, equality (like inequality) is defined essentialistically as a matter of individual variations in the possession of "human capital" or other goods.[19] The primary causes of equality (and inequality), moreover, are located in the orientations and actions of entities such as groups or individuals, rather than in the unfolding relations among them: in attitudes such as racism, sexism, and ethnic chauvinism. Yet, in Charles Tilly's (1995*b,* p. 48) words, "bonds, not essences, provide the bases of durable inequality." Inequality comes largely from the solutions that elite and nonelite actors improvise in the face of recurrent organizational problems—challenges centering around control over symbolic, positional, or emotional resources. These solutions, which involve the implementation of invidious categorical distinctions, resemble "moves" in a game, or perhaps even attempts to change the *rules* of the game. Members of a categorically bounded network, for example (such as recently arrived immigrants), ac-

[19] "Faced with male-female differences in wages, investigators look for average human-capital differences among the individuals involved. Encountering racial differences in job assignments, researchers ask whether across categories individuals distribute differently with respect to residential location. Uncovering evidence of sharp ethnic differences in industrial concentration, analysts only begin to speak of discrimination when they have factored out individual differences in education, work experience, or productivity" (Tilly 1995*b,* p. 9).

quire control over a valuable resource (e.g., information about employment opportunities), hoard their access to it (e.g., by sharing it only with others in their personal networks), and develop practices that perpetuate this restricted access (e.g., by staying in touch with their places of origin through frequent correspondence and visits home). Hard, durable differences in advantages and disadvantages then crystallize around such practices. Unfolding transactions, and not preconstituted attributes, are thus what most effectively explain equality and inequality.

Third, the notion of *freedom* is also open to far-reaching reformulation in relational terms. A very common way of thinking about freedom (or liberty) is in substantialist fashion, as a possession, a "legal status represented in laws" (Stinchcombe 1995, p. 126), and as contrasted with the equally essentialist status of slavery. But, as Arthur Stinchcombe (1995, p. 126) indicates, freedom is best described pragmatically as a set of "liberties . . . in fact enjoy[ed], whether or not they are defended in the law." Drawing upon John R. Commons (1924, p. 19), who cautioned that ideas such as liberty refer not to the "thing itself but [to] the expected 'uses' of the thing, that is, [to] various activities regarding the thing," Stinchcombe (1995, p. 126) regards freedom not as a fixed, pregiven attribute, but rather as *what we can do* under given circumstances: "A liberty creates an *exposure* of others to the different consequences of different choices by the free person. . . . The definition, then, is a sum of practically available liberties, including in particular the social capacity to get others to suffer the consequences of [one's] practical . . . freedom . . . to decide." Freedom, in other words, means nothing apart from the concrete transactions in which individuals engage, within cultural, social structural, and social psychological contexts of action; it derives its significance entirely from the ongoing interplay (akin to a game) of decision, consequence, and reaction. "I . . . argue," asserts Stinchcombe, "that this tack toward understanding variations in freedom helps get us out of the box of defining freedom, or slavery, by its essence. Defining things by their essences is always troublesome in an explanatory science" (Stinchcombe 1995, p. 130).[20]

Finally, and relatedly, the idea of *agency* can also be reconceptualized

[20] A similar conception of freedom can be found in Simmel's work, especially in *The Philosophy of Money* (1990) and *Soziologie* (1950): "[The category of freedom] implies not a mere absence of relationships but rather a very specific relation to others" (Simmel 1990, p. 298; quoted in Breiger 1990, p. 457). "Freedom itself is a specific relation to the environment. . . . It is neither a state that exists always and can be taken for granted, nor a possession of a material substance, so to speak, that has been acquired once and for all. . . . [It] is not solipsistic existence but sociological action. . . . This is suggested by the simple recognition of the fact that man does not only want to be free, but wants to use his freedom for some purpose" (Simmel 1950, pp. 120–21.) For a discussion of Simmel on freedom, see Breiger (1990).

from a transactional perspective. (Of course, this exercise in reconceptualization could just as well be extended to other key terms in the sociological lexicon.) Agency is commonly identified with the self-actional notion of "human will," as a property or vital principle that "breathes life" into passive, inert substances (individuals or groups) that otherwise would remain perpetually at rest. By contrast, the relational point of view sees agency as inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of situations, especially from the problematic features of those situations. As it is conceived of elsewhere (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), agency entails the "engagement by actors of different structural environments [which] both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations."[21] Viewed internally, agency involves different ways of experiencing the world, although even here, just as consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (James 1976; Husserl 1960), so too is agency always "agency *toward* something," by means of which actors can enter into relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events. Viewed externally, it entails concrete transactions within relational contexts (cultural, social structural, and social psychological) in something much like an ongoing conversation. Agency is always a dialogic process by which actors immersed in the *durée* of lived experience engage with others in collectively organized action contexts, temporal as well as spatial. Agency is path dependent as well as situationally embedded; it signifies modes of response to problems impinging upon it through sometimes broad expanses of time as well as space.

In addition to these general concepts, the transactional point of view allows for the reconceptualization of distinct, sui generis levels of inquiry, on a continuum from "macro" to "micro."[22] At the most macroscopic level, for example, *society* is often interpreted as an autonomous, internally organized, self-sustaining "system." Sociological thinkers often assume that inquiry ought to begin with such naturally bounded, integrated, sovereign entities as national states or countries. And indeed, this approach is not entirely implausible, for not only has the European state system been ascendant for two or more centuries, but also, throughout much of world history, disparate interaction networks—economic, military, political, and

[21] Such a conception corresponds closely to classical pragmatist thought: "The subject is that which suffers, is subjected and which endures resistance and frustration; it is also that which attempts subjection of hostile conditions; that which takes the immediate initiative in remaking the situation as it stands" (Dewey, quoted in Colapietro 1990, p. 653). I shall discuss this theoretical connection to pragmatism in greater detail below.

[22] For a discussion of analytic levels similar (but not identical) to that which follows, see Wiley's [1995, chap. 6] fourfold distinction among self, interactional, social-organizational, and cultural levels.

the like—have frequently converged (or been "institutionalized" [Mann 1986]) in coherent, distinct societies. Yet, boundaries of national states do overlap unevenly with populations, territories, production and consumption patterns, cultural identities, collective emotional commitments, and so on, while "interstitial interactions," both within and across these bounded units, also repeatedly belie visions of the latter as unproblematic, unitary entities: "Societies have never been sufficiently institutionalized to prevent interstitial emergence. Human beings do not create unitary societies but a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction. The most important of these networks form relatively stably. . . . But underneath, human beings are tunneling ahead to achieve their goals, forming new networks, extending old ones, and emerging most clearly into our view with rival configurations" (Mann 1986, p. 16). As Michael Mann (1986, p. 1) observes, "societies" are best seen as "constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power."[23] Somers (1994, p. 72) goes even further in replacing the term "society" with "relational setting," which she defines as "a patterned matrix of institutional relationships among cultural, economic, social, and political practices."[24] Such a conclusion does not invalidate the historical-comparative study of national states or "countries" (see Goodwin 1995), but it does prescribe considerable caution in assuming their primacy as units of sociological analysis.

At the "meso-level" as well, the relational perspective leads to significant reconceptualizations. To the extent that they had been theorized, *face-to-face encounters* were most typically seen (at least prior to Erving Goffman) in self-actional or interactional terms, as a question of the mutual interplay among preconstituted, self-subsistent actors. It is precisely this framework that Goffman explodes in his celebrated studies of "copresence" and the "interaction order." Of paramount importance in "the proper study of [face-to-face] interaction," he argues, "is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" (Goffman 1967, p. 2). A "sociology of occasions" is called for that takes as its unit of analysis a gamelike, unfolding, dynamic process, one developing within cultural, so-

[23] I shall focus in the following section upon several such network contexts.

[24] "For most practicing social science research, a society is a social *entity*. As an entity, it has a core essence—an essential set of social springs at the heart of the mechanism. This essential core is in turn reflected in broader covarying societal institutions that the system comprises. . . . [By contrast,] the most significant aspect of a relational setting is that there is no governing entity according to which the whole setting can be categorized; it can only be characterized by deciphering its spatial and network patterns and temporal processes. As such, it is a relational matrix, similar to a social network" (Somers 1994, pp. 70, 72; see also Somers 1993; Somers and Gibson 1994).

cial structural, and social psychological matrices. (In what could well serve as an epigraph for this entire manifesto, Goffman [1967, p. 3] asserts: "Not, then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men.")[25] The study of face-to-face encounters thereupon becomes a matter of locating regularities across such transactional processes, of specifying recurrent mechanisms, patterns, and sequences in meso-level "occasions."

At the microscopic level of analysis, similarly, the notion of *individual* can also be significantly reworked from a relational point of view. Individual identities and interests are not preconstituted and unproblematic; parties to a transaction do not enter into mutual relations with their attributes already given. By reinterpreting Hobbes's construct of the "state of nature," Alessandro Pizzorno (1991) shows how such arguments are internally self-contradictory; they regard as self-subsistent entities what are in fact actors lacking in stable, durable identities to begin with. Selves, not to mention the interests corresponding to them, require mutual trust and reciprocal recognition to come into being, conditions that happen to be absent in the state of nature, where a "war of each against all" prevails. "Individuals threatened by nature to impermanence" achieve "preservation of self, real *formation of self*" (Pizzorno 1991, pp. 220, 218) only through transactional processes of recognition and what Pizzorno terms mutual "name-giving": "The fiction of individuals not yet involved in social relations but originally knowing what their interests are and what the consequences of their choices can be is discarded in favor of a view in which the interaction between persons mutually recognizing their right to exist is the only originally conceivable reality. No preestablished interests are imagined. The individual human agent is constituted as such when he is recognized and named by other human agents" (Pizzorno 1991, p. 220). Individual identities are thus constituted within "circles of recognition," while interests (a secondary construct) "grow out of different positions in the[se] networks and circles" (Pizzorno 1991, p. 219).[26] Such circles of recognition can include "virtual" circles with cultural ideals and fanta-

[25] Goffman (1967, p. 2) characterizes these moments as "shifting entit[ies], necessarily evanescent, created by arrivals and killed by departures." As Arthur Stinchcombe (1991, p. 373) further explains it: "The same people act differently if they are inside the temporal and spatial and communicative boundaries of [such] situation[s] than if they are outside those boundaries." See also White (1973).

[26] For a discussion of the relational dimension of *collective* identity that develops (albeit implicitly) along similar lines to that of Pizzorno, see Melucci (1996). In true transactionalist fashion, Melucci emphasizes the fluid, processual nature of collective identification, a point of view, however, that sits uncomfortably with his own substantialist terminology, as he himself acknowledges: "We should . . . take notice of the fact that the term 'identity' remains semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence and may, perhaps for this very reason, be ill suited for the processual analysis for which I am arguing" (Melucci 1996, p. 72).

sized objects, as well as circles of interpersonal, social relationships. (Recent feminist theorists have developed quite similar insights; indeed, gender theory in general might well be the approach that in recent decades has most widely disseminated transactional modes of reasoning within the social sciences. See, e.g., Scott [1988]; Benhabib [1992]; see also Somers's important work on "narrative identity" [e.g., Somers and Gibson 1994].)

Delving more deeply still into the individual level, relational perspectives also make possible the recasting of long-established lines of theorization regarding *intrapsychic processes.* In the psychoanalytic literature, for example, the standard view is that of drive theory, which conceptualizes the individual actor as a separate, monadic entity with physically based urges that seek out psychical expression in the form of sexual and/or aggressive desires. These desires, which are preconstituted, conflict with the demands of both human civilization and the natural world; psychical life builds around "compromises" between them and the defenses that control and channel them. By contrast, a new school of thought in psychoanalysis emphatically rejects this essentialist perspective and proposes instead a theory of "relational individualism," one that sees transactions with others, and not pregiven drives, as the basic units for psychological investigation. "Object-relations theory does not need to idealize a hyper-individualism; it assumes a fundamental internal as well as external relatedness to the other. The question is then what kind of relation this can and should be. The relational individual is not reconstructed in terms of his or her drives and defenses but in terms of the greater or lesser fragmentation of his or her inner world and the extent to which the core self feels spontaneous and whole within, rather than driven by, this world" (Chodorow 1989*a,* p. 159).[27] Freudian gender theorists (e.g., Chodorow 1978, 1989*b;* Benjamin 1988) utilize such insights with great effect.[28]

[27] These very same assumptions are crucial to the new "relational school" of psychoanalytic theory. In this approach, as Stephen Mitchell (1988, p. 3) summarizes it, "We are portrayed [as] shaped by and inevitably embedded within a matrix of relationships with other people. . . . *Desire* is experienced always *in the context of relatedness,* and it is that context which defines its meaning. Mind is composed of relational configurations. The person is comprehensible only within this tapestry of relationships, past and present."

[28] Transactional thinking appears in nonpsychoanalytic theories as well. For example, Norbert Wiley argues against both old and new versions of faculty psychology, which posits pregiven, innate properties in human nature, in favor of a more "dialogic" perspective influenced by C. S. Peirce and George Herbert Mead. For him, the self is a structure consisting of three elements, the I, you, and me, in continual interaction with each other and with other selves in an ongoing "semiotic flow" of meaning. From Wiley's (1994, p. 72) transactional perspective, the self is "a kind of public square . . . the members of which are in constant conversation." Also relevant here are the writings of Kenneth Gergen (e.g., 1994).

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND TECHNIQUES

In addition to having far-reaching implications for theoretical inquiry, the transactional perspective also opens up many new, exciting directions for substantive research. In this section, I shall consider several of these more empirical lines of investigation, using as my main organizing principle the idea of three transpersonal, relational contexts within which all social action unfolds: social structure, culture, and social psychology. Each of these "environments" (Alexander 1988), I assume, operates according to its own partially autonomous logic, intersecting with the others in varied and interesting ways that require empirical study (for a fuller discussion, see Emirbayer and Goodwin [1996, 1997]; Emirbayer and Sheller [1996]). I shall also discuss new research at the individual level, research that likewise builds upon transactional assumptions.[29]

The best developed and most widely used approaches to the analysis of *social structure* are clearly those of social-network analysis. This perspective is not primarily a theory or even a set of complicated research techniques, but rather a comprehensive new family of analytical strategies, a paradigm for the study of how resources, goods, and even positions flow through particular figurations of social ties. Eschewing self-actional approaches that begin with preconstituted individuals or groups, as well as interactional approaches such as statistical (variable) analyses, network analysts pursue transactional studies of patterned social relationships (Breiger 1974). They adhere to what has been termed an "anticategorical imperative" (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994), rejecting the primacy of attributional categories and other substantives in favor of dynamic, "observable processes-in-relations" (White 1997, p. 60)—notice the felicitous combination here of temporal and spatial imageries—through which pass money, friendship, information, and other elements.[30]

[29] Although I shall range widely across a number of different empirical literatures, I wish to underscore here the desirability of eventually elaborating a common relational language within which to theorize about all these various contexts and levels of analysis.

[30] Peter Bearman supplies a vivid illustration of the comparative utility of network-analytic and categorical approaches for understanding elite social action in England from 1540 to 1640: "Consider the tortuous debate over the appropriate bases for classifying the gentry that arose because historians came to recognize that the gentry as a group acted neither coherently nor uniformly with respect to interests. A primary solution to the problem has been a continued subcategorization, and we now have as salient groups the middling, official, rising, falling, court, and country gentry, to name only the most prominent. These subcategories do correspond to attributes that real gentry had. . . . But it was as likely that court gentry would rise as fall; that Puritan gentry would be at court or in the country; and that official gentry would be as mere as the middling or as grand as the rising. Gentry assigned to the same category frequently acted at cross-purposes. . . . The solution to understanding elite social action [thus] cannot be further subclassification from received categories. Categorical models

(This does not mean that in certain cases network analysts do not unduly privilege synchrony over diachrony, spatial over temporal figurations, a point to which I shall return below. Nor does it mean that they never import into their explanations self- or interactional assumptions, most problematically a *rational-choice* approach to action; for a critique of such eclecticism, which occurs in other lines of transactional research as well, see Emirbayer and Goodwin [1994].) Important here is the notion that social networks *cut across* discrete communities and other entities—are "interstitial"—even though in certain cases they may also congeal into bounded groups and clusters (network researchers speak in such instances of "CATNETS" [CATegories + NETworks; see White 1966; Tilly 1978]). Significant as well is the insight that transactions unfolding within social networks are not always symmetrical in nature: flows are often "directional" in content and intensity, with significant implications for actors' differential access to resources. Finally, often important is the patterning of invisible relations among actors—"relations visible only by their absence" (Burt 1992, p. 181)—since such "structural holes" or gaps in networks usually mean disparities in access to both information and control benefits.

Network analysts draw heavily upon the methodologies of sociometry and graph theory (the mathematical study of structural patterns in points and lines) to formally represent social figurations. They also draw upon the techniques of "multidimensional scaling" to map out sometimes complex patterns in such ties, and upon set theory to model role structures algebraically (for an overview, see Scott [1991]). These methods figure prominently in cluster analyses as well as in studies of structural equivalence, the two central currents in social-network research.[31] The former approach focuses attention upon actors' direct and indirect ties, explaining social processes through the very fact of connectivity itself, as well as through the strength, density, and so forth, of the ties that bind. It seeks to specify the relative centrality of actors within networks, the "prominence" of such actors, and the subgroupings to which they belong. "Network structure is described in terms of the typical relations in which individuals are involved and the extent to which actors are connected within cohesive primary groups as cliques" (Burt 1980, p. 81). The latter approach emphasizes more the patterning of actors' ties, not with one

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alone rarely partition people in a way that confirms with observed action, because individual activity in the world is organized through and motivated not by categorical affiliations but by the structure of tangible social relations in which persons are embedded" (Bearman 1993, pp. 9–10).

[31] In Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994), these were referred to as "relational" and "positional" currents, respectively—the term "relational" having a different meaning there than in the present context.

another, but with third parties; the relevant question here is the specific position or role that a set of "structurally equivalent" actors occupies within a given network. "Network structure is described as interlocked, differentially prestigious status/role-sets, in terms of which actors in a system are stratified" (Burt 1980, p. 81). An algebraic procedure called "blockmodeling" partitions overall populations into such equivalency classes.[32]

Relational approaches to the sociological study of *culture* are not nearly so well developed as those concerned with networks of social relationships. Yet they share many of the same basic assumptions, beginning with the notion that cultural formations entail, not individual "attitudes" or "values," much less disembodied "systems," but rather bundles of communications, relations, or transactions. Relational methodologies come into play when analyzing the meaning structures that order or organize these patterns. Such methodologies are transactional or relational precisely because they involve "a shift away from thinking about a concept as a singular *categorical* expression to regarding concepts as embedded in complex *relational* networks that are both intersubjective and public. . . . That is, concepts cannot be defined on their own as single ontological entities; rather, the meaning of one concept can be deciphered only in terms of its 'place' in relation to the other concepts in its web. What appear to be autonomous categories defined by their attributes are reconceived more accurately as historically shifting sets of relationships that are contingently stabilized" (Somers 1995, p. 136). Such insights, of course, are familiar from Saussurean linguistics and structural anthropology (Saussure 1959; Lévi-Strauss 1963), both of which stress in eminently relational terms that meaning derives not from the intrinsic properties of signs (understood dyadically as "sound-image" and "concept," "signifier" and "signified"), but rather from their differences from all other signs within a semiological system.[33] Such ideas are also central to two other sources of semiotic theory that are perhaps less familiar, but even more congenial to transactional thinking: Peircean semiotics and Bakhtinian dialogism. Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of both pragmatism and semiotics, agrees on the relational embeddedness of symbols but diverges sharply from the Saussurean tradition in taking as his unit of analysis not dyadic structures or snap-

[32] Expressed more accurately, blockmodeling *tests the hypothesis* that a set of relations breaks down into a set of equivalency classes specified a priori.

[33] Also relevant here is the seminal work of Roman Jakobson: "Jakobson was drawn to the fact that for Einsteinian physics, as for Cubism, everything is based on relationship. . . . The artist's credo 'I do not believe in things, I believe in their relationship' (Georges Braque) thus joined the mathematician's motto 'It is not things that matter, but the relations between them.' . . . Or as Jakobson himself put it much later, 'Attention must be paid not to the material units themselves but to their relations' " (Waugh and Monville-Burston 1990, p. 5).

shots, but rather a triadic process of "sign," "object," and "interpretant": "A sign . . . is something which stands to somebody [interpretant] for something [object] in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody" (Peirce 1931–58, p. 228). As one commentator observes, for Peirce "a sign only has meaning in the context of a continuing process of interpretation. Because [of this], his theory is intrinsically processual and thus incompatible with Saussure's dyadic and intrinsically static theory" (Rochberg-Halton 1986, p. 46). A similarly processual approach to language and culture can be found in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, who takes the "utterance" as his point of departure. Words, concepts, and symbols derive their meaning only from their location within concrete utterances, but these in turn only make sense in relation to other utterances within ongoing flows of transactions: "The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*. . . . Each individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication. . . . Like Leibnitz's monad, [it] reflects the speech process, others' utterances, and, above all, preceding links in the chain" (Bakhtin 1986, pp. 92–93).

Cultural analysts are increasingly turning toward such relational approaches for methodological guidance in studying conceptual or symbolic networks. Much empirical research in anthropology, history, and sociology, for example, draws upon the semiotic theories mentioned above in analyzing the internal logics and contradictions of cultural languages, idioms, and meaning systems. Research programs articulated by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (1993), Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1986), and Marc Steinberg (1996) exemplify these Saussurean (cum Lévi-Straussian), Peircian, and Bakhtinian perspectives, respectively. In a more formalized fashion, researchers are also drawing upon sociolinguistics in analyzing "speech communities," or sets of transactions marked by shared "knowledge of the communicative constraints and options governing a significant number of social situations" (Gumperz 1972, p. 16).[34] Finally, certain analysts of culture are drawing, not upon semiotic or linguistic analysis, but rather upon the relational social-network strategies outlined above. One such line of work features cluster or connectivity analysis, measuring the ties between "focal concepts" and other symbols within "semantic networks" in terms of their "density," "conductivity," and "consensus" (Carley and Kaufer 1993; Carley 1994). Another line of work pursues a structural equivalence approach, using blockmodeling to determine the formal structure of "discourse roles" or positions within classification schemas, rhetorics, or other sets of cultural practices (Mohr 1994). Together, these lines of inquiry provide a wealth of techniques for modeling the internal struc-

[34] See also Halliday (1976, 1978) on "speech registers," or shared modalities of language use *within* a speech community, and Hanks (1990) on "discourse genres"; the latter is deeply influenced by Bakhtinian dialogic theory.

ture of cultural formations, techniques that yield important results at both micro- and macroscopic levels of investigation.[35]

Relational studies of *social psychology* are perhaps the least well developed of the three categories of research (but see Ritzer and Gindoff 1992). Here the objects of analysis are psychical patterns that constrain and enable action by channeling flows and investments of emotional energy—durable, transpersonal structures of attachment and emotional solidarity, as well as negatively toned currents of hostility and aggression. The emotions, from this point of view, inhere not in " 'entities' that have been located in individuals, such as 'personalities' or 'attitudes,' " but rather in "*situational* ways of acting in conversational encounters" (Collins 1981, p. 1010), that is, in transactional dynamics. Some of the most significant research done in this vein appears in the "new structural social psychology." Randall Collins, for example, argues that enhanced levels of the physical density of transactions, together with the increasing ecological boundedness of a group, raise the group's focus of attention and the intensity of common emotions. For any actor, social life consists in a long series of such interaction rituals, "an intermittent chain of IRs" (Collins 1993, p. 210), with levels of emotional energy accumulating gradually across them. Collins envisions an emergent market of such rituals, with certain figurations yielding higher emotional energy rewards than others, yet requiring higher entry costs in the coin of emotional "investment." In this way, he opens up possibilities for mapping the structure of emotional flows across the broader social psychological environment. Structures of energy-enhancing ritual interactions would parallel in such a mapping the social structural and cultural figurations of the other two relational contexts of action. Collins is currently developing new computer software to chart these emotional flows with greater specificity.

Finally, relational analyses of *self-dynamics* and *individual psychology* have become increasingly prevalent. (Such investigations appear at a different level of analysis than those discussed above, the former being personal and the latter *transpersonal* in nature.) Relational studies of personality conceptualize it, not as fixed traits or dispositions that endure across times and contexts, but rather as a stable configuration of "distinctive *if-then* situation-behavior" transactions, or characteristic patterns of behavior within distinct but meaningfully similar circumstances. While the traditional substantialist perspective regards situations as "error" and aims to average out their effects by aggregating across them, the transactional approach takes the actor's pattern of engagement with "evoking situations" as its basic unit of analysis. "This shift call[s] attention away from

[35] Mention should also be made here of the work of Bruno Latour (1987), which combines relational thinking at both the social structural and cultural levels of analysis.

inferences about what broad traits a person *has,* to focus instead on what the person *does* in particular conditions in the coping process" (Mischel 1990, p. 116). One especially rich line of substantive research on such "behavioral signatures" is that of Walter Mischel and his associates in a series of studies of children in a residential summer camp. Through analysis of observations and computer codings of the children's behavior (undertaken by camp counselors as well as independent judges), these researchers find that "there are characteristic intraindividual patterns in how [the children] related to different psychological conditions and that these patterns form a sort of behavioral signature that reflects personality coherence" (Mischel and Shoda 1995, p. 251). Mischel and his associates do not map out these behavioral patterns sociometrically, but their findings certainly do point them in precisely such a direction (see White 1994*b*).

PERPLEXITIES, DIFFICULTIES, CHALLENGES

Thus far, I have discussed the considerable promise of transactional theory and research, saying relatively little about the issues that it has *not* yet fully resolved. Despite its many important contributions, this perspective still confronts a number of unanswered questions. In the section that follows, I shall survey the most significant of these problems, taking up in turn the issues of boundaries and entities, network dynamics, causality, and normative implications.

The problem of *boundary specification,* of moving from flows of transactions to clearly demarcated units of study, from continuity to discontinuity, is perhaps the most frequently encountered of all challenges to relational analysis. Social-network researchers, for example, continually grapple with the question of where to draw lines across relational webs possessing no clearcut, natural boundaries. Analogous questions arise in respect to cultural and social psychological matrices. No definitive solution has been found to such difficulties.[36] According to one set of network investigators, two basic strategies exist for demarcating boundaries: "realist" and "nominalist." The first takes the point of view of the actors involved, treating a network "as a social fact only in that it is consciously experienced as such by the actors composing it." The second proceeds from the concepts and purposes of the social-scientific observer instead,

[36] For studies of boundary drawing, see Silverstein (1979), Zerubavel (1991), and Lamont and Fournier (1992). Ronald Breiger notes (personal communication, July 11, 1996) that one "approach . . . is to internalize, or endogenize, or 'make reflexive' this problem within the frame of a relational analysis. (Substantialist) boundaries are [then] played off against boundaries defined by relations." For a substantive example, see Breiger (1981).

taking the correspondence between "the investigator's analytically drawn boundaries and the subjective awareness of these boundaries by participants [as] an empirical question rather than an assumption" (Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky 1983, pp. 20–21).[37] Thus, Bourdieu's concept of a "field of practice" falls squarely within the "nominalist" side of this distinction: its boundaries are drawn in accordance with the observer's (and not the participants') frame of reference. The overall intractability of the boundary problem, on the other hand, is eloquently attested to by the apparent circularity in Bourdieu's own "solution" to it: "We may think of a field as a space within which an effect of field is exercised. . . . The limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 100). When beginning with ramifying webs of relations rather than substances, it becomes notoriously difficult to justify the empirical boundaries that one draws.

Behind the analytical and methodological difficulties in setting boundaries, moreover, stand fundamental questions of an ontological nature. Once one defines the boundaries around a given matrix of transactions, how does one characterize what obtains *inside* those boundaries? When, if ever, does a set of relations actually count as a "thing," a substance, or an entity? In *Identity and Control,* Harrison White (1992) points out that some (although not all) clusters of events or transactions may be deemed entities. An entity or "identity," he asserts, is "any source of action not explicable from biophysical regularities, and to which observers can attribute meaning. . . . Clusters can come to be perceived as and act as identities, if they reappear repeatedly or in a variety of other contexts" (White 1992, pp. 6–7). Andrew Abbott (1996) further makes clear that not all "zones of difference" within a social process or social space become entities; the "entitativity" (Campbell 1958) of a recurrent phenomenon consists in its exhibiting two key features: "coherence," some structure of causes internal to it that permit it to recur, to "keep happening in the same way," and "causal authority," an "independent standing as a site of causation, as a thing with consequences . . . [an ability] to create an effect on the rest of the social process that goes beyond effects . . . merely transmitted through the causing entity from elsewhere" (Abbott 1996, p. 873). The difficulty, of course, is that neither element in Abbott's definition can be seen as given in a processual ontology; both must be explained. Identities

[37] Laumann et al. (1983) add that one can further distinguish three approaches (each with its attendant methodologies) that cut across the two just mentioned strategies for determining whether or not given actors will be included inside a boundary: possession of a specified attribute; involvement in a specified type of relationship; or participation in a given event or activity.

and entities are problematic in transactional approaches in ways that they never can be in a substantialist mode of analysis.[38]

Closely related to the vexing issues of boundaries and identities is that of *network dynamics*. Paradoxically (for a mode of study so intently focused upon processuality), relational sociology has the greatest difficulty in analyzing, not the structural features of static networks, whether these be cultural, social structural, or social psychological, but rather, the dynamic processes that *transform* those matrices of transactions in some fashion. Even studies of "processes-in-relations," in other words, too often privilege spatiality (or topological location) over temporality and narrative unfolding.[39] (The reason for this state of affairs can probably be traced back to the same hegemony of substantialism that makes self- and interactional approaches so very prevalent.) Again, the most promising "ways out" come from the relational analysis of social structures. In his inquiry into "structural holes," for example, Ronald Burt (1992) surveys the circumstances that maximize "structural autonomy," the capacity to exploit entrepreneurially whatever information and control benefits a network affords.[40] Burt's insight is that what best explains action are not the attributes of social actors themselves, but rather the complex figurations of relations (especially relations of absence, or "holes") to which they respond. (In principle, parallel arguments could also be developed in respect to cultural and social psychological figurations.) In a major network study,

[38] There is, in other words, an unavoidable trade-off in attendant "problems" when shifting from substantialist to relational points of view: "By making change our constant, we also exchange our explananda. It becomes necessary to explain reproduction, constancy, and entity-ness, rather than development and change." More to the point, Abbott continues, "the central reason for making this [shift] is practical. It is possible to explain reproduction as a phenomenon sometimes produced by perpetual change; it is not possible to explain change as a phenomenon sometimes produced by perpetual stasis" (Abbott, 1997, p. 98). It is difficult to imagine a more concise and persuasive articulation of the relative advantages of transactional vis-à-vis substantialist perspectives.

[39] For a classic case in point, see the celebrated article on blockmodeling by White, Boorman, and Breiger (1976), which provides no more than a mere succession of static representations (or "snapshots") of social structure. (For a critical analysis, see Emirbayer and Goodwin [1994].) More recent approaches (e.g., the special issue on network dynamics published by the *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* [1996]) provide exciting technical innovations but do not satisfactorily resolve the problem. In the area of cultural analysis, meanwhile, much the same can be said of the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), which itself rests quite explicitly upon a conceptual dichotomization of structure and time.

[40] According to his definition, "Players with relationships free of structural holes at their own end and rich in structural holes at the other end are structurally autonomous" (Burt 1992, p. 45).

John Padgett and Christopher Ansell (1993) combine this structural autonomy notion with a focus upon "robust action," the "flexible opportunism" made possible by certain actors' "structurally anomalous" locations within social networks marked by deep structural holes. Still other analysts (e.g., Gould and Fernandez 1989) examine the pivotal roles that "brokers" play in dynamic processes-in-relations. These researchers all converge upon the idea that network dynamics are dialectically related to network structures, each of these "moments" partially conditioning the other.

Yet another inquiry into dynamic processes is currently being carried out by Harrison White, whose major contribution has been to shift the analytic focus of attention away from social networks alone toward sociocultural units which he terms "network-domains," or "netdoms." (White speaks relatively little about social psychological formations.)[41] Actors continually "switch" between netdoms as they negotiate the subtle transitions, sometimes barely perceptible, among the various modes of social interaction that mark everyday life. "Publics," a simple example of which is the momentary "coffee break," facilitate such transitions; in them, social times and meanings pertaining to specific netdoms are suspended and network-domains themselves are "decoupled" from one another in a sort of "temporary bubble" of "continuing present time."[42] Switches also occur *within* netdoms, among the various "stories" or accountings of social reality that together are borne by and serve to constitute each network-domain. "In ordinary, everyday social relations," writes White, "multiple alternative accounts are being carried along until temporary resolutions at disjunctions which I call switches. At a switching, the continuing juggling among a set of stories is resolved into the account from which the next phase of reality constructing takes off, among relations cohering through that there and then" (White 1996, p. 1049). Here White invokes from statistical science the idea of "Bayesian forks" to capture the uncertainty or ambiguity—"What's going on here?"—that arises and is resolved at network switchings. By means of such phenomenological categories, White helps to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms driving network processes. What still remains missing from his account, on the other hand (as from other approaches to network dynamics outlined above), is any

[41] "Networks catch up especially the cross-sectional patterns of connection and resonance in interaction. Domains catch up especially the meanings and interpretations which are the phenomenology of process as talk. These two, networks and domains, come together for the type of tie and . . . for construction of social meanings and times" (White 1996, p. 1038).

[42] Publics ease switches because "it is easier to evolve a mere 2n ways to enter and exit a common public state from n distinctive network-domains than it is to evolve the much larger (n times $n - 1$) number of ways to switch from one to another of the network-domains" (White 1996, p. 1056).

systematic, normative consideration of the role of what Dewey termed "intelligence" in the intentional guidance and direction of human affairs. Social actors' reflexive engagement with the problems confronting them in their everyday lives remains significantly undertheorized in recent studies of network processes (more on this below as well).

A third related challenge facing the relational approach concerns *causality*. How are network dynamics to be accounted for? How are shifts in the content and direction of transactional flows to be explained? One persistent problem, yet another outgrowth of substantialist ways of reasoning, is the tendency even of many relational thinkers to depict causes as immaterial phenomena. Entities such as "forces," "factors," and "structures" are said to "impel" social substances, including persons and groups, down the causal path. Even figurations or patterns of relations (including structural holes) become substantives that putatively "move" action along in some fashion. Can causality be conceptualized in a more satisfactory way? One writer begins to address this problem by calling for a new "action language" for the social sciences. Roy Schafer (1976), a psychoanalytic theorist, proposes that we "regard each psychological [and, by extension, social] process, event, experience, or behavior as some kind of activity, henceforth to be called action, and . . . designate each action by an active verb stating its nature and by an adverb (or adverbial locution) when applicable, stating the mode of this action. Adopting this rule entails that, insofar as it is possible to do so sensibly, we shall not use nouns and adjectives to refer to [transactional] processes, events, etc." (Schafer 1976, p. 9). A sentence such as "their disadvantaged position led to heightened competitiveness" should thus be translated as "they responded to their disadvantageous situation by acting more competitively." Social actors themselves, in gamelike transactions within ever-changing contexts, do all of the acting in social life, not some imaginary entities within or without them, as in the substantialist worldviews of self- or interaction.

Of course, such a methodological prescription remains useful only insofar as one bears in mind that not all social actors are individual persons: in certain contexts, organizations or other identities might also be deemed actors for purposes of transactional analysis. More important, social actors are always embedded in space and time; they respond to specific *situations* (opportunities as well as constraints) rather than pursuing lines of conduct in purely solipsistic fashion. The narratives of their responses (together with the situations within which these occur) help to explain how causes actually produce effects in history. Action language, in other words, clears the ground for causal analysis by eliminating reified structures as "causal factors," yet it needs to be supplemented by an explicit concern for the "situational mechanisms" (Stinchcombe 1991) that actually channel flows of events. Such mechanisms provide an answer to those who would sug-

gest (as variable-centered analysts often do, e.g.) that action language abandons the search for causal generalities in social life. Tilly provides an example of the sort of mechanism one might now be looking for: "The relationship among an activity, the set of agents that control the means that might make that activity possible, and the bargaining that goes on between the agents of the activity and those who hold the resources, produce unexpected sets of structures that themselves constrain the next round of action. . . . The causal mechanism lies in the bargaining that comes out of resistance to release the resources that are already committed to other ends. . . . The general cause lies in that struggle over control over wanted resources" (Tilly 1993, p. 6). This approach to causation retains the action orientation that Schafer advocates, yet avoids the latter's tendency toward pure voluntarism by insisting upon a search for robust explanatory processes that operate across a multiplicity of social situations.

Finally, the *normative implications* of relational inquiry come into question when one considers what sorts of moral and practical leverage such inquiry might provide in respect to social realities. We can distinguish here between "critical" and "reconstructive" implications. Preeminent among the former is the capacity afforded by transactional thinking to "unfreeze" static, substantialist categories that deny the fluidity—hence, the mutability—of figurational patternings. In present-day cultural studies, for example, "essentialist" modes of thinking all too often see individuals and collectivities as possessing singular, unitary "identities" rooted in race, class, gender, or sexuality; putatively, such fixed attributional features explain both "interests" and action unproblematically.[43] Nor is such essentialism limited to cultural analysis alone; contemporary "identity politics" largely revolves around the attempt similarly to thematize (as well as to legitimize) particular collective identities (e.g., "African-American," "Latina woman") long devalued in mainstream culture. More clearly pernicious essentialisms (e.g., racism, [hetero-]sexism, xenophobic nationalism) share in such reasoning, if not in its progressive ideological agenda. Now, categories certainly do matter a great deal in social life; as W. I. Thomas famously pointed out, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572). Moreover, categorical thinking can have crucial critical implications, such as normatizing previously devalued categories or redistributing resources by means of social policy. Yet, transactional thinking contests the intrinsically

[43] Versions of cultural studies that speak in more nuanced terms of the intersection of *multiple* identities, as in the category of "black lesbians," add considerable complexity to the picture, yet still do not escape the difficulties that pertain to all categorical, substantialist thinking.

reified nature of *all* categories: it shows how they "totalize" identities that are in fact often multidimensional and contradictory; prescribe modes of thought and action against which alternatives can only be labeled "deviant"; naturalize rigid distinctions that suppress possibilities for creative (self-) transformation; and, most generally, accept rather than contest the historically variable relational matrices that serve to constitute invidious distinctions and categorizations in the first place (Somers and Gibson 1994, pp. 55–57).[44] Transactional thinking, in a word, deconstructs a taken-for-granted moral universe; in so doing, it attacks in moral and practical life the very same tendencies toward "process-reduction" that Elias so forcefully underscored at the level of cognition.[45]

In a more reconstructive vein, relational reasoning also speaks directly to the problem of what is to count as a "better" or "worse" line of conduct (or end point of action), from an ethical or political point of view. If values are not preconstituted substances, then whence do they arise and how are they to be evaluated? What kinds of transactions ought to be most highly valued in a processual, relational view of the world? Such issues, which have long vexed transactional theorists, are perhaps most provocatively addressed by classical American pragmatists such as John Dewey—with whom we began—and George Herbert Mead (although they were also engaged with in similar ways by Bakhtin [1993] and later by Jürgen Habermas [1984–87]). For the pragmatists, normative implications flow naturally out of the central concept of transaction itself: "Values are not simply objective givens, which are independent of human existence. They are, however, also not merely the product of the subjective evaluation of objects which are essentially neutral with regard to this evaluation. Rather . . . the evaluation is the result of an 'interaction' [or transaction] of subject and object" (Joas 1985, p. 131). Thus, values are by-products of actors' engagement with one another in ambiguous and challenging circumstances, which emerge when individuals experience a discordance between the claims of multiple normative commitments. Problematic situa-

[44] See n. 38, above. In practical politics and cultural struggle, social actors often invoke collective identities strategically, even as they question categorical thinking theoretically. "The point . . . is not to stop studying identity formation, or even to abandon all forms of identity politics, but rather . . . to rely on notions of identity and identity politics for their strategic utility while remaining vigilant against reification" (Epstein 1994, p. 197).

[45] For examples of self-consciously deconstructionist, "poststructuralist" thinking in respect to questions of identity, see Scott (1988) and Sedgwick (1990). Relationalism by no means entails adoption of all aspects of deconstructionism, even if it does share important features with it. The continuities (and discontinuities) between deconstructionism (Derrida 1974), on the one hand, and contemporary relational perspectives—from neopragmatism (esp. Rorty 1982) to social-network theory (esp. White 1992), on the other—would make for a valuable comparative study.

tions of this sort become resolved only when actors reconstruct the relational contexts within which they are embedded, and in the process, transform their own values and themselves: "The appearance of . . . different interests in the forum of reflection [leads to] the reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object" (Mead 1964, p. 149).

Appealing visions of both action and order follow directly from this line of reasoning. The rational resolution of problem-situations—a matter of action—requires capacities for prudential reasoning and practical judgment, which the pragmatists (beginning with Dewey) termed "intelligence." In this mode of action, "the individual . . . take[s] into account all of those interests [that are implicated in a given situation] and then make[s] out a plan of action which will rationally deal with those interests" (Mead 1934, p. 388; see Emirbayer and Mische, in press). The actor puts himself in the place of the other, broadens his own point of view through argumentative engagement with the latter, and attains in this manner to ever more comprehensive, cosmopolitan, universalistic perspectives. In parallel fashion, the ideal mode of mutual engagement or transaction—a matter of order—entails a free and open communication of actors in a universal community, a relational matrix within which both cooperation and conflict are rationally regulated. This "mode of associated living"—in a word, democracy—embodies moral intelligence on a transpersonal scale; it involves "conjoint communicated experience" in which practical reasoning is undertaken in common, through inquiry into moral and political problems on the model of an experimental science (Dewey 1980, p. 93). Such a point of view—as it pertains to both action and order—does resolve many problems concerning the normative implications of relational reasoning, while also remaining well within a transactional frame of reference. What it does not adequately address, however, is the question of whether the relevant standards of normative judgment are to be substantive or merely procedural: Does the idea of free and open communication in transactional processes mean nothing other than a formal method of intelligent reasoning, or does it lead to a view of moral character and collective social arrangements that is more contentful? This is a question that relational thinkers continue to be troubled by (to the extent that they address it at all), and that they have not yet—and may never—satisfactorily resolve.[46]

[46] One of the most serious shortcomings of relational sociology to date is its relative neglect of normative concerns, despite the profound interpenetration (in true transactionalist fashion) of all questions of "is" and "ought" in social-scientific analysis.

CONCLUSION

Such unresolved issues and problems notwithstanding, of course, the promise of a relational mode of sociological inquiry remains considerable. Philosophically, theoretically, and empirically, it offers a compelling alternative to the currently ascendant perspectives of self- and interaction, and to their present-day champions in rational-choice, neo-Kantian, structuralist, and variable-based sociologies. New and exciting approaches to cultural, social structural, and social psychological analysis already exemplify this vast potential; ongoing efforts at the reconstruction of major theoretical concepts further attest to it. Moreover, social thinkers from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, national traditions, and analytic and empirical points of view are fast converging upon this frame of reference, often without even grasping its full significance. A set of assumptions—some might call it a paradigm—that first attained to systematic expression in sociological theory, as in other fields such as physics, near the turn of the century (its antecedents reach much farther back in time, of course) is finally now, at the close of the century, starting to receive the widespread attention it so richly deserves. Despite the sharp attention accorded to so many other debates, dualisms, and oppositions in sociology, the choice between substantialist and relational modes of inquiry, a choice of bedrock assumptions regarding the very nature of social reality itself, is fast becoming the most important and consequential dividing line in sociological investigation.

Many challenges lie ahead; the preceding section discussed only a few of the most significant. Relational theorists and researchers must now focus upon several tasks. One is to explore ever more aggressively the analytical levels of culture and collective emotions, importing into these problem areas many of the same insights and research techniques already elaborated by network analysts but also exploiting, for example, the exciting new approaches developed by sociolinguists and social psychological researchers. (Analysts have been moving into the culture field in ever increasing numbers but as yet the study of transpersonal emotional flows—the social psychological dimension—has remained seriously underdeveloped.) Second, and relatedly, transactional researchers must strive resolutely to maintain theoretical consistency *across* levels of analysis, not only in their more case-specific explanations, but also, and especially, in their general efforts at theory-building. Often the wariness of social thinkers today regarding comprehensive theorization (an outdated carryover from earlier battles against the Parsonian legacy?) leads to an all too easy acceptance of hybrid models (e.g., juxtapositions of rational-actor with network-analytic approaches). The richness and breadth of relational ways

of thinking allow one to avoid such ad hoc reasoning and to develop causal explanations more self-consciously within a unitary frame of reference. And finally, transactional thinkers must begin to systematize some of the alternative ways in which central issues and problems have been thematized from within their own tradition. Internal debates will be lifted to a much higher plane—and theory-building facilitated—once analysts begin to see differences, for example, between Bourdieu and Foucault on "power," between Tilly and Somers on "culture," or between Dewey and White on "intelligence," as alternative ways of proceeding from the selfsame philosophical premises regarding processes-in-relations. Only then will transactional sociologists be able fully to grasp the possibilities and choices confronting them; only then will they (and the sociological discipline more generally) finally arrive at the theoretical clarity and reflexivity that they have long been capable of attaining.[47]

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[47] Lest this "manifesto" seem incomplete without one, I shall offer one final rallying-cry: *Entities of the World—Relate!* Both descriptive and prescriptive, with implications both causal and normative, this statement (despite slight *inter*actional overtones) nicely captures the rich possibilities inherent in the relational, transactional vision of social reality.

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