

Relational Sociology, Culture, and Agency¹

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One of the debates surrounding social network analysis has been whether it consists of a method or a theory. Is network analysis merely a cluster of techniques for analyzing the structure of social relationships, or does it constitute a broader conceptual framework, theoretical orientation, or even philosophy of life? In an article two decades ago synthesizing emerging work on social networks, Barry Wellman argued that network analysis goes beyond methodology to inform a new theoretical paradigm: “structural analysis does not derive its power from the partial application of this concept or that measure. It is a comprehensive paradigmatic way of taking social structure seriously by studying directly how patterns of ties allocate resources in a social system” (Wellman 1988, p. 20). This paradigm, he goes on to argue, takes relations – rather than individuals, groups, attributes, or categories – as the fundamental unit of social analysis. This argument was taken up a few years later by Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, who described the new “anti-categorical imperative” introduced by network analysis and explored its relationship to research on cultural and historical change (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994).

While disagreement remains among network analysts regarding this issue, a broader “relational perspective” within sociology has been simmering for the past three decades, often involving scholars who themselves do not use formal network methodology, or who use it only marginally in their research. Inspired by such eminent figures as Harrison White and Charles Tilly, this perspective has taken some of the broader theoretical insights of network analysis and extended them to the realms of culture, history, politics, economics, and social psychology. Fundamental to this theoretical orientation (if it can be called that) is not merely the insistence that what sociologists call “structure” is intrinsically relational, but also, perhaps more deeply, that relational thinking is a way to overcome stale antinomies between structure and agency through a focus on the dynamics of social interactions in different kinds of social settings.

In this chapter, I will explore the historical origins of this perspective and its positioning in broader intellectual networks. While a relational orientation has germinated in a number of

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different intellectual hubs (and is certainly not limited to sociology²), I will focus in particular on the emergence of what might be called “the New York School” of relational sociology during the 1990s and the constitution of a cluster of scholars working in diverse subfields who elaborated this perspective in partially intersecting ways. I go on to explore four distinct ways in which scholars have conceptualized the relationship between networks and culture, with implications for different kinds of substantive research. I argue that these conversations propose a new theoretical agenda that highlights the way in which communicative interaction and the performance of social relations mediate between structure and agency across a wide range of social phenomena.

The New York School

To explain the emergence of what I am calling the “New York School” of relational analysis, we can use the conceptual framework that was elaborated in its own conversations and debates. New York in the 1990s was home to a set of interstitial spaces of conversation and debate, composing what some within this perspective might call “publics,” using a particular networked meaning of that term that I will discuss in more detail below. These publics brought together senior scholars – notably, White and Tilly – who were undergoing intensive reformulation of their own theoretical frameworks, in (sometimes contentious) dialogue with emerging younger scholars who were advancing new theoretical syntheses and critiques, as well as graduate students composing original frameworks for empirical research.

To borrow from two strongly relational (although somewhat discordant) theories of intellectual innovation, these publics were sources of intellectual opposition, energy and excitement (Collins 1998), and also of experimental probing of fractal divides in theoretical perspectives, particularly those related to realism and constructivism as well as positivism and interpretivism (Abbott 2001a). Participants in these discussions were linked by multiple ties that were forged and enacted in a series of partially overlapping discursive settings (workshops, mini-conferences, study groups, dissertation committees), facilitated by a set of prominent scholars who were extraordinarily attuned to the democratic exchange of ideas. As participants wrestled with the tensions generated in these conversations, they developed not a unified theory (important differences remain among them), but rather a shared focus on the communicative grounding of network relations and the implications of these relations for understanding dynamic social processes.

To trace the emergence of this perspective, we need to examine the structural holes that it was bridging, as well as the intersecting intellectual streams that gave it a distinctive voice. During the mid 1990s, social network analysis was maturing as a field, with the publication of several handbooks and edited volumes (Wellman and Berkowitz 1988; Scott 1991; Wasserman

² Additional relational perspectives in adjacent fields include a budding movement in political science (e.g., Nexon and Wright 2007; Jackson 2002) as well as important work in science and technology studies (e.g., Knorr Cetina 2003). Actor network theory as developed by Latour, Callon, Law and others shares a deep focus on relations as productive of action, including non-human objects and sites in its network imagery (see Law and Hassard 1999; Muetzel 2009). Other relevant European work includes the systemic and configurational perspectives of Luhmann and Elias (see Fuhse 2009; Fuchs 2001), as well as “the new mobilities” literature (Sheller and Urry 2007), which combines elements from anthropology and cultural studies and resists some of the depoliticizing elements in ANT.

and Faust 1994), the development of software packages such as UCINET, and the expansion of its professional association, INSNA (founded in 1978, but growing beyond its initial tight knit base in the 1990s). However, much of the work in the field was highly formal and technical, thus making it relatively inaccessible to non-mathematical researchers who otherwise might have gravitated toward its core ideas. Most cultural theorists saw network analysis as located squarely in the positivist camp, reducing cultural richness to 1s and 0s and lacking attention to processes of interpretation and meaning-construction.

At the same time, the subfield of cultural sociology in the United States was undergoing a rapid expansion and shift in orientation, moving beyond the study of artistic production to encompass practice and discourse more generally. The Culture Section of the ASA grew from a relatively marginal section in the early 1990s to one of the largest sections by the mid 2000s. Moreover, cultural sociology often overlapped with other sub-areas, especially political sociology, comparative-historical sociology, and the study of collective behavior and social movements, thus creating significant subfield cross-fertilization. While a handful of researchers in the late 1980s and early 1990s pioneered the use of network analytic techniques to study cultural and historical processes (notably Erickson 1988, 1996; Carley 1992; Bearman 1993; Mohr 1994; Gould 1995), a sizeable gap remained between formal network analysis and more interpretively oriented cultural research.

These streams converged in the mid-1990s in New York City, as a cluster of scholars across several area universities engaged in a series of intensive exchanges related to networks, culture, and historical analysis. One center for these debates was Columbia University, where Harrison White arrived from Harvard (via Arizona) in 1988, taking on the directorship of the Paul F. Lazarsfeld Center for the Social Sciences.³ Under White's leadership, the Lazarsfeld Center sponsored a series of ongoing interdisciplinary workshops on topics including social networks, sociolinguistics, complex systems, and political economy. These workshops brought in outside speakers while sponsoring graduate students and nurturing local research and debate across intersecting intellectual domains. During this period, White began thinking deeply about the origins and transformations of language, involving many young scholars in these discussions.⁴

Likewise, the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research was a sometimes tempestuous hub of interdisciplinary debate. In the mid 1980s, then Dean Ira Katznelson recruited a cluster of top scholars – including Charles and Louise Tilly, Janet Abu-Lughod, Talal Asad, Richard Bense, Eric Hobsbawm, Ari Zolberg and others – that added new voices to the

³ In 1999 the name of the Lazarsfeld Center was changed to the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP), under the direction of Peter Bearman. Other network analysts at Columbia in the late 80s/early 1990s included Ron Burt (who helped to bring White to Columbia), Eric Leifer and Martina Morris, although all three of them had left by the mid-1990s.

⁴ New York area students centrally involved in discussions about networks and culture at the Lazarsfeld Center during the mid-1990s included David Gibson, Melissa Fischer, Salvatore Pitruzzello and Matthew Bothner (from Columbia); Ann Mische and Mimi Sheller (from the New School); and Shepley Orr, a visiting scholar from Chicago. Earlier students in this ambit who also worked with Burt, Leifer and Morris included Shin-Kap Han, Holly Raider, Valli Rajah, Andres Ruj, and Hadya Iglie. While my own degree was at the New School (supervised by Tilly) I was a visiting scholar at the Lazarsfeld Center from 1994-98 and a post-doc from 1998-99.

Graduate Faculty's already strong grounding in normative theories of civil society. Debates between critical theorists, post-structuralists and structurally-oriented historical scholars were frequent and intense, and as I argue below, helped to push Tilly toward a re-examination of the role of identities, narratives, and discourse in theories of contentious politics, as he developed the synthesis he labeled "relational realism." In 1991, Mustafa Emirbayer arrived at the New School as an assistant professor. While he himself came from a strongly interpretive tradition, he became interested in network analysis from watching his White-inspired peers at Harvard, and with his fellow Harvard alum Jeff Goodwin at NYU began writing an article to explore what all this fuss about network analysis was about (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). The conversations sparked by this network of New York area scholars – in dialogue with a broader circle of researchers elsewhere – set the stage for the consolidation of a perspective that crossed a series of fractal divides, linking network relations with discourse, identities, and social interaction.

Harrison White began what might be called his "linguistic turn" in the early 1990s with the publication of his major theoretical statement, *Identity and Control* (1992). Harrison had been preoccupied since the 1970s with the lack of theoretical understanding of what he called "types of ties," the basic measurement unit of the mathematical approach to network analysis that he and his students pioneered at Harvard in the 1970s. In *Identity and Control*, he wrestles with this question by proposing the narrative constitution of social networks. Social ties, he argues, are generated by reporting attempts in relation to contending efforts at control: "a tie becomes constituted by story, which defines a social time by its narrative of ties" (White 1992 p. 67). Since ties are multiple, fluid, and narratively constructed (and reconstructed) in relation to evolving timeframes, the new challenge for network analysis, White argued, was to understand this link between temporality, language and social relations.

Fascinated by these connections, he began to probe more deeply into work on language usage, function and evolution. In conjunction with a group of graduate students, he carried out an intensive reading of sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and theories of linguistic change. He was especially attuned to work on the link between semantics, grammar, and interaction context (Halliday 1976, 1978; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Schriften 1987), as well as studies of tense (Comrie 1985) and the indexical (or "deictic") nature of language use (Hanks 1992; Silverstein 2003). He saw in contextualized grammatical references to time, space, and relations the link between language, networks, and what he called "social times." His attention to linguistic work on code switching (Gumperz 1992) inspired some of his ideas on switching dynamics between network-domain (see below). Moreover, he saw work on "grammaticalization" (Hopper and Traugott 1993) as important for understanding how language emerges and shifts in relation to usage patterns in particular relational contexts. He also engaged with Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogic theory, seeing the notion of "speech genre" as grounded in a relational semiotics attuned to multiple and shifting ties.

Many of these ideas were elaborated in his ongoing graduate seminar on "Identity and Control" at Columbia, as well as in the student-organized workshops on sociolinguistics and social networks at the Lazarsfeld Center. These workshops contributed to a series of articles and working papers that focused on the relationship between language, time, and social relations (White 1993, 1994, 1995) as well as an article with Ann Mische highlighting the disruptive potential of conversational "situations" (Mische and White 1998). These papers propose the

notion of “network-domains” as specialized sets of ties and associated story-sets that keep those ties moving forward in time through a continuous process of reflection, reporting and updating. With the complexity of modern life, White argues, we are continuously forced to switch between multiple network-domains (or “netdoms”), thus creating the need for the buffering in the transitional zones of “publics.”

White’s notion of publics is an innovative twist on Goffman’s work on interaction in public spaces; within the bubble of publics, participants experience a momentary sense of connectedness due to the suspension of surrounding ties. Such publics can range from silent encounters in an elevator to cocktail parties, carnivals, or protest rallies, all of which involve a provisional equalization of relationships and decoupling from stories and relation around them, which nevertheless may threaten to impinge on and disrupt the situation at hand (White 1995; Mische and White 1998). “The social network of the public is perceived as fully connected, because other network-domains and their particular histories are suppressed. Essential to its mechanism is a decoupling of times, whereby time in public is always a continuing present time, an historic present” (White 1995, p. 1054). Empirical work building on Goffman’s notion of publics has since been developed by several participants in those discussions, including Mische on communicative styles in Brazilian activist publics, Gibson on turn-taking dynamics in managerial groups, Ikegami on Japanese aesthetic publics and Sheller on black anti-slavery publics in Haiti and Jamaica (described in more detail below).

Between 1993 and 1996, White organized a series of mini-conferences at the Lazarsfeld Center around the themes of time, language, identities, and networks. A broad range of outside scholars took part in these mini-conferences, thus helping cross-fertilize the emerging “relational” perspective (see footnote below for a full list gleaned from conference records).⁵ At one of these mini-conferences, Mustafa Emirbayer was inspired to write a programmatic statement that systematized some of the ideas that were being discussed in the group. The resulting “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” (Emirbayer 1997) draws on pragmatist, linguistic, and interactionist philosophies as well as historical and network analysis to develop a critique of “substantialist” approaches to social analysis. He calls instead for a “transactional” approach focusing on the dynamics of “supra-personal” relations that transcend individual actors, and discusses the implications of this approach for historical, cultural, and social psychological analysis. This widely cited article has become one of the rallying cries of the “new relational” approach in sociology, articulating its underlying philosophy in an expansive manner that goes beyond the use of mathematical techniques.

While he was working on this article, Emirbayer was also organizing a study group on Theory and Culture at the New School that brought in graduate students and some faculty from the broader New York area (including the New School, Columbia, NYU, Princeton, CUNY and other schools). Most of the authors discussed by the group were strongly relational in orientation, including Andrew Abbott, Pierre Bourdieu, Hans Joas, Alessandro Pizzorno,

⁵ Outside participants in these mid-90s mini-conferences at Columbia included Andrew Abbott, Ron Breiger, Jerome Bruner, Kathleen Carley, Aaron Cicourel, Elisabeth Clemens, Randall Collins, Michael Delli-Carpini, Paul DiMaggio, Mustafa Emirbayer, Robert Faulkner, Michael Hechter, Eiko Ikegami, Walter Mischel, William Ocasio, John Padgett, Philippa Pattison, Richard Schweder, Ann Swidler, Charles Tilly, Chris Winship, Viviana Zelizer and others,

William Sewell, Margaret Somers and Norbert Wiley, among others. This group also discussed drafts of Emirbayer's "Manifesto," as well as a series of related articles exploring the interface between relations and culture. His now classic 1994 article with Jeff Goodwin was followed by an article with Ann Mische that develops a strongly relational theory of human agency, focusing on the embedding of actors in multiple socio-temporal contexts, with varied orientations toward past, present, and future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Emirbayer also published a paper with Mimi Sheller exploring the network composition of publics as interstitial locations for the exchange of ideas (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999). Sheller (2000) extends these ideas in her comparison of the linguistic markers and network embedding of black anti-slavery counter-publics in Haiti and Jamaica, showing how these influenced the differing trajectories of post-abolition civil societies.

Several study group participants (including Mische and Sheller) were also students of Charles Tilly at the New School, where they participated in another essential public for discussion of relational sociology: Tilly's Workshop on Contentious Politics. This workshop was started by Chuck and Louise Tilly at Michigan in the 1970s, transplanted to the New School in the late 1980s, and then relocated again when Tilly moved to Columbia in 1996 (with several name changes along the way). This famously democratic workshop drew in faculty and students from the greater New York region, in addition to many notable international scholars. Students and younger researchers presented work-in-progress alongside senior scholars and were encouraged to offer commentary and critique. During the 1990s, Tilly was undergoing an important transition in his thinking, spurred by debates in the workshop as well as challenges he was receiving from normative and post-structuralist scholars at the New School. He was moving from a resolute structuralism (developed in opposition to the normative orientation of Parsonian functionalism) to a deep engagement with cultural processes of identity-formation, narratives, and boundary construction, rethought in dynamic, relational terms.

While a focus on relations and interaction was integral to Tilly's thinking from the beginning (Diani 2007; Tarrow 2008), at the New School he began to pay closer attention to the ways in which such relations are constructed through processes of meaning-making. Tilly responded to what he saw as the solipsistic dangers of post-structuralism by, as he described it, "tunneling under the post-modern challenge." As Viviana Zelizer writes, this meant not only recognizing "that a great deal of social construction goes into the formation of entities – groups, institutions markets, selves," but also calling on social scientists "to explain how that construction actually works and produces its effects" (Zelizer 2006a, p. 531). This is the perspective he called "relational realism," which he contrasted to "methodological individualism," "phenomenological individualism," and "holism" in a series of broad theoretical statements in the highly productive final decade of his life. He defines relational realism as "the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life" (Tilly 2004 p. 72; see also Tilly 1995; Somers 1998).

The evolution of this shift can be seen in a series of essays, books and working papers that addressed the relational dimensions of identities, narratives, and boundaries (many of which are collected in Tilly 2004, 2006a). In these papers, he continually stressed that political process is best understood as a "conversation," a trope that captures the dynamic association between discourse, relations, and interaction (Tilly 1998a). In *Durable Inequality* (Tilly 1998b), he turns

his attention away from contentious politics to look at the relational origins of inequality, focusing on how durable, exclusionary categories emerge as solutions to relational and institutional problems. Early chapter drafts of this book were workshopped by White and others at the Lazarsfeld Center at Columbia – showing again the multiple intersections in the New York milieu. The emphasis on the dynamic dimension of relationships – including discursive mechanisms of attribution, identity activation, and boundary shift – is forcefully expressed in Tilly’s collaborative work with Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam et al 2001), as well as in a series of other articles describing “relational mechanisms” as key elements in explaining political processes. This attention to the social dynamics of stories can also be seen in his later popular work, *Why?* (Tilly 2006b), which describes the relational underpinnings of different kinds of reason-giving.

Several other prominent New York area scholars engaged in this local dialogue on culture, relations, and contentious politics, often participating in several of the workshops described above. Karen Barkey (at Columbia) and Eiko Ikegami (at Yale) both completed major historical works on relational dimensions of the transformation of state bureaucratic control in the Ottoman Empire and Japan, respectively (Barkey 1994; Barkey and van Rossem 1997; Ikegami 1995, 2000). Ikegami’s second book (2005) builds directly on White’s language work by examining the emergence of new forms of civility across aesthetic networks in Tokugawa Japan. Francesca Polletta finished several important books and articles while at Columbia focusing on communicative processes of deliberation and storytelling in political protest; her work has a strongly relational focus, albeit with a more interpretive grounding than either White or Tilly (Polletta 2002, 2006). Polletta collaborated with Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper (at NYU) in a volume on the role of emotions in social movements (Goodwin et al 2001); this theme was taken further by Goodwin and Jasper in a series of critical articles challenging the structural bias of social movement theory and arguing for a revived focus on culture, creativity, strategy and emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 2004; see also Jasper 1997, 2006).

In addition, other Tilly students from the New School and Columbia during that period blend a focus on relations, culture and interaction without using mathematical network analytic techniques. Javier Auyero (2001, 2003) examines interpretation, performance, and networks in his study of poor people’s protest and politics in Latin America, drawing heavily on Tilly’s notion of “relational mechanisms.” John Krinsky (2007) studies the co-constitution of discourse, relations, and contentious events in struggles over welfare to work programs in New York City. Chad Goldberg (2007) examines the reconstruction of the discourse of citizenship through struggles over class, race, and welfare rights. And Victoria Johnson (2008) explores the relationship between organizations, culture, and social relations in her study of the historical transformations of the Paris Opera. In addition to their work with Tilly, these scholars are all strongly influenced by Bourdieu’s work on the relational sources of cultural distinction; Goldberg and Johnson co-authored articles with Emirbayer exploring the links between Bourdieu and other branches of research (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Goldberg, Johnson and Krinsky were also participants in the New School Theory and Culture group, along with Mische, Gibson, and Sheller.

Additional scholars arriving at Columbia in the late 1990s helped to cement its position as a hub for relational sociology. David Stark came to Columbia from Cornell in 1997, bringing

a focus on the complex network combinatorics involved in political and economic transitions. Duncan Watts was a post-doctoral fellow in 1997-98 and joined the faculty in 2000, contributing additional mathematical expertise in relation to his work on small world networks (Watts 1999). And in 1999 Peter Bearman arrived at Columbia from Chapel Hill, adding an important voice to the local contingent working at the border of networks and culture (see below). Many other Columbia PhDs since 2000 have studied with some combination of White, Tilly and these relationally oriented scholars.⁶ Most of these students have combined attention to networks and discourse in some way, building on the work from the previous decade described above.

In short, the New York area in the 1990s and 2000s was a rich hub of conversation that contributed to a reformulation of the link between networks, culture and social interaction. I would suggest that we can explain these conceptual innovations by drawing on the core concepts developed in these discussions, described in more detail below. The “publics” convened across these New York universities were characterized by a complex web of overlapping ties (colleagueship, co-authorship, dissertation advising, workshop participation, study group membership) as well as frequent cross-fertilization by visiting scholars from allied perspectives. The equalizing dynamic that was famously characteristic of White and Tilly is analogous to the “open regimes” – combined with geographic proximity – that institutional scholars have seen as critical to innovation (e.g., Owen-Smith and Powell 2004). While Columbia and the New School served as key incubators, researchers from other area universities (NYU, Princeton, Yale, SUNY, CUNY, Rutgers, Penn and others) joined in these partially overlapping conversations. What emerged was a perspective that straddled positivist and interpretivist positions, stressing the mutual constitution of networks and discourse, the communicative nature of social ties, and the interplay between multiple relations in social action. As I argue below, these researchers also show how a focus on interaction, performance and social dynamics helps to mediate (if not resolve) the tension between structure and agency.

Four approaches to the link between networks and culture

While I have been focusing so far on the emergence in the 1990s of a cluster of scholars in the New York area, this group is embedded in a much broader intellectual network of researchers who have been contributing to discussions about networks, culture, and agency for the past three decades. Although this work is international in scope and has developed in dialogue with the highly relational work of European scholars such as Bourdieu, Luhmann and Elias (see Fuchs 2001; Fuhse 2009), the link between networks and culture has been most clearly elaborated in a set of closely linked American universities. Harvard has repeatedly served as a hub for the development of network analysis since the 1970s; many early scholars linking networks and culture (such as Bearman, Carley, Emirbayer, Goodwin, Gould, Ikegami, Morrill and Somers) have come out of the second wave of White-inspired conversation in the 1980s. Chicago has been a second hub, housing important debates over contingency, creativity, and multiple networks, while Princeton has been central in linking social ties to culture, institutions,

⁶ Other Columbia PhDs since 2000 include Delia Baldassari, Matthew Bothner, Andrew Buck, Emily Erickson, Jorge Fontdevila, Fumiko Fukase-Indergaard, Frederic Godart, Jo Kim, Sun-Chul Kim, Hennig Hillman, Jennifer Lena, Denise Milstein, Sophie Mützel, Paolo Parigi, Joyce Robbins, Tammy Smith, Takeshi Wada, Cecilia Walsh-Russo, Leslie Wood, Balazs Vedres and others. Most of these scholars have highly relational approaches building on the perspective described here; I regret that space constraints keep me from going into detail on them all.

inequality, and economic relations. Toronto, Stony Brook, Arizona, UC Irvine, Michigan, Berkeley, UNC-Chapel Hill, Stanford and Rutgers have also been important centers for relational sociology at different periods in time.

I will incorporate this expanded group in discussing four distinct ways in which the link between networks and culture has been conceptualized over this period. Since much work in this area is detailed in other chapters in this volume (especially Valente, DiMaggio), my analysis will be schematic rather than exhaustive, sketching some of the main analytic tendencies linking culture, networks, and agency. Many of my examples come from the field of social movements and contentious politics, since this is the work I know best; however, work in this area extends to other substantive subfields as well. I will demonstrate how each of these perspectives builds on the shortcomings of the others in constructing a more dynamic, processual account of the culture-network link.

1. *Networks as conduits for culture:* One of the earliest and most straightforward ways of linking culture with networks has been to see networks as carriers or “pipelines” of social influence, in the form of attitudes, ideas, and innovations. As other chapters discuss in more depth (e.g., Valente, this volume), a variety of mechanisms for the transmission and diffusion of cultural ideas have been proposed by network researchers since the 1950s. These range from simple contact, information flow, and opinion leadership (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) to normative pressure in relationships (Coleman, Katz and Mendel 1966) to competitive mimicry based on structural equivalence (Burt 1987). The idea of networks as conduits for cultural transmission has been extended to the diffusion of social movement participation and repertoires of contention, often drawing upon rational choice theories of the critical mass (Granovetter 1978; Marwell, Oliver and Prahl 1988; Oliver and Myers 2004; Kim and Bearman 1997). The concept of “tipping points,” taken from critical mass theory, has been popularized by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) and been heavily influential in studies of marketing and consumption, although some tenets of this theory have been recently challenged by Duncan Watts and colleagues using models of influence in small world networks (Watts and Dodds 2007; Watts 1999; see also Gibson 2005b).

What characterizes these approaches is the assumption that the cultural elements (information, ideas, attitudes, practices) are something external to the networks. Network relations serve as conduits of transmission or influence from one node to the next, but the nodes and ties have an existence that is independent of the cultural object, attitude, or practice that travels across them. Social ties contribute to the adoption and diffusion of cultural elements, but are not themselves composed by cultural practices. While this approach has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural flows, it is grounded in a limited and substantialist account of the relationship between networks and culture. Network nodes and ties are seen as pre-given and unproblematic, as are the cultural goods that move between nodes; as a result both networks and cultural processes take on a reified quality that eclipses their mutual constitution.

2. *Networks as shaping culture (or vice versa):* A second major theoretical perspective focuses on the causal relationship between networks and culture, that is, how networks shape culture, or vice versa. While this perspective shares some characteristics with the “cultural conduit” approach – particularly the role of social influence – it places a stronger emphasis on

the culturally generative dimension of network structures. There are three main variants on this approach: a focus on network clusters as *incubators* of culture; on network positions as generating categorical identities (or *catnets*); and on network *bridges* as a source of cultural resources and creativity. Finally, there has recently been a move in the other direction, showing how cultural factors (such as tastes and moral frameworks) create relational affinities that shape network structure.

The first of these variations, which I'll call the *incubator* approach, focuses on the intense commitments and solidarities generated by location within particular network clusters or enclaves. Alberto Melucci (1989) for example, describes how social movement identities develop in submerged countercultural networks (see also Taylor and Whittier 1992); Donatella della Porta (1988) notes that tight knit, strong tie networks may be especially important for supporting engagement in high risk activism. Overlapping involvements can intensify the incubator effect (Fernandez and McAdam 1988; Gould 1991, 1995; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Diani 1995, 2003; Osa 2003; Mische 2003, 2007; Baldassari and Diani 2007) since densely overlapping relations bring identities, loyalties, and solidarities generated in one network domain (home, neighborhood, religion, school) to bear on another (e.g., social movement mobilization). Friedman and McAdam (1992) argue that strong pre-existing ties in social movement networks provide "identity incentives" for social movement participation; McAdam and Paulson (1993) look at the flip side of this, exploring how salient countervailing identities developed in competing strong tie networks can impede mobilization.

However, enclaves of strong or overlapping ties are not the only source of identities and discourse; other researchers take what I call the *catnet* approach, building upon the early idea proposed by Harrison White (2008 [1965]) and developed by Tilly (1978) that identities are born from emerging awareness of structural equivalence in network position. For example, Roger Gould (1995) shows how "participatory identities" in 19th century Paris insurrections shifted from class to urban community, based on the changing network positions of participants in relation to work, neighborhood, and the state. Likewise, Peter Bearman (1993) uses blockmodeling techniques to show how the shifting rhetorical orientations of pre-civil war English elites were rooted in changing network positions. In both cases, position in relation to other blocks of actors is an important generator of shared identities and discourse, rather than simply solidarities and pressures within an enclave.

A third approach stresses network intersections or *bridges* as a source of cultural resources, contributing to status, mobility, coalition building and cultural innovation. This can be seen as the opposite of the enclave approach, since it focuses on weak ties, network diversity and structural holes rather than dense network clusters (Grannovetter 1973; Burt 1992). For example, Paul Dimaggio (1987) argues that wide ranging networks contribute both to diversity in taste and genre differentiation. Bonnie Erickson (1996) builds on this insight by demonstrating that higher status actors tend to have more diverse cultural repertoires, due to a greater variety in network ties. Recent work on social movements has shown that inter-organizational bridging and network de-segmentation can contribute to the multivalent symbolism and brokerage activity useful for coalitions (Ansell 1997; Mische and Pattison 2000; Diani 2003; Hillmann 2008). What we consider "good ideas" are often borrowed from other networks, thus making network bridging (or interstitial locations in institutional fields) the key to innovation (Burt 2004, 2005;

Clemens and Cook 1999; Uzzi and Spiro 2005; Mische 2007; Morrill forthcoming). And internet communication has made network diversity and weak ties the key to the emergence of a new “networked individualism” (Wellman et al 2003; Boase and Wellman 2006). In these cases, theorists focus on the generation of culture through relational intersections, rather than through intra-cluster solidarities or categorical positioning.

Finally, recent work turns the causal arrow in the other direction by arguing that cultural tastes, values and moral frameworks can shape network structure. Building on deeply relational work by Bourdieu (1986) and DiMaggio (1987), Omar Lizardo (2006) takes a “constructionist” approach to the relationship between culture and networks. He argues that “high brow” cultural tastes are more easily “converted” into exclusionary and solidaristic strong tie networks than tastes for popular culture, which facilitate weak ties that bridge locations in social space. Lizardo and Vaisey (2009) extend these insights to the realm of moral values, arguing that deep-seated (and largely unconscious) moral worldviews provide the basis for the emotional “click” that leads to the selection of friendship relations, as well as the effort (or lack of effort) that contributes to the cultivation or decay of those ties over time. In both cases, cultural tastes or values shape network structure, rather than the other way around.

What links these approaches is a nuanced examination of the mutual influence between network structures (enclaves, positions, bridges) and cultural elements (identities, tastes, moral values). Networks and culture are seen as autonomous variables that impact each other, but that are ontologically distinguishable components of social life. This assumption of causal autonomy simplifies analysis and allows for the use of network measures in models containing cultural indicators. However it does not go as far as other recent work as seeing networks themselves as composed of cultural processes, as I discuss below.

3. *Networks of cultural forms:* A third major analytical perspective conceives of culture itself as organized into networks of cultural forms, including concepts, categories, practices, and narrative events. Margaret Somers, for example, describes a “conceptual network” as “a structured relational matrix of theoretical principles and conceptual assumptions.” She argues that these networks deeply constrain historical processes of interpretation and concept formation: “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” (Somers 1995, 135-36). Working from this premise, a wide array of scholars has applied formal relational techniques to the study of cultural networks. Some approaches examine the structure of direct connections among cultural elements, while others analyze the “dual” or interpenetrating relations of cultural forms with other kinds of elements (e.g., people, groups, events). Among the varied approaches to this analysis, I’ll focus here on two: techniques for cognitive and discursive mapping and analysis of narrative or sequential relations.

Kathleen Carley has been a pioneer in the area of cognitive mapping, beginning with her early work in extracting mental models from cultural texts (Carley and Palmquist 1992; Carley 1993, 1994; Carley and Kaufer 1993). Carley goes beyond conventional content analysis by examining relations between concepts, writing that “the meaning of a concept for an individual is embedded in its relationship to other concepts in the individual’s mental model” (Carley and Palmquist 1992, p. 602). These mental models, she argues, serve as a sample of the

representation of the individual's cognitive structure, and can be analyzed using network analytic measures such as density, consensus, and conductivity (Carley 1993; Hill and Carley 1999). More recently, she has examined complex intersections between different kinds and levels of relations, focusing on communication and learning in an "ecology of networks" (Carley 1999).

John Mohr has been another pioneer in modeling cultural forms, using blockmodeling and Galois lattices to examine relations between discourse and practice in changing institutional fields. Using a cultural adaptation of the Simmelian notion of "duality" elaborated by Breiger (1987, 2000), Mohr studies the dual association between historical representations of identity categories and poverty relief services (Mohr 1994; Mohr and Duquenne 1997), as well as the changing relational logic of affirmative action categories and practices (Mohr and Lee 2000; Breiger and Mohr 2004; Mohr, Bourgeois and Duquenne 2004). Recently, he has carried his analysis deeper into cultural and institutional theory by applying blockmodeling techniques to Foucault's notion of institutional power (Mohr and Neely 2009) and co-authoring with Harrison White on the modeling of institutional change (Mohr and White 2008).

A number of other researchers have applied the notion of duality in mapping cultural elements. Breiger (2000) uses correspondence analysis and Galois lattices to show deep mathematical similarities between the theories of Bourdieu and Coleman. John Levi Martin (2000) examines the dual association between the symbolic representation of animals and job occupations in a Richard Scarry children's book, using an entropy-based dispersion measure to reconstruct "the logic of the dispersion of species across the occupational map" (Martin 2000 p. 206; see also Martin 2002). Ann Mische and Philippa Pattison (2000) use tripartite lattice analysis to examine intersections among political organizations, their projects and coalition-building events during the Brazilian impeachment movement. King-to Yeung (2005) uses Galois lattices to map relations between meanings attributed to persons and to relationships, showing how a group's "meaning structure" is associated with variation in leadership structure and group stability. John Sonnett (2004) uses correspondence analysis to show the association between genre configurations and boundary drawing in musical tastes. And Craig Rawlings and Michael Bourgeois (2004) demonstrate how the dual association between organizations and credentialing categories differentiate an institutional field into distinct niche positions.

A more temporal approach to cultural mapping uses formal relational methods to analyze the narrative or sequential structure of discourse and interaction. For example, Roberto Franzosi (1997, 2004) has developed a formal methodology for analyzing "semantic grammars," focusing on relations between subjects, actions, and objects. As he argues, such a methodology is intrinsically relational, first for "expressing mathematically the complex relations between words" (Franzosi 1997 p. 293), but also more substantively in mapping relations among sets of actors, linked by different kinds of historical actions. Charles Tilly (1997, 2008) combines semantic grammars with network-analytic tools, using blockmodeling techniques to compose partitions on sets of actors linked by different kind of actions (e.g., claim, attack, control, cheer), thus mapping the changing relationships involved in the parliamentarization process in Great Britain (see also Tilly and Wood 2003; Wada 2004).

Other mapping strategies focus on the sequential character of narrative and interaction. For example, Peter Bearman and Kate Stovel (2000) treat autobiographical stories as networks of

elements linked by connective narrative arcs, and apply network analytic techniques (such as path distance, reach, and centrality) to compare their narrative structure. Bearman, Faris and Moody (1999) extend this technique to historical “casing,” showing how dense clusters of narrative elements (composed of multiple overlapping autobiographical stories) create robust historical cases that are resistant to future interpretation. Andrew Abbott’s “optimal matching” techniques for comparing sequences of events provide insight into the narrative structure of “cultural models” underlying institutional trajectories (Abbott and Hrycak 1990; Abbott 1995; see also Stovel et al 1996; Blair-Loy 1999). Several scholars have combined sequences methods with network analysis to show how both networks and careers shift together over time (Giuffre 1999; Stark and Vedres 2006).

These techniques are one expression of a broader theoretical perspective linking temporal and relational structures with historical contingency and theories of social change. Such techniques allow us to conceive of historical process, as Abbott describes it, as occurring in “a world of socially structured and generated trajectories linked by occasional turning points: a network in time” (Abbott 2001b, p. 253). This perspective focuses on the multiplicity and intersection of social and cultural structures, as well as the resourceful agency of individuals and collectivities in sustaining and transforming those (Sewell 1992; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Network techniques help to show the robust and interlocking nature of cultural structures, as well as the social locations and historical periods in which these can be challenged and reformulated.

4. *Networks as culture via interaction.* A final major approach to the network-culture link moves beyond the conception of cultural forms as autonomous from networks (and thus capable of being “transmitted” or “incubated” or “transformed” by means of network ties), focusing rather on networks themselves as composed of cultural processes of communicative interaction. While early work in the symbolic interactionist tradition (Fine and Kleinman 1983) examined the link between networks, meaning and group interaction, this connection has recently been revitalized by younger researchers, often in response to the limitations of the methodologies described above. For example, the study of network effects on identities and coalitions begs the question of how actors actively construct relations of solidarity or alliance through the communicative activation (or deactivation) of network ties.

Here I examine how four younger scholars have developed this perspective in recent work. The commonalities in this work are no accident; two of these researchers came out of the New York school described above, and the other two came out of the closely aligned Chicago milieu, both of which have genealogical links to the Harvard hub of relational sociology in the 70s and 80s. A recent generation of incubatory workshops (organized by McLean and Mische at Rutgers and Gibson at Penn) has helped to nourish an innovative perspective focusing on the dynamic construction and deconstruction of network relations through temporally unfolding processes of talk and interaction. Strongly influenced by the work of Erving Goffman, this work involves deepening attention to communication, setting, performance and interaction, showing how these are simultaneously constitutive of and permeated by network relations.

One of the most detailed network appropriation of Goffman can be seen in Paul McLean’s (1998, 2007) study of the rhetorical construction of patronage ties and self-presentations in Renaissance Florence. McLean argues that both selves and relations are

discursively constructed by patronage seekers when they appeal to notions such as “friendship,” “honor,” “respect” and “deference.” By “keying” (to use Goffman’s term) particular dimensions of relationships, they signal the “type of tie” that they strategically hope to activate as they build networks capable of providing them with various kinds of material and social rewards. Note here that in this perspective, networks themselves are the dynamic and changing results of discursive “framing processes,” although at the same time position in these networks shapes the kinds of discursive moves one is able and likely to make.

Likewise, Ann Mische (2003, 2007) studies the discursive and performative dynamics of network construction in a multi-organizational field that is itself undergoing change. In her ethnographic and historical study of Brazilian youth activist networks, she maps the trajectories of overlapping institutional affiliations among young activists in student, religious, partisan, professional, NGO and business groups during a period of democratic reconstruction. She builds on Goffman’s notion of “publics” by showing how activists highlight, suppress, segment and combine dimensions of their multiple identities as they create new settings for civic and political intervention. Extending the concept of “group style” developed by Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), she analyses how actors switch between different modes of political communication as they grapple with the relational tensions posed by particular institutional intersections.

A somewhat different appropriation of Goffman can be seen in David Gibson’s work on the sequential dynamics of conversation and the ways that these are permeated by different kinds of relationships. Gibson (2003, 2005a) offers a formalization of Goffman’s “participation framework,” focusing on the moving window of the changing relations between speaker, target, and unaddressed recipients within small group interaction settings. He shows how conversational dynamics (i.e., who takes the floor, when, and after whom) are affected both by formal institutional hierarchies and by network ties such as friendship and co-work. In this way, he demonstrates how fleeting ties forged through co-involvement in interaction sequences enact pre-existing ties of a more durable kind. Like McLean and Mische, he has focused on the strategic and opportunistic dimension of conversation, as speakers pursue goals and build relations by means of particular discursive moves (Gibson 2000, 2005c)

Finally, Daniel McFarland (2002, 2004) analyzes the relation between networks, discourse, and performance in his study of classroom resistance in high school settings. Drawing on the work of Goffman and Victor Turner, he describes how students switch between “social frames” and “person frames” in disruptive dramas that challenge institutional relations in the classroom (McFarland 2004). In a recent series of articles, he has used network visualization techniques (Moody, McFarland and Bender-deMoll 2005) to show how different “discursive moves” contribute to the stabilization and destabilization of classroom relations, arguing that it is “through talk that interactional networks shift, stabilize and are potentially undermined” (McFarland and Diehl 2009, p 4).

While the work of these four scholars provide especially vivid examples of the dynamic construction of ties via communicative interaction, others researchers have explored similar patterns. For example, Peter Bearman and Paolo Parigi (2004) demonstrate that people segment topic domains in relation to different conversational partners. David Smilde (2005, 2007) describes the role network-based conversations play in the construction of conversion narratives.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2000, 2005) examines the performative and discursive composition of moments of relational disruption and transformation, such as standoffs and surrenders. Recent collaborations with Harrison White address the generation of meaning, strategy and power through switching across “netdoms” (White, Godart and Corona 2007; Fontdevila and White 2010), extending the theoretical agenda developed during the 1990s in the New York school.⁷

The shared focus in this work on the conversational and performative enactment of ties allows these scholars to elide traditional dichotomies between structure and agency. The study of relational settings, patterns and constraints can be linked to a focus on strategic (and sometimes transformative) maneuvering by motivated, culturally embedded actors. Relations in this conception have durability, in that they have histories, meanings, obligations, and projected futures; yet this durability requires communicative work and is subject to negotiation, contestation, and opportunistic challenge. Both opportunities and constraints result from the fact that multiple relations can potentially enter into play, charging relational settings with tension, drama, and potential for change.

Further links and directions

The sketch that I have given here of recent developments in relational sociology is certainly not exhaustive or bounded; rather it represents my own situated perspective on a sprawling network of overlapping conversations across several sociological sub-disciplines. While network imagery – if not network-analytic techniques – is central in most of the work that I have described, it has close kinship with other kinds of relational metaphors that have gained currency among allied scholars, including those of fields, ecologies, and circuits. In closing, I would like to mention several distinct but intersecting streams of research that are also deeply relational and have taken some interesting turns in recent years.

John Levi Martin (2003, 2009), for example, traces the genealogy of the “field” metaphor in social analysis from Lewin and Bourdieu through new institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; see also Fligstein 2001; Owen-Smith and Powell 2008; Mohr 2010). The field perspective, he argues, offer an alternative to conventional social science models of causality in its focus on the subjective alignments and propulsive forces involved in social positioning. Work drawing on field imagery includes studies of artistic elites (DiMaggio 1991); social movement organizations and repertoires (Ennis 1987; Klandermans 1992; Clemens 1997; Evans 1997; Armstrong 2002; Davis et al 2005; Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008); organizational conflict (Morrill 1995; Morrill, Zald and Rao 2003) and culinary professionals (Leschziner 2009). Moreover, the concept of social fields has also been central to relationally oriented historical research that focuses on culture as discourse and positioning (e.g., Spillman 1995; Steinberg 1999; Gorski 2003; Steinmetz 2008).

Others have studied links across multiple fields, networks, or institutional “ecologies,” often focusing on the ways that intersecting relational logics reinforce, constrain, or transform each other. This idea is central to the pathbreaking work of John Padgett and his collaborators

⁷ See the forthcoming special issue of *Poetics* (2010), edited by Corinne Kirschner and John Mohr, with articles by Frederic Godart and Harrison White, Jorge Fontdevila, John Mohr, Ronald Breiger and Jennifer Schultz. See also the forthcoming review essay on culture and networks by Mark Pachucki and Ronald Breiger (2010).

on the coupling and decoupling of relational logics in Renaissance Florence (Padgett and Ansell 1993; Padgett 2001; Padgett and McLean 2006). Many historical sociologists have similarly sought to combine a focus on relational contingency and social structure by analyzing interactions within “relational settings” (Somers 1993) or between multiple social orders (see reviews of this extensive literature by Clemens 2007; Adams, Orloff and Clemens 2005). Such multiplicity is also addressed in Abbott’s (2005) concept of “linked ecologies,” in which different institutional arenas are connected through “hinge” strategies that work in both ecologies at once. The ecological metaphor itself is intrinsically relational, with a long history going back to the Chicago School (Abbott 1999) and recently revived in work on organizational niche formation and population dynamics (Hannan and Freeman 1989; McPherson et al 1991).

In addition, recent work in economic sociology stresses the relational dimension of economic exchange, while paying attention to meaning and process. Viviana Zelizer (2004, 2005a,b) describes how differentiated ties ramify into “circuits of commerce” involving “different understandings, practices, information, obligations, rights, symbols, and media of exchange.” She argues that these differ from networks, traditionally conceived, in that “they consist of dynamic, meaningful, incessantly negotiated interactions among the sites” (Zelizer 2005a, p.293). Other scholars have focused on the moral weighting of exchange relations and their embeddedness in organizations and networks (Fourcade and Healy 2007; Healy 2006), as well as the importance of networks and meanings in economic restructuring (Bandelj 2008). Harrison White’s early work on markets (revamped in his 2004 book) also pays attention to processes of communication, signaling, and meaning production among networks of producers, focusing on local processes of market differentiation and niche-production (see also Bothner 2003, Bothner, Stuart and White 2004; Hsu and Podolny 2005).

Finally, one of the most promising future directions to this work is a recent revival of pragmatist thinking, as informed by this emerging relational perspective (Joas 1997; Whitford 2002; Lichterman 2005; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Gross 2009; Mische 2007, 2009). Early statements by Emirbayer (1997) and Somers (1998) make explicit the connection between network thinking and the pragmatist theories of Dewey, Mead, James, Peirce and others. Likewise, Abbott (1999) reminds us that the roots of American sociology in the Chicago School were pragmatist as well as relational in orientation. In this perspective, the (necessary) tension between ontology and epistemology (as with that between realism and constructivism, or between structure and agency) becomes productive rather than troubling; something is “real” because it produces actions, which are necessarily grounded in the interpretation of relations. One exciting vein to be tapped is that of pragmatist semiotics, as proposed by Peirce, which focuses on the triadic relation between sign, object, and “interpretant.” The interpretant is the product of the action involved in the “addressing” relation, which brings forth new interpretations – and thus, by extension, new relations among actors mediated by interpretations of objects in the world (Emirbayer 1997). This move helps us transcend the realist-constructivist divide we have inherited from Saussurean semiotics, a move implicit (but not fully elaborated) in Tilly’s term “relational realism.”

Since most social science research – including much work on culture and networks – is still rooted in Saussurean (and Kantian) antinomies, this poses a number of challenges for the future. I would argue that we need to craft an approach to theory and research that views

relations, interpretations and actions as mutually generative, yet also subject to what Peirce calls the “resistance” of objects in the world. As I have demonstrated in my own work, the formal representations we gain from network analytic techniques provide useful insight into the complex patterning of relationships – and thus the structural opportunities, constraints, and dilemmas actors confront. But these representations need to be complemented by historical, ethnographic and interview research that examines the communicative interplay, strategic maneuvering, and reflective problem solving carried out by actors in response to these relational tensions and dilemmas.

As Jan Fuhse (2009) argues, this requires attention both to the observable communicative processes that compose networks – which he, like Emirbayer, calls “transactions” – and to the “meaning structure” of networks, grounded in intersubjective expectations as well as systems of categories and the ongoing interpretive work of situated individuals. This approach also builds on recent theories of “situated actions” in multi-layered social and institutional contexts (Vaughan 2002; see also Broadbent 2004). An important future challenge lies in understanding how the communicative construction of relations is channeled and constrained by institutions, which influence the durability, robustness, and constraining power of social ties (Swidler 2001; Owen-Smith and Powell 2008; see also Stinchcombe 1997).⁸ In this light, the practical and communicative construction of such durability – along with the multiple temporalities in which relations are embedded – become in themselves the focus of sociological attention.

The work discussed in this chapter brings us to this threshold and suggests a compelling framework for future research. More than just a set of analytical techniques, the new relational sociology becomes a way of challenging the core theoretical and methodological divides in the discipline. The effervescent “New York moment” described above was one formative conversational hub in a recent movement that returns sociology to its relational and pragmatist roots, while suggesting a new agenda for studying the dynamic interplay of networks and culture.

⁸ Arthur Stinchcombe notes that both the focus on action and the constraining power of institutions are important for Tilly’s view of networks: “Tilly regards neither the links in networks nor the needs of institutions as naturally existing causes, but instead as things brought into existence by human action on the links and nodes that are important for institutions” (Stinchcombe 1997, p. 387). While Stinchcombe himself has not theorized the link between networks and culture, he is certainly a fellow traveler in this relational perspective; his work on causality, mechanisms, and institutional flows has been influential for both White and Tilly (see Stinchcombe 1991, 2005).

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