Advance Relationalism and communication theory without Title page

Sumitra Balakrishnan

Abstract

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Key words: Relationalism, structuration, organization, organisational communication, Theory in Social Network Analysis

Looking at a social Relationship perspective of organization, its communication, Networks and Structure

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Introduction

Social network analysis has grown significantly since its inception in the 1930s as a field of study in sociology. Social network analysis is seen by many as having the potential to reenergize and unite sociological research under the guise of a theoretical interest in relationships rather than individuals. This viewpoint disregards the fact that social structures are always constructed as symbols of expectations and are thus replete with "culture" (Yeung, 2005, pp. 392ff). The main focus of relational sociology, as developed later by Harrison White, Mustafa Emirbayer, Charles Tilly, Ann Mische, and others (Pachucki and Breiger, 2010; Mische, 2011), is how network relations and culture are intertwined. Despite claims that social networks lack
theoretical foundations, this paper is part of a larger movement in relational sociology that aims to move beyond structuralist explanations of social networks and develop a more theoretically sound and empirically supported understanding of what networks actually are (Pachucki and Breiger, 2010). It connects various bodies of literature ranging from sociological theory to research on interpersonal relationships and social network analysis. It places the relational approach to analysing communication within the larger field of organizational communication, and seeks its fit with organisational and organisational communication theories. The review begins with an examination of communication, communication in organizations and an appraisal of major theoretical perspectives about them. This is followed by understanding of the composition of the contemporary workplace structure, the development in organizational teams, a description of team communication and exchange, presented particularly where studied through the sociological perspective of networks and network analysis. The definition and description of organisational communication, networks and its interaction with relational sociology is given.

**Major theoretical perspectives on organisational communication**

Organizational communication as a discipline of interest grew tremendously in the 20th century. With multiple perspectives talking about definitions, boundaries and the expanse of the discipline, there was a struggle in establishing a clear identity for it. Theories of organizational communication have exhibited multiple pluralities. They have been outlined under significant thematic threads or “metatheoretical fiefdoms” as Corman(2000) calls it, whose divergences though debated are highly productive for research (Putman & Mumby, 2013).

Being metatheoretical in understanding disciplines like organizational communication allows for a high amount of multidisciplinary work and inclusivity of thoughts from across threads of thought. There is also enough space for flexibility and ‘proliferation of concepts’ in the context of contemporary contingencies. Inclusion of contemporary methods of theorizing, multi-method research approaches, interdisciplinary conjunctions and radical conceptualizations are encouraging communication researchers who “have been timid in moving out of their intellectual comfort zones” (Sortrin, 2014), Mumby traces conceptual shifts that transformed organizational communication “from the study of communication in organizations to the communication politics of organizations” (Miller, K. I., 2008).

Organizational studies have schools of thoughts that intersect with the schools of thought of organizational communication. The influences are evident when these schools’ major ideas are examined.

The keystone of positivism is empiricism, as positivism upholds the scientific study of the social world. Its purpose is to develop abstract and universal laws that govern the social universe’s operative dynamics. Post-positivism upholds that an organization has an objective existence; people come and go, but the organization endures. Interpretivism upholds that an organization has a subjective existence; people create and sustain it through their communication. The Critical theory as an approach upholds that that the structures of power within an organization have a fixed existence and reflect larger historical and cultural forces. Social construction assumes that people construct (i.e., create, make, invent) their understandings of the world and the meanings they give to encounters with others, or various products they or others create. It also assumes that they do this jointly, in coordination with others, rather than individually (Leeds-Hurwitz, W., 2016). Critical realists emphasize, to a greater extent than most constructionists account, that social reality ‘consist of much more than the linguistic, symbolic, and discursive resources and practices through which we come to describe, understand and reflect on it’ (Reed, 2009a: 434).

There is also the post-modern approach that upholds the importance of power relations within an organization, and believes in their fluidity. This expands from the earlier approaches to include diverse forms of inquiry that challenge and reconstruct systems of power, identity, and representation. (Mease, 2017). The idea of realities being constituted through interaction, through and by different humans and thus constituting different versions of reality for their cultural or social group is also emergent. Theorists challenge any way of structuring truth and reality that overpowers others. They do this by emphasizing suspicion, irony, appropriation, pastiche, tension, irrationality, and vulnerability to demonstrate the inadequacy of any
particular structure or order for understanding reality.

As Putnam and Mumby(2014) say “theories, by definition, highlight and hide different elements of a phenomenon under study. . . so a larger toolbox of theories is of more value to conceptualize organizing knowledge, and leaning on the same theory is detrimental to knowledge.” So, scholars develop perceptions and knowledge claims that are as much a product of “their own theoretical constructs as much as of the phenomenon itself”. They also mention that in the future researchers need to “develop homegrown theories that will offer communicative modes of explanation and a discipline-based lens to study organizational phenomena”. Also, studies of organizational communication need to utilize communicative modes of explanation from theories, discipline-based lenses, and multi-level relationships between organizational elements.

This research requires a nuanced treatment of the individual-leader-organization relationship. The idea is to understand how communication is central in its function in mediating this relationship. It also looks at the treatment of communication in its forms of construction, organization and discourse.

Organizational communication is often the most generative when it focusses on complexity and contradiction. Focussing on generative tensions between communication and materiality can help researchers understand complex connections between the material and the symbolic. The review proceeds to a breadth of scholarship, relational sociology, that lends strength to the theories of communication, and leadership used in this research. Inspired from the work on relational sociology by stalwarts like G.H. Mead to classic scholars like George Simmel, Harrison White, Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann, along with research by active or visible contemporary relational sociologists like Fuhse, Crossley, P. Donati, Charles Tilly, and Liang and Liu this section expands the importance of social forms, system theories, social relationships and network analysis. (Ruggieri, D. 2017, Fuhse, J. A. 2009). The inspiration coerced the urge to study, argue and reason about structure and dynamics, about collapse and growth, and about humans and technology, that co-exist in what are explained here, as networks.

An overview of Relationalism as an approach to understand organization and structure

In the late 20th century, the dilemma faced by sociologists with how to conceive the social world- as made of substances or residing in processes, in static things or in dynamic relations (Emirbayer, M., 1997). There were many dualisms that the science was researching, like “structure vs agency”, “material vs ideal”, and “individual vs society”, but the most important at that time, according to Emirbayer, M. (1997), was to decide between substantialism and Relationalism.

Relationalism in its early research upholds society as a super-structure of relationships, as a large framework of connections that gives life a frame. It is to be understood here that is not the substance here which is important, but the relationships, their strength, and their force in constructing frames that are perceived as social structures. The classic sociologist, Simmel, had a lot of initial work contributory to relational theorizing. He observed 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” (Jenks, C., 2004, Simmel in Simmel, G. 2009; Ruggieri, D. 2017). These thoughts position it separately from the substantialist view of sociology and social sciences broadly.

Relationships are not constant, and it is this changing, contingent nature that makes them the centre of focus in relationist studies. If relationships were considered to be constant, independent of context or fixed, they would be another version of substantialism, wrote Erikson. So, the contingent, dynamic nature of relationships is dependent of the space within it operates, the social social context, and this in turn, is shaped by these relationships. (Erikson, E. 2013)

Substantialists identify the source of social action and explanation in fixed entities, be they individuals, societies, or social structures. Relationalists instead believe that 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” (Emirbayer 1997:287). And, “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” (Emirbayer 1997:287). The individual, or any single unit is incapable of independent survival as the society is all important.

Relationships, especially social relations, have often been studied as decisive variables for various phenomenon, but little attention is paid to the meaning structure of networks of relationships. These social networks hold together the expectations, symbols, schemata, and cultural practices embodied in interpersonal networks, and these allow the interplay of structure and meaning in networks. (Fuhse, J. A., 2009).

Using the relational sociology lens to analyze organizational research theories

Relational sociology is interesting to analyze for the weightage it puts on the constitution of society. Donati (Donati, P., 2018) believes in society being not a space ‘containing’ relations, but rather the very tissue of relations. He said that society ‘is relation’ and does not ‘have relations’. (Prandini, R., 2015). It is also of specific interest as 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. (Mische, A., 2011). Incorporating insights from diverse research traditions such as systems theory, socio-psychological research on relationships, symbolic interactionism, and social anthropology, the aim is to avoid a purely ‘structural’ understanding of networks. The result is finding more meaning in networks, depiction of social relationships as ‘intersubjective constructs of expectations and cultural forms’, simplification of complexities attached to network structure, and adding meaning to identities that exist therefore making for a “network culture”.

Human beings believe that they are independent and autonomous individuals, who think independently. But, in fact, the so called “independent” thoughts exist within pre-existing or developing, pre-determined or instantaneous structures that contain, inform, direct and determine their actions. Sociology’s enterprise is to study these, often hidden social structures, and highlight their importance and function.

Where structure is used to define the more fixed and enduring aspects of the social landscape (Stones, R., 2007), that act as regulators and constraints on an individual’s action; Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. It lies in in the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power. “It is the ability of actors to operate independently of the determining constraints of social structure” (Campbell, C., 2009).

Human agency and social structure, have a simultaneously antagonistic and mutually dependent relation (Hays, S., 1994). Social life is fundamentally structured, and social structures do make possible a whole range of choices in everyday life. Also, agency is reproductive of structure, so it should be studied in inter-relation with structure along with systems of structure and systems of meaning. “Structures should be understood as enabling as well as constraining; they are the very basis of human power and self-understanding” (Durkheim 1964, 1965a, 1965b, 1966; Giddens 1982, 1984; Weintraub, 1945). Similarly as Hays (1994), says “A sociological understanding of agency, then, does not confuse it with individualism, subjectivity, randomness, absolute freedom, or action in general, but recognizes it as embracing social choices that occur within structurally defined limits among structurally provided alternatives.

Structure and agency, are co-existent, and schools of Sociology highlight different aspects differently. (Castells, M., 2000). The reason for looking at these is to understand scholars’ interpretations of the importance of structure and agency, and any relation among the two. The research undertaken needs these to interpret the sociology of organizations and put into place why and how certain organizational structures and constituents function in specific in specific ways. It also helps in further interpretation of patterns that may emerge due to differently occurring relationships between structure and agency. These patterns have been looked at as the main area of interest in Networks.

An overview of thoughts on structure and agency- inter-relating it with the differential importance of structure and agency in social theory and organizational communication

Three different schools of thought in social theory question the relationship between structure and agency, and analyze their interaction differently. These are the schools of structuralism, symbolic interactionism,
and post-structuralism. A look at some representative thoughts that have been most influential will aid understanding of these approaches.

An annotation of three main perspectives is provided then to understand their influence in this study of organizational and human communication. Their contribution stems from the role of structure and agency in determining patterns. Their reliability as valid communication research, along with some methodological issues has been put forth. The main threads presented are the systems theory, structuration, and network theory, which form the main theoretical base for understanding transfer of information, formation of communication partners and patterns of exchange.

Structuralism is sometimes referred to as structural-functionalism (Pope, W., 1975). This approach has been criticized for its lack of acknowledgement of individual agency. Social institutions are seen as collective means to fulfill individual and collective or social needs.

According to structuralism, language serves as a bridge between the subject’s mind and the outside world and scholars’ work theorized how language became action. Language, according to Saussure, is the result of social interaction. Language, according to Levi-Strauss, is more of a value than a sign. The distinction between language (social) and speech is the fundamental premise of Saussure’s linguistic structuralism (individual act).

Structuralism then holds that social structures are patterns of everyday life, the way that social relationships are organised on a consistent basis, and that this is what provides order to the social world. Structuralism thus finds the possibility of social transformation in the structure’s fragility. When the ideas of thinkers are combined, it becomes evident that in order for social change to occur, the conditions or behaviours of the masses of people must alter. Thus, in order for societal change to occur, systems such as the family, schooling, and so on must be transformed. Structuralism is thus a macrosociology in which individual human activity is substantially influenced by the environment that structures provide.

Anthony Giddens structuration theory is a contemporary European social theory that shows inspiration from Karl Marx's thoughts (Giddens, A., 1992; Tucker, K., 1998). Giddens sees structure as both constraining and enabling. At its core, Giddens’s structuration theory, with its focus on social practices, is a theory of the relationship between agency and structure. All social action involves structure, and all structure involves social action. According to Bernstein (1995), "the very heart of the theory of structuration" is "intended to illuminate the duality and dialectical interplay of agency and structure". Giddens’s structuration theory deals with the agency-structure issue in a historical, processual, and dynamic way. Giddens is concerned with the dialectical process in which practice, structure, and consciousness are produced. The human actor not only is self-conscious but also is engaged in the monitoring of the ongoing flow of activities and structural conditions. Bernstein argues that "agency itself is reflexively and recursively implicated in social structures". Actors use language to account for what they do, and sociologists, in turn, use language to account for the actions of social actors.

Systems theory is a general theoretical approach to communication theory located in the structural-functional perspective. It gives essential notions to aid in the development of more particular theories. Various theories and research projects have been developed using the same set of notions, such as wholeness and interconnectedness. Systems theory was proposed in the 1940’s by the biologist von Bertalanify. But it is Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory which is a modern theory that studies organizations. Luhmann was the pioneer of the social systems theory and laid the foundation for creating robust organization science theories. However, his comparison of the organization to a mechanistic entity wasn’t appreciated by all thinkers. Using a sociological thought helps understand how teams, organizations and society work together, and makes room for the Social Systems theory. This theory is rooted in the thought that organizations consist of decision communication, to the extent of risking barely considering the presence and role of humans and human interaction in them (Luhmann 1984, Rhodes & Niklas, 2013). Luhmann unfortunately used a biological metaphor to explain the codes of communication. He also "bracketed human action and intention as analytically outside his systems of social coordination". His view of the theory has also been criticized for having
“meta-biological overtones” (Leydesdorff, 2006) and having inherent issues like “structural coupling”, which could be considered as a biological mechanism (Leydesdorff, 2010).

Nevertheless, the theory’s foremost orientation lies towards creating distance, demarcating boundaries and making distinctions (Schwanitz, 1995; Seidl, D., & Schoeneborn, D., 2010), particularly for many parts and wholes in society. It encourages us to concentrate on systems and subsystems, as well as the examination of relationship patterns at various levels. It’s been described as an ecological worldview in which each system is unique while still being a part of a larger whole. Rather than reducing an entity to the attributes of its parts or elements, systems theory focuses on the arrangement and relationships between the pieces that link them together to form a whole (holism). It helps think of the deterministic qualities of the type of communication that produces decisions, how units function as operationally closed systems, and the power of conscious communication. Organizations are seen as self-organizing and self-reflective systems. Then, it finally makes organizations appear like networks of decisions, which is a developed view from the classic thought of mechanical systems of production or just machines.

The symbolic interactionist school of thought’s main thinkers include George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, and Herbert Blumer. The theory itself is a micro-level theory (Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C., 2015), that concentrates more on individual level or interpersonal interactions and meanings generated therefore. Symbolic interactionism, has its origins in pragmatism (Dewey), social theory (Mead, Blumer), and later social psychology (Goffman), and claims that people understand and give meaning to events through an intricate system of symbols (Stryker, S., & Vryan, K. D., 2006). The meanings of these symbols emerge and change as a result of human social interaction. So, it examines society via the descriptive meanings humans have assigned to things, events, and actions. Humans’ behavioural patterns will be based on these descriptive meanings since people behave based on descriptive beliefs rather than objective reality. According to this hypothesis, humans construct a sophisticated collection of symbols that provide meaning to the world from their perspective. Meanings are formed via interactions with society. And they interpret these interactions subjectively to fit the meaning in line with the existing symbols. It might be argued that in order to comprehend the behavioural patterns of society, we must first understand ourselves. However, this approach does not answer how certain groups of individuals come to develop background expectations and roles. It also does not account adequately for possible social change, lack of consensus, and subjectivities and micro-aggressions generated by interactions.

Post-structuralism or post-positivism believes in a theory of knowledge and language (Agger, B., 1991). This school of thought’s main thinkers move away from previous thoughts of language as something that makes the world legible to us, to the claim that language makes the world, i.e. a discursive claim about language.

Through ”habitus,” Bourdieu discusses how social structures and human action come to combine and shape the conditions and possibilities of actions within society. (Townley, B. 2014). Derrida, arguably, the most noteworthy post structural writer contributed the idea of deconstruction (Agger, B., 1991). He explains that every definition ”deconstructs,” or unravels, when one delves deeper into its foundational assumptions and literary gestures. Because definitions are the product of a particular time and place, post-structuralism proposes a kind of suspicion of concise definitions. Supportive theorists are sceptical of things like grounded theory because there is no such thing as a ‘theory-free’ field. This is all about power relations, and post-structuralists are attempting to devise a model that negotiates between language, the social world, the discursive world, the physical world, and power systems. If the relationship between a person and their subjectivity is not fixed, a person can represent competing contradictory interests.

In this school’s thoughts, language creates the world, as opposed to the structuralist concept of it only referring to the physical world. Language constructs both subjectivity and the subject (Clegg, S., 1998). So, it is only through language that people have the ability to comprehend something called the world. Fluidity of meaning derived and attached was appreciated, as it was language that constructed the world. Post-structuralism was then considered as a philosophical and metaphysical view of the world.

Most feminists and cultural studies scholars come from this intellectual tradition because it helps them to see
the subject in such a way that the subject reflects many, multifarious, and often contradictory entities at the same time. Post-structuralists claim that there exist rough and tacit phenomena, but those are immaterial to how we perceive the universe. The world is not a mirror of these objective things out there, but rather the result of our interaction with it.

Post-structuralism paved the way for sociological research that does not operate from a fixed conceptual standpoint and challenges normative understandings of social relations. Post-structuralism then approaches the issue of structure and agency in a way that provides flexibility to structure, implying that social phenomena that we assume operate in a fixed way and can only be one thing are actually a dynamic set of plural meanings influenced by a wide range of social contestations.

A network approach, rather than focusing on the characteristics of individuals, focuses on the causes and consequences of relationships and connections between and among sets of people and groups (Monge, P. R., & Contractor, N. S., 2001). A network is said to comprise of interacting patterns formed by individuals and groups through transmitting and exchanging messages over time and space. Under the Cybernetic Tradition, network theory allows us to observe clusters of communication relationships created by the objects communicating within a network. These clusters link together to form organizational networks. (Castells, M., Monge, P., & Contractor, N., 2011). The fact that group members are enmeshed in various, previously established as well as emerging communication networks that differ in structure, type of interactions, and diversity of links is a major element of intergroup contexts. (Stohl, C., 2018).

A fundamental concept of the theory is that behaviour is best understood socially; and each social unit is at the crossroads of a plethora of limiting and enabling alignments. Traditional social scientific techniques to intergroup communication are extended and supplemented by a network perspective.

**Implementation of philosophical assumptions or positions in research methods:** Theories chiefly reflect assumptions with regard to ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontology explains the reality of existence of things, including social phenomena such as organizations; epistemology explains how things become known and the scope of knowledge and axiology explains what is worth knowing and what is right. (Anderson, J. A., 1996; Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, K. A., 2010).

The application of Ontology and Epistemology in analyzing knowledge: Positivism and Objectivism. Interpretivism and Constructivism

Positivism, an epistemological position, emphasises the importance of objectivity and evidence in seeking truth, and the researcher has no influence on the world. Furthermore, impositivism, facts and values are different, allowing for objective and value-free inquiry (Snape & Spencer, 2003)

Objectivism believes that when we recognise objects around us, we merely find meanings that have always been there in them. Furthermore, truth is static and always objective, according to the positivism/objectivism paradigm.

Because all information about the world originates in our experiences and is gained through our senses, only facts (and hence knowledge) that can be validated by the senses may be regarded as true knowledge (Bryman, 2008; Ormston et al, 2014). According to Wellington (2000), positivist knowledge is objective, value-free, generalizable, and reproducible. This is why positivism is frequently associated with the ‘scientific approach.’

Since the early twentieth century, the positivist and objectivist traditions and thought have been criticised. The rejection of positivist thinking and tradition was based on the premise that if rules and laws are solely formed through observation, then a future observation may prove to be an exception to a current rule or law (Ormston et al, 2014). This viewpoint spawned a second kind of positivism known as post-positivism.

**Interpretivism-**. The researcher knows the social world utilising both his/her understanding as well as the participants’ understanding. The researcher and the social world interact and absolutely bias-free interpretation is not possible. Objective and value-free inquiry is impossible since findings are invariably influenced by
the researchers’ opinions and values. Knowledge is formed through studying and comprehending the social world of the individuals being studied. Knowledge is viewed as personal, subjective, and distinctive. The use of an emergent and collaborative strategy is congruent with the interpretivist notion that humans can adapt and that no one can have prior knowledge about time and context constrained social realities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). As a result, rather than generalising and forecasting causes and effects, the purpose of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour (Neuman, 2000; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). An interpretivist researcher must comprehend intentions, meanings, reasoning, and other subjective experiences that are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000).

Constructivist: Knowledge is created by exploring and comprehending (rather than discovering) the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations, i.e., meanings are socially constructed by the social actors in a given context. Constructivists believe that scientific knowledge is created by scientists rather than discovered from the outside world. Because reality is a mental construct, it is perceived to be subjective. (Fuller, T., & Loogma, K., 2009).

The researcher follows more of an interpretivist approach towards knowledge-seeking and interpretation. The “paradigmatic commitment” is Constructivist-interpretivist as the methodology used is that of a case-study (Taber, K. S., 2014).

Relations, networks and communication- emergence, organization, structure and agency

Though sociology and social theory have evolved significantly since the times of their founding fathers such as Comte, Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, questions about the scientific status of sociological research and theorising can still be raised. The epistemological status of a lot of knowledge content is undergoing slow change. It has been argued that sociology does not do much justice to and has failed to incorporate a theory of communication. As Prandini says “The individual is social(ized), and the social is interiorized by individuals; they are made by the same stuff, relationships. . . .the theoretical (ontological) block of relational sociology is ‘communication’, conceived as an ongoing social process.” (Prandini, R., 2015). Pure relationists tend to remove the social from the relation, and study it like quantum mechanics is studied- like a ‘system’ of flow and movement which is dependent on connections. (Rovelli, C. 2016 in Whimster, S. 2018; Whimster, S. 2018).

There was a need to move beyond the formality and technicality of network research which made it formidable and inaccessible for many non-mathematical researchers (Mische, A. 2011). Similarly, the field of cultural sociology felt constricted by its orientation towards artistic production, and started moving towards the study of its intersection with significant areas in sociology. Political sociology, social movements, comparative studies, historical sociology, practice and discourse, and the study of collective behaviour had major overlays with cultural sociology. There were few scholars steering network analytics techniques to study cultural and historical processes, so the gap was felt and so was the need for more “interpretively oriented cultural research” (Prandini, R., 2015). The social network approach argues that organizations are groupings of objects in a system formed by a variety of relationships (Tichy, N. M. et al. 1979, Mische, A. 2011).

Sociology saw a change in the early 1990s with the ‘relational’ turn seen largely in New York and some areas in America. Two previously distinct strands of studies, cultural sociology and social network analysis, that studied the content and form of relationships in society and its constituents, were meshed in relational studies. With this turn, sociological research took a healthy turn from the individualistic-collectivistic divide, to studying events and phenomenon from the angle of relationships, with the individual and the society being main determinants. So, sociologists like Mucha (2003) carried forth Simmel’s thoughts on duality from early 20th century and worked on the micro-sociology of relationships. They brought out the angle of the co-existence and interdependence of individualistic and collectivistic perspective of existence, and this was social reality to relational sociology. The “associations between interdependent human beings” were the “objects” of relational sociology. Networks and matrices could be used to study concentrations and clusters of associations, usually formed due to similar preferences or tastes, also called homophily. Donati (2011)
explains the connection to formation of social ties ad networks well. He says that the social relation is the emergent effect of reciprocal actions reiterated over time among social actors/subjects occupying different positions in a societal configuration (system or social network)

So, according to relational sociology, social networks are interwoven with meaning and culture (Erikson, 2013, Fuhse, 2009, Crossley, N., 2015; Fuhse, 2022, Mische, 2011). Social connections are interaction and expectation patterns that emerge as a result of larger cultural models and institutionalised roles. In accordance with neo-institutionalism and current field theory, we see network formation situations as fields with different social-cultural organisation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Martin, 2011: 268ff, Fuhse, J. A., 2020; Fuhse, J. A., & Gondal, N., 2022).

Relational sociology offers a comprehensive analysis of social networks, viewing them as actual social structures intertwined with meaning. Stories, identities, social categories (including role categories), and institutions are all forms of meaning that are linked to network configurations (as part of their 'domains') (Fuhse, J., & Mützel, S., 2011; Fuhse, J., 2015). Neo-sociological stands concentrate on linkages and relationships that are especially important within the relational strand. Considering that Nedeva (2000, as cited in Lopes, H. E. G., 2004), explains organizations in the perspective of relationships of networks as ‘any organization can be understood and analyzed in terms of multiple relationships, that take place among the actors, with emphasis on the interactions that they develop inside and outside the boundaries of the organization. These also encourage analysis that investigates the relationships between perspectives and theoretical positions.

Inter-organizational exchange networks are a type of market that consists of both direct and indirect business relationships (Achrol, 1997; Miles and Snow, 1992; Möller et al., 2005). Understanding systemic structures such as networks, as well as the embeddedness of firms within these structures, has been identified as a distinct research focus.

Networks in society - a relational perspective

Networks hold multiple meanings and connotations in multiple disciplines. In using the term social network, there has been a shift in its denotation over time. Studying people as social entities, network research believes that all human beings are "embedded" in "networks" of relationships. These networks are interconnected and are termed social, as they require interaction in some form. This meaning owes its origin to sociological research. “Social” network is used in the context of relations of an individual as a member or part of a collectivity or group. The term “collectivity” (Coleman, 1971, Jenkins, 2002) is used more often in association with the word “social” in sociological parlance and has the same meaning as the word “collective” (Fuhse, 2009, von Scheve, 2019). It may have in some definitions i.e. that of a group or assemblage of people (Callon & Law, 1997, von Scheve, 2019). It does not refer to the frequently interpreted connotation of “social network” as “online social networks” which are identified by its online actors. These terms are often used interchangeably. Wellman talked the perspective of computer and human connectedness in saying “When a computer network connects people or organizations, it is a social network.” Andrews makes it clearer by stating that an “online social network (OSN)” like Facebook or LinkedIn, “uses computer support as the basis of communication amongst all its members” (Andrews et al., 2002), requiring the presence of that particular technical system. So, interpersonal relations and exchanges that exist over technical platforms are considered as a “type” of social network only for network research.

Hawes, 1974 initiated an interesting study of speech, conversations and a search of patterns in organizational behavior through interaction analysis. Centrality within organizations. He said that “a social collectivity is patterned communicative behavior; communicative behavior does not occur within a network of relationship but is that network” (Hawes, 1994). Social behavior and communicative behavior are therefore important in studying a group as a possible network.

According to one group of authors, networks are defined as the connections between organisations, whereas the other group focusses on the actors who are interconnected (Cook and Emerson, 1978). The networks described in the first group are more stable; when one actor disappears, its function is taken over by an existing actor(s) or a new one, and the network remains relatively intact.
Researchers like Wellman had recognized and included other entities and form of relations by defining it as “a social network is a set of people (or organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of social relationships, such as friendship, co-working or information exchange.” He compared the connectedness among people to the way a computer network is connected by a set of cables. We can see the mention of linkages even in some early ones like that of Mitchell (1962)’s definition of networks as “a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved”. Castells’ explanation is similar to that of Wellman’s when saying that “a network is a set of interconnected nodes” (Castells, 2000). He also mentions the adaptivity and flexibility of these structures, when abled by information technology, making them capable of accomplishing tasks that the network is programmed for.

Relational perspectives preliminarily use the sociological perspective of networks, to understand relations, ties, associations, dependencies and exchanges (Pescosolido, 2011). To use the understanding of social networks as “a socially constructed organizing process” (Chewning, 2019), to analyse its formative, distributive and collective properties in the processes of communication. Therefore, networks are dealt with as structures of relationships among people in groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

Organizations were perceived similar to machines in traditional management understanding and early theories. Using a sociological thought helps understand how teams, organizations and society work together, and makes room for modern organizational theory. The formation of inter-organizational and intra-organizational networks has become critical to prosperity and success (Tapscott, 1996). When considered as complex adaptive systems, inter-organizational networks exhibit high-level emergent behaviour based on very simple interactions at lower levels of abstraction (Axelrod, 1997; Holland, 1998).

To understand the dynamics of organisations, it is necessary to consider not only the dyadic relationships between two firms, but also the larger environment in which they operate. The economic network in which the organisation operates is one dimension of the environment. Organizations must be viewed as being embedded in a multidimensional environment. Organizational development guarantees that when one aspect of a system changes, the other parts of the system are aligned with that change to enable effective implementation. In an organization, there are many relations that differ in degree, intensity, tenure and tenacity, at work at the same time. We cannot argue against the fact that any organization relies heavily on its human capital and that of these relationships. With the advent of ‘virtual organizations’ and ‘timeless time’ (Castells, 1996), experiences of organizations, people and life itself changed. This experience is a phenomenon led and maneuvered by machine led features like hypertext, hyperlinks, image adjustments and message combinations. So, ‘networks’ translate experience into relations and them ‘within and between levels or units of social reality’, as required. (Van Dijk, J. 2012 :28).

But in analysing organizational structures as networks of relations, there need to be some considerations. Social relationships are not a prerequisite for every social structure. Social networks are more than just a collection of social connections. These need to be linked together in order to create network effects. Also, not all ties in networks are personal in the sense that they connect people, whereas social relationships are always exclusive in the sense of formulating expectations about the behaviour of precisely two people in relation to each other. The only requirement is that, during communication, these entities be treated as accountable social actors, i.e., as beings acting out of internal attitudes like motivations and interests, that can be addressed by expectations. While analysing relations at the macro level, Fuhse argues for a close connection between the communication in relationships and the wider culture through the concept of relational frames. The study of cultural models for relationships and of the micro-processes in social relationships can yield important contributions to relational sociology. (Fuhse, 2011)

According to Emirbayer and Goodwin, network researchers have overlooked the significance of culture, values, and agency. However, when viewed through the lens of relationalist theory, it is clear that social network analysts work within a theoretical tradition that places a premium on form (most commonly understood as
structure) over content (most often understood as culture). Relationalists value the concept of relationships over abstract concepts such as agency and value. Imposing only one theoretical narrative suppresses the philosophically grounded and logically sound reasons why formalists consciously avoid emphasising culture or how relationalists challenge the concept of agency and normative values. The inclusion of contingency in social processes, as well as sensitivity to context and content, all significantly limit the scope of any research completed in relationalism.

Relationalism has a less well-defined agenda, but it is also less dependent on the outcomes of individual actors. Many social processes are of great interest because of their impact on society as a whole, rather than on any single person (or actor). Relationalism, with its emphasis on historical context, lends itself naturally to historical transformation research. Relationalism’s theoretical presuppositions drive researchers to investigate collective dynamics that emerge only through the complexity of multiple interacting units, rather than in discrete interactions between individual and collective forces. Indeed, focusing on relations rather than identities leads researchers away from focusing on groups, and many of these works locate the source of change in the interstices between groups rather than through endogenous group developments.

However, Relationalism significantly narrows the scope of any research done in the relationalist tradition by recognising contingency in social processes and emphasising context as well as content.

Social network analysis has grown significantly since its inception in the 1930s as a field of study in sociology. Social network analysis is seen by many as having the potential to reenergize and unite sociological research under the guise of a theoretical interest in relationships rather than individuals. A theoretical model of what occurs in social relationships and how these relational processes relate to interactions and network structure is necessary for network research and relational sociology. According to this strategy, network studies must be combined with analysis of social relationship and network structure processes. This calls for improvements in the theoretical framework and discussion of alternative conceptions of the fundamental components of networks. An explanation based on communication theory of how social structures, such as social relationships, develop during communication. However, factors like non-accountability of culture because the units of analyses “suppresses an interest in culture as an object of analysis”, dynamism, transformation, and problem of universal generalization pose as restrictions. This saw an active voice from researchers like Fuhse, Goodwin, Erimbayer, and Erikson (Erikson, 2013) wo mentioned the need to have more dyadic ad group-level factors in the ‘paradigm’, and research about “a close connection between the communication in relationships and the wider culture through the concept of relational frames” (Fuhse, 2011), and not forget about the importance of culture, values and agency in social network analysis.

References