

Relationalism: Reflecting on One “How” of Navigating Substance and Process in IR

Written by Kathryn Marie Fisher

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KATHRYN MARIE FISHER, MAY 25 2013

International Relations (IR) scholars and students are tasked with transforming the transactional and processual nature of social and political relations into conceptually digestible snapshots. Considering current limitations of language and communication, to address the complexity of human relations we seem to deal in photo albums when reality is (always) live streaming. As such, IR scholarship rests largely against a backdrop of conceptual abstraction, temporal delay, and spatial dislocation.

The extent of our simplifications of abstraction, delay, and dislocation in IR link to the investigatory lenses with which we choose to analyze, write, and speak, and the choices that such methodological engagements entail. A relative newcomer to IR in terms of “lenses” is relationalism. As a social scientific sensibility, relationalism holds analytical potential in how its ontological commitments play into not just the “how” of *how social and political relations interrelate and unfold in particular ways*, but also the “how” of *how we study how these relations interrelate and unfold in particular ways*. Relationalism holds the potential to facilitate imaginative and creative IR inquiry by attending to process and social construction without shutting the door on substance or materiality.[1]

As a generalized category, relationalism advances a set of research commitments that focus on the constitutive role of transactional processes and social construction. Relationalism treats “social interaction, social ties, communication, and conversation not merely as expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture but as active sites of creation and change” (Mc Adam *et al.* 2001: 22). In-depth varieties of relationalism such as social constructionism (Shotter 1993), processual relationalism (Jackson and Nexon 1999), processism/relationalism/verbing (Albert *et al.* 2001), relational constructivism (Jackson 2006b), and relationalism in the context of post-colonial IR (Go 2013) have provided significant scholarly advancement beyond just thinking in terms of generalized “relationality.” Drawing largely on work in relational sociology by Andrew Abbott, Mustafa Emirbayer, Margaret Somers, and Charles Tilly, among others, relationalism in IR has provided dynamic conceptual perspectives to help disentangle the processual-substantive spectrum of social and political relations.[2]

Part of this disentangling has much to do with methodological decision-making. Each “how to” of IR research design is a result of individual researcher’s choice and preference, with different perspectival frames facilitating different types of research questions, investigatory prioritizations, and analytical outcomes. Relational research underscores the “processes,” “patterns,” and “representations” of international relations with an aim of better understanding, and articulating, the role of discursive practices. But *how* such practices are interpreted and analyzed in practical research application remains underexplored: How do we identify, make sense of, and communicate discursive patterns, representations, and consequences in our research and in our teaching? Whether through the use of causal mechanisms in post-structural discourse analysis or social network analysis in historical research, relationalism has the potential to continue opening the door for types of post-disciplinary conceptual and empirical collaboration.

A frequent reference in relational discussion is Emirbayer’s question on “whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static “things” or in dynamic, unfolding relations” (Emirbayer 1997, 281). But there is no reason to position investigations in terms of considering process “*or*” substance as primary. A key significance of relationally-situated scholarship is the refusal of any processual/substantive either/or,

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focusing instead on how substance and process work together in particular ways in particular settings. In this way relational modes of inquiry can help us to interrogate the causally consequential^[3] interrelation of discourses, transactions, and actors. Processual articulations of identity influence actors and outcomes by constituting the structures within which agency is engaged, delineating which actions are (more) “politically possible” (Jackson 2006a, 132). Articulations, collective meaning, and actions contribute to an intersubjectively constituted feedback loop of causal significance for structure and agency: Structures do not determine agency or vice versa. Individuals are “inseparable from the transactional contexts within which they are embedded” (Emirbayer 1997, 287) and are “embedded in process and relation, so that there is no internal ‘core’ which was separate from social process” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 298). As an analytical perspective, relationalism is one guide for empirical research around issues of entity formation, interpretation, and consequence through a post-disciplinary attitude that is open to critical perspectives, self-reflexive research design, and rigorous empirical analysis.

The question that remains for relational scholarship and IR is how (in greater specificity) do we go about researching and making sense of such embeddedness in our conceptual elaborations and empirical applications? In a sense, relational approaches encourage research endeavoring for a more nuanced understanding of what may be interpreted as “nonlinear” or “multi-directional” causality. Relational inquiries foster such a perspective by encouraging specific types of questions:^[4] For example, “When, if ever, does a set of relations actually count as a “thing,” a substance, or an entity?” (Emirbayer 1997, 304) How does the “making [of] an entity” and establishment of “thingness” influence international relations in a particular context considering that the way things are today is not the way things have to be? (Abbott 2001, 271)

Relationalism as an approach to IR inquiry is in many ways both a general multidisciplinary perspective as well as an emerging signpost for something “new.” At the most basic level, relationalism is one way to grapple with long-standing tensions along the processual-substantive spectrum of social relations. A range of constitutive practices of meaning-making join the poles of process and substance. Encompassing varying combinations and degrees of material and ideational factors, researchers and students are faced with a seemingly insurmountable complexity. *How* researchers and students engage with this spectrum of complexity is in many ways what the future of relationalism may hold for IR scholarship. It is from what develops in this space for creative, imaginative, and analytically rigorous innovation that I most look forward to with respect to what (hopefully) lays ahead for “relational IR.”

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[1] One aspect of future relational research that I will not go into here but that is in need of further consideration are the “normative implications” of relationalism (Emirbayer 308).

[2] Forthcoming works with an explicitly relational focus include Jackson and Nexon (forthcoming) and Lawson (forthcoming).

[3] “Causally consequential” being a term I am just beginning to try and wrap my head around (Fisher 2013).

[4] To reference “nonlinear” or “multi-directional” causality may be risky considering a lack of space for explanation. But the key purpose of this reference in this discussion is to distinguish relational causal inquiry from perhaps more traditional notions of causal explanation.

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