

**The Relational Approach and its Theories in Sociology**  
SPO 510097 ((Tópicos Especiais))

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2018

### **General description of relational sociology**

This course is an illustrated introduction to relational sociology. We will answer to the question *What is relational sociology?* by comparing this type of sociology to other types of sociologies, notably the ‘substantialist’ approaches in sociology.

In brief, relational sociology has been defined as a ‘paradigm’ by relational colleagues. In this sense, it would be the equivalent of other ‘paradigms’ in sociology, such as Marxism, Feminism, system theory and symbolic interactionism. This is partly true since relational sociologists propose sets of worldviews, concepts and methods which are supposed to fix scientific problems other ‘paradigms’ cannot resolve. However, if it refers to T. Kuhn’s views on the ‘structures of scientific revolutions’, this paradigmatic view can be misleading for two main reasons: i) relational sociology does not offer any consensual theory and method, ii) like within other sociological ‘paradigm’, relational sociologists disagree on fundamental issues. In fact, there are different relational theories or approaches. One of the major disagreements refers to the idea that there are ‘social structures’ with ‘causal powers’.

However, there are also fundamental agreements among relational sociologists, and this is why we can talk about a ‘relational turn’ in the discipline. Relational sociology should be presented as an intellectual movement within the discipline of sociology (and the ‘society’). Most of relational sociologists are asking for major changes in sociology in terms of epistemological and ontological principles, and at the conceptual and methodological levels. They think some sociological (and social) problems need to be fixed. In this respect, relational sociologists invite us to see *social phenomena as relations* instead of social ‘substances’; and many of them insist on the *processual* nature of any social phenomenon and the *interdependency* of the interactants.

### **Method of the course: Comparisons of theories through empirical illustrations**

In this course, we will discuss the basic ontological principles and the main approaches we find in relational sociology. This introduction will be done through comparisons of approaches based on empirical illustrations. We will compare:

- Relational approaches with two types of non-relational approaches (social determinism and co-determinism).

- Relational approaches with other relational approaches.

At first, we will explain *why we need a relational turn* in the discipline. It is suggested that relational sociology is an antidote to the prevailing culture of egocentrism in sociology and the ‘society’. After, we will try to find out *what kind of relational sociology* we need. In this respect, relational approaches will be compared and discussed in reference to real social events which happened in slavery plantations in the Americas. These historical examples will be used to illustrate what can be seen and explained and what cannot not be seen or explained with each approach. Various illustrations might be used during the lectures and discussions, but the main ones will be the two stories told by Sandra L. Graham in her book *Caetana Diz Não: Histórias de Mulheres da Sociedade Escravista Brasileira*. São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras, 2005.

The course will be based on a combination of lectures and discussions. The participation of the students will be strongly encouraged through the reading of selected texts and the active participation to discussions in class. The main idea is to evaluate the relevance of relational sociology and not necessarily to endorse it as if it should be *the* ‘paradigm’ in sociology. In this respect, students are more than welcome to think and act as ‘critical’ thinkers and to use examples coming from their own doctorate research to support or reject relational ideas.

## Content of the course

### Part 1: The nature and relevance of relational sociology (16/03; 23/03)

#### 1.1 The dilemma: processual and relational thinking versus substantialism

Text to read:

- Emirbayer, M. (1997)

#### 1.2 Processual-relational thinking against egocentrism

Text to read:

- Dépelteau (Forthcoming)

#### 1.3 Main agreements and disagreements within the relational movement

Text to read:

- Dépelteau, F. (2018a)

#### 1.4 Brief introduction to the main theories in relational sociology

Text to read:

- Manterys (2017)

## Part 2: Processual-relational critique of social determinism (13/04)

### 2.1 E. Durkheim and the 'social things'

Texts to read:

- Durkheim, E. (1982)
- Dépelteau, F. (2017)

### 2.2 Deterministic types of network analysis

Texts to read:

- Erikson, E. (2013)
- Wellman, B. (1997)
- Wellman and Berkowitz (1997)

## Part 3: Processual-relational critique of co-determinism (20/04; 27/04)

### 3.1 M. Emirbayer and P. Bourdieu

Texts to read:

- Emirbayer (1997)
- Emirbayer and Mishe (1998)
- Emirbayer, M. and Desmond, M. (2015)
- Liang and Liu (2018)
- Dépelteau, F. (2013)

### 3.2 M. Archer and P. Donati

Texts to read:

- Archer, M. (2000)
- Archer, M. (1982)
- Donati, P. (2015)
- Donati, P. (2013)
- Dépelteau, F. (2008)
- King, A. (1999)

## Part 4: The processual-relational sociology (04/05; 18/05)

### 4.1 Processual thinking

### 4.2 The notions of trans-action and interdependency

### 4.3 The processual-relational redefinition of social fields

### 4.4 Sequences of social events

### 4.5 Beside positivism and history

Texts to read:

- Dépelteau, F. (2018b)
- Dépelteau, F. (2015)
- Hillcoat-Nallétamby, S. (2018)

## Part 5 H. White's and J. Fuhse's relational sociology (01/06)

### 5.1 H. White

#### Texts to read:

- Fontdevilla, J. (2018)
- Fontdevilla, J. and White, H. (2013)
- White, H. and al. (2013)

### 5.2 J. Fuhse

#### Texts to read:

- Fuhse, J. (2018)
- Fuhse, J. (2015)
- Fuhse, J. (2013)
- Fuhse, J. (2009)

## Part 6 N. Crossley's relational sociology (15/06)

### 6.1 Main ideas and concepts

### 6.2 Empirical illustrations

#### Texts to read:

- Emms, R. and Crossley, N. (2018)
- Crossley (2018)
- Crossley, N. (2015a)
- Crossley, N. (2015b)
- Crossley, N. (2013)
- Crossley, N. (2011)

## Evaluation

Participation in class (readings and discussions) 10%

### Critical essays

- What is relational sociology? (1000-2000 words) 10%
- Advantages and limits of social determinism (1000-2000 words) 10%
- Advantages and limits of co-determinism (1000-2000 words) 10%
- Advantages and limits of processual-relational sociology (1000-2000 words) 10%
- Advantages and limits of H. White's and J. Fuhse's relational sociology (1000-2000 words) 10%
- Advantages and limits of N. Crossley's relational sociology (1000-2000 words) 10%

Oral presentations (20%) and final discussion (10%) in class (22/06) 30%

Very important:

a) The evaluation will never be dependent on my personal views (if I agree with you or not, or if you agree with me or not). In this course, never hesitate to openly disagree with the professor when you have good sociological reasons to do so. The evaluation will be based on the clarity, the originality and the sociological relevance of your arguments. In this course, a relevant argument is related to the issue we discuss and it is founded on rationality and empirical examples or data.

b) The evaluation of the participation in class makes the physical presence in class mandatory. However, being there physically is not enough. It is essential to be prepared adequately for the discussions which makes the reading of the selected texts necessary.

c) If are well-prepared for the discussion, never hesitate to ask questions for clarification. There is no annoying or 'stupid' question when we are well prepared. We are all here to learn and to test our knowledge rather than showing we already know. The day we will think we know, science will be dead. At the same time, relativism is not an option because we are here to test our ideas in order to get closer to the Truth. We want to know how social phenomena work for real and not to build and diffuse beliefs, narratives, stories, ideologies or so-called 'alternative facts'. In sum, without decent effort and outside of this scientific spirit, doing this course and having sociological discussions become irrelevant. Thanks to real and well-done sociological work, we give to ourselves the possibility of making social progress.

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