1. Why relational sociology?

There has long been an unfortunate tendency in the social sciences to divide society into the micro and the macro. Micro is usually about individuals and actors, whereas macro is described with such terms as ‘structure’, ‘system’, or simply ‘society’. In sociology, micro and macro are often referred to as occupying separate levels. This way of thinking has locked most of social science research in the area into explanations that either prioritize individuals and their actions or focus on the effects of systems and structures (Ahrne, 1981; Coleman, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1981; Scott, 2021). Norbert Elias (1978) has aptly characterized this stalemate with his contention that ‘the individual is at one and the same time surrounded by society yet cut off from it by some invisible barrier’ (p. 15).

Many hardcore social theorists emphasize the macro level and the social structure, whereas others, often economists, are critical of those explanations and prefer to address individuals and their preferences. Even laypeople and politicians are usually suspicious of references to structures and systems. As Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990, famously maintained, ‘there is no such thing as society’ (see Outhwaite, 2006, p. 17). On the other hand, many people, including business leaders, sports leaders, and even parents, find it convenient to blame a society that they perceive to be somewhere far away, insisting that it is not their problem, but society’s problem.

Many sociologists have devoted themselves to a search for links between the micro and the macro with a variety of proposals. Giddens (1984) has suggested that micro and macro are in fact the same thing seen from different perspectives, whereas Coleman (1990) contends that there is an interaction. Habermas (1981) perceived a system that risks colonization of the lifeworld – the world as experienced by individuals. Although there did seem to be consensus that it was a good idea to conceptualize society as having different levels, these efforts have merely achieved theoretical compromises that fail to abolish the division between micro and macro.

As Collins (1981) has argued, a more fruitful way of understanding the notions of micro and macro is to see them in ‘relative terms in both time and space’ (p. 987). They can be perceived as a pair of continuous variables, and macrophenomena can be translated into combinations of microevents. Such a translation ‘refers to people’s repeated behavior in particular places,

using particular physical objects, and communicating by using many of the same symbolic expressions repeatedly with certain other people' (p. 994). As Stinchcombe (1985) has stated, 'Macrosociology is sociology about millions of people' (p. 572).

There are many reasons to distrust explanations that unilaterally emphasize society or structure at the expense of the individual. But this does not mean that the focus must be on individual actors. On the other hand, to question the reasonableness of a microperspective does not necessarily mean to ignore people and their choices and values. In recent years, the notion that society is divided into these two levels has been challenged by a relational approach. By looking at people's relationships, we can see how they are recreated or changed through countless everyday events as they move in and out of relationships, their actions reinforcing each other and being captured in relational patterns with long-term effects.

There have been recent discussions about a relational turn in sociology (Prandini, 2015), the purpose of which is to resolve barren antinomies between structure and agency (Crossley, 2011; Mische, 2011). Crossley (2011) assumes that society is 'a process arising between actors' (p. 21). Donati (2011) contends that it is the relationship that constitutes the core and the starting point for an understanding of what society is – that relationships are the 'cells' of society: 'In other words, social relations are those maintaining between agent-subjects that – as such – constitute their reciprocal orientations and actions as distinct from all that characterizes single actors' (p. 60).

BRINGING ORGANIZATIONS BACK IN

My purpose in this book is to demonstrate how theories about organizations can contribute to the development of a relational sociology. There tends to be a large gap between organization theory and more general social theory. Many social theorists prefer to discuss collective action, social movements, institutions, or networks rather than addressing the role of organizations. An analysis of organizations is also lacking in relational sociology. My starting point is that organizations are a type of relationship, and that they should not be understood as situated between micro and macro. Rather, we can understand actions and what we call society *through* relationships. People's actions take place to a large extent in relationships, and society changes as relationships change.

Relationships are held together through social bonds, and there are many kinds of relationships with different characteristics and qualities. In this book, I investigate what happens when one examines organizations from a relational perspective while simultaneously developing a relational sociology from an organizational perspective. Although not usually stated explicitly, much of organization theory is about relationships, and it can be used to develop

a relational view of society: Society is not somewhere out there. Society is all around us. There is a tendency in organization theory, however, to see organizations as being at a kind of meso-level between the micro and the macro. We can often hear people talk about ways in which organizations are affected by society and by overall societal processes, without considering that what is ‘out there’ is, in fact, largely other organizations.

We can only speculate as to why organizational researchers are willing to accept their subordinate role to such a large extent or why other social scientists, such as sociologists and political scientists, overlook the importance of organizations. Perhaps the development of organizational theory in recent years has occurred primarily within business schools and has thus become uncoupled from the development of sociological theories (Besio et al., 2020). Or perhaps it has something to do with the way Max Weber (1930) described rationalized organizations as iron cages characterized by mechanized petrification (pp. 181–182), leading to a disenchantment of the world (Weber, 1946, p. 19). Or perhaps it is simply that organizations appear too obvious and too mundane to fit into an exciting theory of society.

Charles Perrow (2002) is one of the few organizational researchers who has turned against this underestimation of the importance of organizations. One of the most prominent organizational sociologists since the early 1960s, he is perhaps best known for his book on the Harrisburg Nuclear Accident of 1979, *Normal Accidents* (1984). In the introduction to his 2002 book entitled *Organizing America*, he formulates a theory of a society of organizations. He perceives organization as the independent variable and writes that ‘the impact of large organizations on society has not been fully appreciated’ (p. 10). But we do not even need to enter a discussion about organizations affecting society. They are not reflections of a more general social order (Ahrne et al., 2016). Organizations are society, and society is all around us, both inside and outside organizations.

NEITHER INDIVIDUALS NOR STRUCTURES

But before I begin to discuss how we should be understanding what relationships are and what they consist of, it may be appropriate to mention a few examples of how such concepts as individual and lifeworld or society, structure, and system are defined and how they have been used. When we scrutinize them, we find that they are ambiguous and lacking in clarity.

Individuals

In Anthony Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration, there is a clearly individualistically oriented notion of action: ‘Action is a continuous process, a flow,

in which the reflexive monitoring which the individual maintains is fundamental to the control of the body that actors ordinarily sustain throughout their day-to-day day lives' (p. 9).

But the social context is crucial for the way we should understand individual actions. Max Weber (1968) distinguishes between social and non-social action. An individual's action is social if it 'takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course' (p. 4). This orientation towards other people can apply to the past, present, or future behaviour of others (cf. Martin, 2009, p. 9). Those to whom the actions are directed can be either an individual or a larger group of unknown people.

But individual actions are non-social if aimed at inanimate objects. Actions that cannot primarily be understood as social, Weber (1968) exemplifies with a common situation: When it starts to rain, a number of individuals independently open their umbrellas (pp. 22–23). These are individual actions that occur almost simultaneously without any direct connection to each other.

Actions become social when they involve an interaction between acting people. A strictly individualistic concept of action therefore leads to a misunderstanding of what happens in society. In a strict sense, a social act is hardly individual. It presupposes the action of others; a social act remains incomplete if it is not coordinated with the actions of others. A conversation is not a conversation if people do not address each other and answer each other's questions.

We can see social action as a continuous process that goes from individual to individual; the actions of one individual are complemented by the actions of another. The individual action loses its meaning if it is not continued by others, because social actions exceed the physical and mental capacity of individuals. As further discussed in Chapter 5, they are propagated through interaction and in relationships.

Lifeworld

The concept of lifeworld comes from phenomenology. Its foremost interpreter in sociology has been Alfred Schutz (1962). In his presentation, lifeworld is the part of social reality that an individual encounters in daily life – a part of society within the reach of each individual (p. 224). A lifeworld is unique to each individual, and individuals must create their own image and knowledge of their lifeworld. But it is far from a world that the individual has been involved in creating. On the contrary. Our lifeworlds existed before we were born and have come into being as a result of the experiences and actions of our predecessors 'as an organized world' (Schutz, 1970, p. 72). Lifeworlds are worlds of multiple realities, pieces of different social sectors that we share with each other and must adapt to. But for the moment, each of our individual

lifeworlds are ours, and it is up to each of us to give that world meaning and to orient ourselves in it.

The multiple realities of the lifeworld and its objects can in another, perhaps gloomier phenomenological interpretation be described as a practico-inert field (Sartre, 1976). This field can be seen as an objectified practice. It is through the mediation of the objects in the field of the practico-inert – activities and structures inherited from ancestors – that different lifeworlds meet. In this way, human relations are arranged in seriality (pp. 259–261). People share something in common that simultaneously separates them. The connections between individuals are negatively determined through their links with objects in a practico-inert field.

The various objects in a lifeworld offer resistance. As Foucault (1979) would have it, power is exercised in lifeworlds. But an individual's movements in the lifeworld are also 'modifying or changing its objects and their mutual relationships' (Schutz, 1970, p. 73). To the extent that individuals have the opportunity to choose between exit and voice in different contexts (Hirschman, 1970), they can influence the objects around which the lifeworld revolves.

A lifeworld does not seem to exist separate from a social structure, then. Rather, the opposite. Lifeworlds are in the midst of these structures and consist of each individual's way of moving and interpreting them. From a lifeworld perspective, individuals consciously or unconsciously shape these structures through their bodily movements and in the choice between exit and voice. Micro and macro are intimately connected. It is in lifeworlds, on the ground, that things are determined.

Society

The establishment of the idea of society as beyond and partly separate from humans was a prerequisite for the emergence of a social science distinct from such other disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and biology (Tilly, 1984). The idea of society demonstrated something that ruled and had power over people without being a divine or princely force. In everyday language, the term 'society' is used in a variety of contexts. It can refer to a state, or from an individual viewpoint, it can stand for people who are unknown except perhaps as TV personalities. One's immediate surroundings or lifeworld are rarely seen as society.

Roughly speaking, one can distinguish between two fundamentally different ways of summarizing what the term 'society' stands for; it 'has a useful double meaning' (Giddens, 1984, p. xxvi). In the most common and conventional use of the term, various scholars have differentiated among various societies and suggest that *a society constitutes a delimited geographical unit separate from other such units* (Parsons, 1951; cf. Giddens, 1984; Tilly, 1984). According to

Talcott Parsons' (1966) functionalist theory, a society is a collective that constitutes a social system. What makes it a society is its relative self-sufficiency (p. 9). In practice, the use of the term 'society' in this sense equates it with a country or a state, with each country being perceived as a separate society. This view has been heavily criticized, not least in light of a growing awareness of globalization. Charles Tilly (1984) was early in advancing this critique:

All of the standard procedures for delineating societies run into severe trouble when the time comes either to check the clarity and stability of the social boundaries thus produced or to describe the coherent structures and processes presumably contained within those boundaries. (p. 23)

From a global perspective, only a society that encompasses the whole world has fully unambiguous boundaries (Outhwaite, 2006, p. 52).

Even as globalization processes erode the independence of states, they are contributing to a fragmentation of these so-called societies. But as Udehn (2016) suggested, the conclusion must be that these are neither sufficiently integrated nor sufficiently delimited from the outside world to be considered social systems.

Tilly (1984) concluded his critique of the idea of conceptualizing society as a thing apart, as having a specific spatial delimitation, by suggesting that instead of seeing societies as different autonomous systems, we should apply the idea of multiple social relationships, 'some quite localized, and some worldwide in scale' (p. 25).

The second meaning of the term 'society' is to see it as *the sum of all social relations and interaction among people*. This view of society was, in fact, the most common one before the breakthrough of structural functionalism in the 1940s. The classical sociologist who gave the most pregnant expression to this interpretation of society was Georg Simmel, who was active at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (Frisby & Sayer, 1986). Without abandoning the idea of something social that influences and can explain human actions, Simmel proceeded from these actions. Society is everywhere 'where a number of human beings enter into interaction and form temporary or permanent unity' (Simmel, quoted from Frisby & Sayer, 1986, p. 59).

For Simmel (1909), society was an abstraction that expressed the forces generated in interactions between people when they socialize and cooperate or compete and fight with each other. The concept of society covers two meanings:

first, the complex of associated individuals, the socially formed human material, as the full historical reality has shaped it. 'Society' is, second, the sum of those forms of relationship by virtue of which individuals are changed into 'society' in the former sense. (p. 301)

Structure

A common expression of the micro–macro dichotomy is to talk about actor and structure. Is there a difference between society and structure? Perhaps it can be said that the structure is the skeleton of a society (Scott, 2021). But, as with society, there is no agreement on what structure stands for. According to Joas and Knöbl (2009), structure has become ‘something of a jack-of-all trades, deployed to a diverse array of ends in every imaginable context, which is precisely why it is rarely defined in any detail’ (p. 343).

The concept of structure is a relatively new element in social theory; it was not until the 1960s that it began to be widely used. It was first introduced in anthropology and came to replace the concept of function (Lizardo, 2010). Before long, structure became established as a cornerstone of social science vocabulary: ‘from being an unwieldy and unevenly used abstraction’, structure became a ‘seemingly obligatory part of the vocabulary of contemporary sociologists’ (p. 653).

Structure has been used primarily as an analytical tool in anthropology, but in Anthony Giddens’ version, structure became an ontological concept, an assumption about the nature of social reality (Lizardo, 2010). According to Giddens (1984), however, this social reality, in turn, consists of rules and resources: ‘Structure as recursively organized sets of rules and resources, is out of time and space, save as instantiations and coordination as memory traces, and is marked by an absence of the subject’ (p. 25). He also contended that institutions have a place in this structural concept: ‘Those practices which have the greatest time-space extension within such totalities can be referred to as institutions’ (p. 22).

A social structure that consists of combinations of rules, resources, and institutions is far from a monolithic solid block that forces social life into certain definite forms, but rather a web of relationships with different extents and boundaries in time and space. Rather than referring to structure in a definite form as the cause of certain phenomena or behaviours, we must be able to say what that structure comprises. And if we address this issue in terms of changing such structures, it may rather mean changing rules or institutions. In his book, *Social Structures*, John Levi Martin (2009) developed an approach based on the notion that social structures are results and effects rather than causes. He was interested in the emergence of structures and rejected the idea that social structures could explain regularities in social action. For Martin, structures are a form of ‘patternings of relationships’ (p. 3). If one is to mention structures, then, it is as the effects of human actions rather than as something that explains them.

Society Is All Around Us

The idea of societies defining self-sufficient systems is clearly outdated. The world is not divided into a number of separate societies. Yet we cannot say that there is no such thing as society. To think of society is to think of people. Without people, there is no society; and without society, there are no people. Society is not far away; society is not the others; society is all around us, as manifested in our interactions and our relationships.

When we think of people and society, perhaps we should distinguish between individuals and human beings. Each individual is distinct from every other individual, but a human being is one of many. Individuals have difficulty with relationships. A basic idea for Simmel (1910) was that 'the individual soul cannot be inserted into an order without finding itself at the same time in opposition to it' (p. 384). But for human beings, relationships are a matter of course.

As social beings, people are not individuals; they are siblings, parents, friends, cousins, neighbours, citizens, colleagues, members, volunteers, patients, supporters, prisoners, students, team-mates, or tenants. Being a sibling provides different conditions for a relationship than being a member of an organization, a patient, or a prisoner does. Many people are in relationships that are not characterized by cooperation or common agreements, rather the opposite; they are competitors, rivals, enemies, or opponents. People live their lives in relationships, are born into relationships, sometimes leaving relationships if they can, but looking for new relationships. Changing society means changing relationships.

WHAT ARE RELATIONSHIPS?

Many scholars who write about relational sociology emphasize that social analysis should be based on interaction between people. But there is a crucial difference between interaction and a relationship. Relationships are developed through repeated interaction; a relationship creates opportunities to meet the same people on several occasions. According to Crossley (2011), a relationship consists of 'the sedimented past and projected future of a stream of interaction' (p. 35). It is developed through experiences from previous interactions, influencing and shaping a continued interaction. A relationship can be strengthened or weakened through interaction. Each relationship has a special 'temporal code' (Donati, 2011, p. 89), a history, but its continuation cannot be taken for granted.

But a relationship is more than repeated interaction. Meeting a person again, hanging out, or doing something together can happen by chance; people may meet again because they live close to each other or take the same route to work.

In order for a relationship to arise and be maintained, something more must be created – something that constitutes the conditions for continued contacts, some type of communication that can make it possible to meet again or keep in touch without any direct interaction. The bonds with which a relationship is held together and the conditions they create are crucial for an analysis and understanding of their meaning and how they work. They are needed for the relationship to continue, but they also create a certain distance; bonds hold people both together and apart and sometimes simultaneously. In general terms, relational sociologists such as Prandini (2015) refer to these enabling conditions as ties or building blocks. A recurring theme is that relationships are ‘constituted by story’ (White, 1992, p. 67; cf. Tilly, 2002, chapter 3). Crossley (2011) suggests that we ‘tell stories about our relationships’ (p. 36). It can also be about ‘conversational situations’ (Mische & White, 1998). Some authors emphasize transactions as elements that bind relationships together (Dépelteau, 2008; Tilly, 2005a). Others note that relationships require negotiations between those involved, for relationships must be constantly maintained (Crossley, 2011). All these proposals can be understood as communicative events. Different forms of communication shape, stabilize, or change relational expectations (Fuhse, 2015).

Yet, relational sociologists have not come far in explaining the conditions under which it is possible to create relationships, and how they arise and are reproduced. The proposals that have been made – story-telling, transactions, and negotiations – are vague. And there are a lack of decisive insights into the way relationships are created – possibilities for inclusion and who may or may not participate, for example. I discuss this issue in the next chapter and develop a way of defining the terms and conditions for establishing relationships more closely, with the help of social bonds.

Why have relational sociologists been so vague in explaining the elements that hold relationships together? Probably because the area has been developed by sociologists who focus on studies of networks. Many of their main ideas have emerged in the academic circle of Harrison White and Charles Tilly of Columbia University, which is why the perspective is sometimes referred to as the New York School (Fuhse, 2015; Mische, 2011; Prandini, 2015). But there are several other roots. In most of the contributions, however, relationships are equated with networks. Ann Mische’s (2011) article on the emergence of a relational sociology, entitled ‘Relational sociology, culture and agency’, is included in the *SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis*. She emphasizes that relational sociology has developed from general insights based on network analysis. And even those who do not directly have their intellectual roots in the New York School seem to equate relationships with networks, as evident in Crossley’s (2011) statement: ‘relationships are real and the social world comprises actors-in-relationship – in networks’ (p. 23; cf. Donati, 2011, pp. 92–94;

Fuhse, 2015). The fact that culture constitutes a dominant research interest in relational sociology is probably another reason for the underdevelopment of the notion of what constitutes relational building blocks.

The idea that organizations can be understood as relationships rarely exists within this school, although Tilly (2002) mentioned organizations even as he argued for a relational perspective (p. 73), and Crossley (2015) advanced the idea that corporate actors such as trade unions, companies, or authorities can be seen as actors in a relational sociology (p. 66).

In addition to the criticism of the division of society into a macro and a micro level, there has been a tendency in relational sociology to emphasize processes at the expense of structure or substance. In the introduction to his article, 'Manifesto for a relational sociology', Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) held forth that there is a contradiction in sociology between 'conceiving of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or processes, in static "things" or in dynamic, unfolding relations' (p. 281).

There may be tensions between process and substance, but these notions are hardly mutually exclusive. Substances arise from processes, and processes need some substance in which to develop. Not everything can flow; water must have something in which to flow. It is sometimes said that one cannot descend into the same river twice. Yet we know that rivers are ancient.¹ Rivers consist not only of water, but also of riverbeds, beaches, and their deltas. And it is claimed that Heraclitus did not say exactly that one cannot descend into the same river twice, but rather said something to the effect of 'Around those who descend into the same rivers, new water is constantly flowing.' Rather than being contradictions, then, substance and process condition each other.

Relationships can be understood as a flow of repeated interaction that changes for each occasion of interaction. But there must still be something that holds the relationship together in order for it to continue. A relationship needs substance and form. As Vandenberghe (2018) noted, 'What appears as a solid particle is also a wave; structure is also process' (p. 47). The distinction between structure and process is temporal. In identifying boundary specification as one of the biggest problems for a relational analysis, Emirbayer (1997) indirectly admits that processes need a form, 'moving from flows to transactions to clearly demarcated units of study, from continuity to discontinuity' (p. 303).

Network-inspired relational sociology has provided a foundation to stand on and support the fruitfulness of a relational approach to society. But its focus on networks and processes runs the risk of leading it into a dead end. Not all relationships are networks. If that were the case, there would be no reason to refer to networks; it would be enough to comment on relationships. In order to develop a relational social science that includes organizations and other types of relationships, we must continue along a different path. Maybe it is a good

idea to go back a bit and follow a track from Max Weber. He did not have to struggle with micro and macro; nor did he have to deal with networks.

Relationships According to Weber

I previously discussed how Weber (1968) distinguished between social and non-social action in his introduction to *Economy and Society*. What makes an individual's action social is that it is directed at someone or some other people. Weber's view of social relationships relates to his description of social action and follows directly on the analysis of social action. Relationships arise through people's mutual social actions. A social relationship, according to Weber, is the behaviour of a plurality of actors for whom 'the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms' (p. 26).

Social relationships can be based upon diverse things, from friendships and sexual relationships on the one hand, to political relationships and economic transactions on the other. But every relationship revolves mainly around a specific content. Moreover, they can be based upon mutual solidarity and appreciation or upon hostility and conflict (Weber, 1968, p. 27).

Relationships are shaped in a variety of ways. Some, which Weber referred to as 'associative relationships', are based upon decided agreements and can often be about different types of financial transactions. He also identified 'communal relationships', based upon traditional or emotional grounds. Weber noted that these different aspects of a relationship can overlap in more permanent social relationships between the same persons. In such relationships, emotional values may exceed pure utility aspects (p. 41). But not all relationships remain long lasting. A social relationship may be of a 'very fleeting character' or of 'varying degrees of permanence' (p. 28).

Perhaps Weber's (1968) most significant distinction was between open and closed relationships. In open relationships, it is possible in principle for anyone to participate, and there is nothing to stop those who want to join. He mentioned religious movements and market relationships as examples of open relationships. But a relationship is closed, he contended, 'so far as, according to its subjective meaning and its binding rules participation of certain persons is excluded, limited or subjected to conditions' (p. 43). The fact that a relationship is closed, however, does not imply that individual members do not come and go, merely that involvement is not unconditional and open to everybody. In the long run, there is a tendency in most relationships to move from openness to closedness. It does not matter if they can be seen as associative or communal. But this change often occurs gradually, and there are many variations between openness and closure, ranging from exclusive clubs or the audience that bought tickets to a concert to a political meeting to which as many people as possible are welcome (p. 45).

Immediately following his analysis of social relationships, Weber (1968) moved on to the concept of organization. An organization is the most typical example of a closed social relationship, but not all closed relationships are organizations. Another example is kinship. The fact that a social relationship is closed, however, is not enough for it to be seen as an organization. In an organization, closure is linked to authority and rules. A closed social relationship is regarded as an organization only 'when its regulations are enforced by specific individuals' (p. 48). The existence of an organization 'is entirely a matter of the presence of a person in authority' (p. 49). This authority is expressed in orders or rules. Thus, in Weber's view, an organization, apart from being a type of closed social relationship, also requires orders, rules, and some form of authority.

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In the following three chapters, I develop the analysis of social relationships. In Chapter 2, I address the ways in which social relationships are constructed using social bonds, which can be fashioned in different ways. Relationships can be more or less organized. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate variations between relationships that have no organization and relationships such as family, friendship, gangs, and social movements that may be partially organized. That chapter begins with a comparison between the idea of social relationships and similar concepts, such as group, collective action, network, and figuration. In Chapter 4, I analyse formal organizations as social relationships, and demonstrate how a number of traditional concepts in organizational theory can be given a relational interpretation. In the two concluding chapters, I return to the question of individual and society, but from a relational perspective. Chapter 5 highlights a relational concept of action: bonded actions. And in Chapter 6, I show how social change and globalization can be understood by examining social relationships.

NOTE

1. 'I've known rivers:
Ancient dusky rivers.' (Langston Hughes)