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RESEARCH NOTES

Conjectures on a relational turn in policy studies

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Abstract
We explore emerging work around the relational dimensions of public policy. What constitutes a relational frame of analysis is a broad terrain, but some general tenets characterize these approaches, including the foregrounding of relationships between policy actors along with the idea that these relationships are, at least in part, constitutive of the role and identity of these actors. In fact, relationality has long been a feature of studies on policy processes and implementation. More recent scholarship in policy and public administration attempts to more systematically theorize and analyze relationality. This draws from the "relational turn" in sociology and other social sciences. After reviewing the relevant literature on relationality, we offer several propositions on the immediate relevance of the concept of relationality for policy studies. Short of accepting strong ontological and teleological claims regarding relationality and society found in the broader literature, there nevertheless is value in the systematic exploration of the relational dimensions of public policy—i.e., as a mode of description of the practice of policy in the everyday, and as a rich, new lens by which to understand institutions in society. While previous policy literature will acknowledge the relevance of the relational in policy life, there has yet to be a concerted effort to foreground relationship and relationality so as to be the primary focus of analysis.

Keywords Relationality · Relationalism · Relational · Implementation · Governance

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Introduction

What does it mean to think relationally? What we might recognize as a relational perspective encompasses a broad spectrum of approaches. But one general, though not absolute, tenet involves focusing one's analysis not so much on the traditional objects of inquiry but on the "spaces in between" them and to realize that what goes on in these spaces is constitutive, at least in part, of these objects themselves. Take the case of political identity. For this, we take the example of politics in the U.S., not to further any U.S.-centric bias in policy studies, but because the point is seen most clearly in this context. What does it mean to be a political conservative (or, alternatively, a liberal) in the U.S.? While one can list characteristics and political positions that might typify the category, perhaps a deeper way of understanding it is that being a conservative (or liberal) is not so much a fixed object in itself but something that evolves its identity in relation to the other. Part of what it means to be a conservative is to be opposed to the other (liberal) camp and vice-versa, a constantly active dialectic of sorts. One's stance on, say, climate change, is the antithesis of the other's, and the other's position on gun rights is the antithesis of one's own. It is the relationship between the two that, at least in part, constitutes political conservatism or liberalism.

In this review, we reflect on the relational dimensions of public policy, first, as discerned in the earlier literature on implementation and street-level bureaucrats, and secondly, in current work that more systematically foregrounds the relational. The relevance of relationality for policy scholarship is echoed in closely aligned literature in public administration and political science, and it also follows a broader relational turn in the social sciences (sociology, in particular). In this note, we first review the various strands of literature that contribute to the emerging turn toward relationality and, then, offer some propositions for the immediate relevance of the relational view for policy scholarship.

What scholars mean by the word, relational, is a broad terrain in itself. But, for pedagogic purposes, it may help readers to think in terms of a loosely-drawn contrast (and perhaps a play of words) between understanding policy in terms of rational systems and those that think of it as more relational ones. The first term evokes conceptualizations of policy as a product of formal, structured, often-codified systems of rules and routines, and the second strives to analyze and describe the role of the informal, deliberative, emergent, and often-uncodified practices and interactions.

Current work on relationality in the policy realm is consonant with broader efforts in the social sciences (in particular, sociology) to go beyond the rigid dualism of structure and agency (Dépelteau, 2008) or, expressed in related ways, undoing the individualism-holism binary (Emirbayer, 1997). How have scholars proposed to go about exceeding the strictures of such dichotomies? One can more deliberately seek to study the "spaces in between" the traditional objects of analysis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As Bartels and Turnbull propose, relational studies of policy and public administration suggest a "a relational ontology that takes networks of interaction, interdependence, and relationships as the main unit of analysis" (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020, 1325). This may involve undoing strong notions of structure and agency. For example, viewed from a relational perspective, we may find that formal structures (the rules, routines, and lines of authority of policy situations) may actually be epiphenomenal to the relational such that "policy, in its meanings and practice, emerges… from the working and reworking of relationships among a network of policy actors'' (Lejano & Kan, 2022, 2). Strong notions of the individual, autonomous, agent give way to an understanding of the person as inherently connected, such that one's identity

draws from relationship with the other, faithful to the prescription that "a theory of the self must, therefore, be interwoven with a theory of relationship" (Josselson, 1988, 104).

As will be discussed, concern for the relational has been present in policy scholarship since its beginnings. Relationality, while not explicitly theorized in any fashion, was a key feature of early research on policy implementation (such as foundational writings by Majone and Wildavsky, 1979), as well as the co-construction of policy by street-level bureaucrats, beginning with early analyses by Lipsky and others (e.g., Lipsky, 1969). Literature on policy analysis takes a turn toward the relational by focusing away from analysis as a technical/rational exercise and, instead, one founded on the deliberative, co-productive, and interactive, as identified in earlier works such as by Wildavsky (1979). This overlapped with the critical theorists' and feminist critique of the technocratic model of rationality, equating rational systems planning with domination and control (e.g., Merchant, 1980). These trends were furthered by subsequent scholarship on the decentering of the state in policymaking and the turn toward governance (Rhodes, 1996).

In this "conjecture" regarding the emergence of a relational perspective in policy, we emphasize that many concepts associated with (as we discuss) relationality have been written about in various strands of scholarship. In other words, the relational perspective is not to be seen as a reorientation of the field of public policy but a sharpening, and hopefully increasingly systematic, focus on concepts that have arisen in previous scholarship. It is also a call for a more concerted effort towards a gathering of a community of scholars around the relational perspective.

These trends, in the study of policy and governance, followed upon a broader turn to relationality in the social sciences, particularly that of relational sociology, which is where we will begin the discussion in the following section. We then review some earlier literature, followed by more recent scholarship in public policy and public administration. Later in the piece, we offer some propositions regarding why and how a focus on the relational is of immediate relevance (and why) for policy studies.

A relational turn in the social sciences

In his workshop notes on reflexive sociology, Pierre Bourdieu suggests a turning away from a substantialist study of society that focuses on pre-configured objects of conventional analysis (such as class or poverty) and, instead, a relational one that studies spaces of relations. Instead of studying power-strata and dominant classes, he continued, one would do better to study fields or relations of power that inhere in social positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This sociological focus understands that these "social spaces… in the form of highly abstract, objective relations… although one can neither touch them or 'point to them,' are what makes the whole reality of the social world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 231).

The relational turn in sociology is explicitly laid out in Emirbayer's "manifesto" (Emirbayer, 1997). In it, he eschews frames of analysis that conventionally employ individualist or holist frames of reference. The former refers to the idea of self-acting agents, autonomous egos whose behavior is driven by rational or norm-following motivations. On the other end of the dualism is the assumption of conceptualized structures or social systems as the origins of action –e.g., positing that society or class as an actual material entity.

Rather than study society in terms of these objectified entities, he posits instead the study of society in terms of "relations between terms or units… unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties between substances" (289). Crossley goes on to suggest that such relations are, in fact constitutive: "Relations are 'more than' individuals who stand in relation… they define the actors who are involved in them" (Crossley, 2011, 16).

Particularly relevant is the turn away from individualist, egoist notions of the human person. An early statement of this position comes from Mead, who posited that "selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves" (Mead, 1925, 262). This has been affirmed in fields such as social psychology and educational psychology where, in contrast to the notion of the individual ego, the self is constituted ontologically in terms of relational being. In other words, the person is not just an individual but someone always part of a social network. As Gergen writes: "…there is no isolated self… Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship" (Gergen, 2009, xv). These ideas about human "being" have implications for human action, as well.

Carol Gilligan's foundational work on an ethical theory of care describes a teleology of human action (i.e., what motivates people to behave as they do) as neither grounded in rational choice or deontological rules but, rather, coherent with one's web of relationships (Gilligan, 1982; see also Noddings, 1984). As Held writes, "The ethics of care… conceptualizes persons as deeply affected by, and involved in, relations with others; to many care theorists persons are at least partly constituted by their social ties" (Held, 2006, 46). These and other developments in the ontology and teleology of human being and acting have profound implications for the conduct of public affairs.

That is not to say that there is consensus over a grand theory of relational sociology (Powell & Dépelteau, 2013). Nevertheless, there are general conceptual dispositions that most scholars who identify as relationalists would agree to. Dépelteau (2018) identifies a number of general propositions:

Interdependence: Instead of independent agents or entities that exist in themselves, there are mutually constituted interactants.

Processual Thinking: Instead of objects, we have processes –i.e., even a human body can be thought of as existing only as a dynamic coming together of processes (metabolic, entropic, etc.).

Rejection of Dualisms: This involves weakening strong dualistic typologies or rejecting them altogether. These include dualist concepts such as subject/object, structure/agency, east/west, etc.

Co-Production: Social phenomena are collaboratively fashioned by interrelating interactants. This is particularly useful in understanding knowledge as a collaborative process and less of a set body of information monopolized by a central knowledge-holder.

These alternative frameworks for social scientific research, namely, the focus on spaces "in between" conventional objects of analysis and the idea that these objects are themselves at least partly constituted by relationships, have important implications for the study of policy. This is already evident in the earliest literature on policy implementation, as we next discuss.

Implementation and street-level bureaucrats: relationality in early literature

When construed as a rational system, policymaking was conventionally depicted as an initial design and subsequent, routine implementation in a linear causal chain. However, the earliest research on implementation discovered otherwise: "Implementation is evolution… When we act to implement a policy, we change it" (Majone and Wildavsky, 1979, 176–177). Rather than frame policy as a strict separation from the creation of policy and its enactment, or the separation of policy designers from implementers, this literature sought to bring the two together in closer correspondence (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984).

From subsequent research in this area, there emerged a "bottom-up" model of policy implementation wherein implementors began to be seen as program adaptors and, in fact, co-designers of policy (e.g., Hull & Hjern, 1987; Palumbo et al., 1984). In this literature, policies are seen to emerge from complex processes where a potentially large number of policy actors, along all presumed stages of the policy process (and including the public), interact to reinterpret, adapt, and enact policy (Matland, 1995). This understanding of policymaking focuses more on "interactive processes, client involvement, and coproduction" (O'Toole, 2000, 283. This literature will be familiar to many readers, and there is no need for lengthier description, except to point out what is relational about it. Relationality is evident in these accounts of implementation to the extent that conventional structures of the policy framework blur and give way to emergent processes, and to the extent that actor's identities are not static or pre-determined but, rather, derive from the process and complex interactions as well. The role of the policy implementer in the design of the working policy emerges from the particular relationships that emerge between policy actors and the policy process, as well as with each other.

A relational perspective is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the related literature on street-level bureaucrats who, as Lipsky described, reinterpret and redesign policies according to the needs that they find on the frontline. These contextual influences that shape these agents' reinterpretation of policy derives from their relationships with the public –i.e., the policy clientele (Lipsky, 1983). Street-level bureaucrats act as informal policymakers (Brodkin, 1997). Along with the informal discretionary authority that street-level bureaucrats can possess, their judgements often deviate from formal organizational goals, often conforming more to a logic of appropriateness (Sorg, 1983; Wise, 2004).

In this framework, neither the street-level bureaucrat nor the public beneficiary are merely passive recipients of policy as designed, casting a light on the policy/action relationship (a term from Barrett & Fudge, 1981). Moreover, to understand how policies are shaped at the local level, the analyst must study the pattern of interactions between street-level bureaucrats and their clients (Lipsky, 1969). The frontline agent acts as a boundary actor, being the primary point of interface between state and public, exerting much influence over the client's relationship with government (Prottas, 1978; also Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). These are early examples of relational analysis, as it brings to light how policy, as enacted, emerges from the relationships between agents of the state and the public.

The turn toward the relational is a turn away from strong notions about rational systems approaches to policymaking and analysis. Wildavsky prefigured some of this when he contrasted modes of policy analysis based on "social interaction" from those based on "intellectual cogitation", the latter term a reference to the Cartesian *res cogitans* (Wildavsky, 1979, 123). And this prefigured scholarship in policy and planning that drew on

postpositivist critiques of the rationalist model and promoted deliberative, practice-oriented, and interpretive approaches to policy (e.g., Fischer & Forester, 1993; Hajer, 2003; Healey, 1992; Stone, 1988). The focus away from the formal, rational systems frameworks for analyzing policy is furthered by scholarship on policy practice (e.g., see Laws & Hajer, 2006; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012). Work on the affective dimensions of public policy (e.g., Durnová & Hejzlarová, 2018; Maor & Capelos, 2023) also invites closer attention to the relational. While these works do not explicitly call out or evaluate the relational, they prefigure the relational perspective by reorienting our attention away from the "essentialisms" of public policy (Dobson, 2015).

This literature opens up the field understanding policy as a phenomenon that emerges from interaction and interrelationship, whether routinized or spontaneous, between networks of policy actors. Without explicitly focusing squarely on the relational dimensions of policy life, these earlier works call our attention to the "social co-construction" of policy.

The co-construction of policy, it follows, hinges much on the nature of the relationships between street-level bureaucrats, other agents of the state, and the public. The earlier literature already highlights relational elements in policy and public administration, but there was not yet any systematic inquiry into describing and evaluating these relationships, beginning with citizen-state interactions (Jakobsen et al., 2019). We next turn to current directions in scholarship.

Current directions in the literature on policy and public administration

While the earlier literature on policy and public administration had touched on relational aspects of program construction and implementation, it has only been in recent years that efforts have begun to more systematically theorize and analyze relationality. While there is as yet no definitive treatment of this theme, we can already discern emerging directions in theorizing and analyzing relationality.

Foregrounding the network of relationships

In moving away from the structure-agency dichotomy, recent literature discusses how systems (in policy and public administration) can be viewed as a relational network. Drawing from developments in relational sociology, Bartels and Turnbull have begun applying the relational paradigm to the study of policy and administrative practice. They underscore three key features of the relational framework, namely foregrounding "networks of interaction, interdependence, and relationships… the emergent properties of these interactions… and… methodological foregrounding of situated, dynamic and unfolding social networks" (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020, 1325). They then discuss how this orientation leads to particular foci of research that tend toward one of the following: connected actors (or the idea that actors are never just individuals but always individuals-in-relation-to-others), co-creation networks (emphasizing the emerge of policies and administrative arrangements from networked action), dynamic systems (which pertains to the process of social construction of meaning in the public sphere), and interactive performance (which pertains to active dynamic process by which interdependent actors enact policies and programs). In this

work, Bartels and Turnbull attempt to account for and synthesize multiple, diverse strands of scholarship that promote a relational perspective.[1]

In describing an idealized type of governance that they refer to as integrative, Stout and Love describes public encounters that feature "genuinely participatory styles of relating interpersonally and organizing interactions… Through participatory cooperation, the group coproduces knowledge, shared desire, purpose, choice of method, and criteria for evaluation –in short, all activities common to the policy process" (Stout & Love, 2015, 141; also see Stout & Love, 2018). In other words, we are beyond the model of political pluralism, where actors with differing (often static) positions negotiate around a compromise solution; viewed relationally, one's positions emerge from the encounter with the other.

The emerging work on relationality underscores the co-constitutive relationship between the agent and environment. In her work on practitioners and the welfare state, Dobson proposes that "practitioners' social worlds can be understood as expansive environments that are constituted by, and constitutive of, dynamic and interrelated components of practitioners' social worlds" (Dobson, 2015, 700).

Decentering the rational subject

Another, more specific, attempt at the systematic conceptualization of relationality begins with the ontological framework of person as connected-being, which is then developed into a model of institutional life (Lejano, 2008). Describing personhood as *curae ergo sum* (we care, therefore we are), this model understands the origin of institutions in the organic encounter between one being and the other (Lejano, 2023).[2] Building on this, Lejano and Kan conceptualize relationality as the condition within which policies and institutions emerge from the working and reworking of relationships among policy actors (Lejano & Kan, 2022). They evoke policy situations that deviate from their formal construction (e.g., as crafted by centralized policymakers), to an extent that they might be considered anomalies, as good illustrations of phenomena that are best explained relationally. This evokes Hunter's notion of a relational politics characterized by "real, messy and uncontrollable agency constitutive of the everyday state, rather than the idealised coherent singular abstracted state" (Hunter, 2015, 16). When the street-level bureaucrat modifies formal rules and practices to fit the needs of the context, this is a relational logic at work. In some cases, the formal is supplanted to such an extent that the ostensible rules, processes, and lines of authority become epiphenomenal to the action of inter-relating actors bringing policy to being (Lejano, 2008). The dynamic of relationships among actors do not just give rise to policy; these relationships shape the identities of these actors themselves (Lejano, 2023).

But this leads to a reconsideration of the teleology of behaviors and decisions of the policy actor (i.e., why people act the way they do). When street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion to mold and refashion policies, they may be said to be following, instead of given organizational logics, logics of appropriateness that inhere in the local context. But

[1] Note, too, their use of the term, relationalism –"contextualizing features for individual policy actors", as something distinct from relationality or considering "relationships in and of themselves" (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020, 1326).

[2] These authors, however, underscore that the relational cannot be reduced to dyadic relationships between individuals. Macro-structures matter, especially in policy life. It is important that relational perspective encompasses different scales and dimensions (e.g., is inclusive of inter-organizational relationships, inclusive of material and cultural interactions, etc.). An early discussion of identity in policy life can be found in Hunter (2003).

what exactly is this logic of appropriateness? In Lejano and Kan's account, oftentimes, this logic corresponds to a coherence with the web of relationships in which the actors are embedded (Lejano & Kan, 2022). A vivid example of this is seen in the practice of *guanxi* (a Chinese term that refers to phenomena that, in actuality, can be found in every cultural-political context), which describes how a set of formal rules (e.g., building codes) can act as a pretext for members of the public and state agents to dialogue. In other words, the logic of appropriateness can be understood as the enactment of an ethic of care (Lejano, 2021).

This emergence of focus on relationships between self and other (and, particularly, inclusion of the hitherto excluded) draws much from considerable literature from feminist and other critical scholarship, stemming from Gilligan's pioneering work on the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982). In her examination of care workers and the welfare state, Williams expands on the political dimensions of an ethic of care –i.e., understanding social policy as a set of relations and crafting politics around care as a moral orientation (Williams, 2012; also Tronto, 2020).[3] While we cannot, in this brief exposition, do justice to the literature on critical examinations of "gendered welfare", we note the contributions of this work toward questioning the structured demarcations of formal/informal, public/private, household/state, and other essentialisms (e.g., Boris & Klein, 2015; Brush, 2002; Stone, 2000).

Network governance

Parallel to the weakening (or decentering away from) the model of the individual, rational subject, the literature on governance has emphasized a decentering of the state and primary focus on the conjoint action of state and nonstate actors.

Rhodes underscores the reality of policy emerging from actions not derived from just central government but, instead, from self-organizing, complex networks –what he refers to as the hollowing out of the state (Rhodes, 1996). Thus, a central feature of network research is the involvement of nonstate actors in hitherto state-centered functions. Central issues of this line of scholarship deal with the process of "networking" (or establishing horizontal and vertical linkages across organizational boundaries) and modes of facilitating interchanges within these networks (Meir & O'Toole, 2007). There is attention to structural network configurations that are found in different situations, network performance, but also to more relational aspects of network management such as trust, communication, and power distribution (Agranoff, 2006).

The earliest literature in this genre characterized network governance as a "third way", an alternative to conventional state and market institutional designs (Powell, 2003). In Powell's words, "certain forms of exchange are more social, that is, more dependent on relationships, mutual interests and reputation –as well as less guided by a formal structure of authority" (Powell, 2003, 300). Consonant to this is the idea that relational strategies provide an alternative to these conventional institutional designs. For example, there has been considerable work on so-called relational contracting where, in lieu of formal, codified covenants, there is instead the establishment of working relationships within which agreements, performance requirements, and returns are worked out (e.g., Bertelli & Smith, 2009; Argyres et al., 2020; Macchiavello, 2022).

[3] Consider, too, the idea that the (universal or nearly universal) experience of caring and being cared for might lead to extended "communities of fate" (Levi, 2025).

This literature examines how ongoing interactions among contractees work to produce these arrangements in real time, and the advantages these arrangements provide over traditional contracts. Similarly, working in the area of regulatory compliance, Huising and Silbey note how relationships between agency staff and the regulated work to reduce "the gap between regulatory expectations and performances with an appreciation of the ongoing production of organizational and material life through a network of interdependent human transactions" (Huising & Silbey, 2011, 15–16). Related ideas are found in the scholarship on relational governance (e.g., Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

Decentering the state does not mean its disappearance, of course. This has given rise to an emerging literature on the "relational state", which pertains to the "human" side of government and its capacity for the use of interpersonal interactions to carry out the business of government (e.g., Muir & Parker, 2014; Mulgan, 2012). Mulgan describes the transition from the delivery state, which acts as a provider of goods and services to a passive public, to a relational one, where the state "increasingly acts with the public to achieve common goals, sharing knowledge, resources and power" (Mulgan, 2012, 20). This public management literature overlaps with that on the co-production of goods, services, and decisions, (Osborne et al., 2016).[4]

While acknowledging the broad terrain that provides a backdrop for the emerging focus on relationality in policy studies, we can now propose some useful working propositions that policy scholars can key in on as they begin to build the relational dimension into their own work.

The importance of the relational perspective for policy analysis

As we have seen in the previous sections, it will not be possible to distill the meaning(s) and import of relationality in the social sciences, and policy studies in particular, into something tightly defined. The literature is too broad and emergent for this. Is at least part of the literature about relationality as an ontological concept, redefining who or what the (policy) actor is? Yes, as was discussed earlier, this is clear from the considerable literature in relational sociology (e.g., Dépelteau, 2018) and recent literature in relational public administration (e.g., Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). Does part of the literature use relationality as a teleological concept, redefining the determinants of individual (and group) behavior? Yes, as can be read into the literature on collective action, empathy, and pro-social behavior (e.g., Batson et al., 2002; Lejano, 2023; Mansbridge, 1990). These are assumptions that the policy scholar may (and should) consider. But, in this section, we propose some working ideas about the immediate relevance of the relationality concept for policy scholarship and suggest that policy scholars need not necessarily commit to these stronger theoretical assumptions to make use of the concept. We appropriate Lejano and Kan's working definition of relationality in public policy (reproduced below) and discuss two propositions that follow from it.

[4] Honig et al. use the term, "relational state capacity", referring to what abilities, provisions, and resources government employs to foster state-citizen interactions, to increase the multi-directionality of communication across government-public divide, and to foster empathy among agents of the state (Honig et al., 2024). This recent literature builds upon a prior, longstanding focus in policy and public administration on participation (e.g., Quick and Bryson, 2022). Also, see related work by Wilson et al. (2024), who describe the shift away from the inherent (often, market-based) transactionalism of New Public Management to new relationalities sometimes associated with New Public Governance.

> "Within the realm of public policy research, the term relationality pertains to the generative role that relationships have in shaping and enacting policy. Relationality is the condition in which policy, in its meanings and practice, emerges not just from formal, prescribed rulemaking and institution-building but also from the working and reworking of relationships among a network of policy actors." (Lejano and Kan, 2023, 2).

Propositions

The first proposition is that, at the very least, the relational perspective offers policy scholars new options for the "thick description" of policy situations. It begins by foregrounding elements (relationships) that are often considered of secondary (or lesser) value in analyzing policy than more formal elements (such as rules, organizational structure, roles). This definition also leads us to our second proposition, which is that relationality allows us a view of institutional processes that helps us understand how policies work toward their outcomes, but in a way that escapes strong structural-functionalist or agentic explanations. Relational processes can be seen as a type of mechanism, often working in the background, that can lead policies in certain directions –and their analysis helps us understand how and why policies can fail, succeed, or surprise in ways conventional analysis might not. At a minimum, relationships are an "explanatory variable" that can afford us a new analytic, which strives to show how policy emerges from the interactions and interrelationships that form and develop among policy actors. Beyond this, we can understand relationships as, in fact, the "stuff" of institutions themselves.

So, what does the relational perspective help us to explain about the practice of policy? A short example can help illustrate the above points. In 2013, the Hong Kong government instituted a new policy wherein senior citizens were provided a voucher for use in obtaining social services to foster aging-in-place (Sau Po Centre on Ageing, 2015). Evaluation of the more formal elements of policy suggested that the new program had the necessary elements for success –a well-defined policy instrument (vouchers), a carefully crafted implementation scheme, and sufficient funding (Sau Po Centre on Ageing, 2015). The policy initiative also relied on a notion of policy targets as individual agents (and, in fact, consumers), able to rationally optimize their individual welfare by using the new voucher. As originally envisioned by Milton Friedman (1973), vouchers work automatically to create a quasi-market wherein consumers, as autonomous agents, maximize their utility by using the voucher to optimize the suite of services they benefit from.

But initial results from the voucher program were mixed –e.g., almost half of the elderly voucher recipients stopped using the voucher altogether (Sau Po Centre on Ageing, 2015). Such unexpected results are difficult to understand when viewing the situation from primarily a structural perspective (i.e., as rational systems) or an agentic one (i.e., from the lens of consumer choice). But, as Kan and Chui (2021) explain, it is only when we consider relational dynamics that we understand the limitations of the voucher. For example, it was found that the voucher did not work in autonomous fashion, allowing consumers to optimize their service choices, but rather, required a well-functioning network of relationships that supported the client's use of the voucher. In their interviews with clients, they researchers found that, when vouchers were put to good use, it was on the strength of multiple, active relationships (between the clients, families, social workers, peers, and others) that supported their use. And, when relationships were absent or not activated, many clients gave up on the use of the voucher. In fact, one of the conclusions of the study was that

policymakers should institute the provision of case managers (i.e., "relationship" facilitators) who would work with each client in supporting the voucher program (Kan & Chui, 2021). A relational approach sensitizes us to elements of a policy situation that lie outside the formal, programmatic, structural features of it. It also provides new ways of comprehending what conventional analyses might simply ascribe to anomalies of policy life.

The second related question pertains to analytical method. To focus on relationship as the primary unit of observation entails reflection on how we observe, describe, and analyze relationship. If the relational perspective is to afford us a thick description of policy processes, then our analytic must allow for the thick description of relationships among policy actors. In this, we are guided by social network analysis, which (formally) attempts to explain the workings and outcomes of policy as a result of networked relationships among differently positioned actors. But the mode of analysis which is used to describe relationships, most often, consist of simple binary linkages (on or off), which do not afford the description of such relationships in any deep way. As Bartels and Turnbull argue, the analysis of networks would be well served by a more integrative approach, where the systematic enumeration of ties among policy actors is complemented by deeper descriptions of what these ties consist of –i.e., "interpretive, qualitative analysis could be overlaid upon social network analyses" (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020, 1340).

So, what richer modes of description must be added to the reductionistic representation of the relationship as zero/one switches? One is through the employment of narrative as a primary empirical research method. Narrative, as Bruner wrote, especially autobiographical narrative, is the primary vehicle for describing one's identity (Bruner, 2003). And, as Lejano demonstrates, relationship can be understood in terms of identity, such as:

> Who the person is as an individual,
> Who the person is vis-à-vis another,
> Who person-and-other are, together,

and this provides one strategy for analyzing autobiographical narratives (Lejano, 2008; 2021). The use of narrative and other qualitative approaches has been forwarded as one route toward the thick description of relationships in social networks (Bodin & Crona, 2009). For example, one group of researchers used narratives to describe relationships among policy actors and to explain how these relationships lead to policies as practiced, in some cases, showing how the identities of network members and the network itself are inseparable from these narratives (Ingram et al., 2019).

In this example, these autobiographical narratives consisted in policy actors explaining who they are and how their relationships with other actors influenced their interpretation and enactment of a policy initiative in ways often ostensibly contradictory to the formal codified policy. This is but a sketch of what is possible, methodologically. First of all, "relationship" is multiplex –i.e., not just inhering in dyadic ties between pairs of actors, but between groups, types of actors, and as Latour suggests, between human and nonhuman actants (Latour, 2007).[5] Secondly, how one actor relates to another is evinced in many ways –through a person's autobiographical narrative, it is true, but also by observing their actions and interactions, analyzing other text, and other means. The challenge exists, methodologically, of how to access thick and non-static descriptions of relational subjects which, as defined by Donati and Archer for example, are " 'relationally constituted', that is,

[5] Also relevant to this strand of literature, Barad's relational ontology posits that agents become distinct only by virtue of their mutual intra-action (Barad, 2007).

in as much as they generate emergent properties and powers through their social relations" (Donati & Archer, 2015, 31). To give an account of those emergent properties that arise in such relations, we invariably struggle in our use of language that is wrapped up in dichotomies of self and that external to the self.

The above propositions set a minimum set of expectations for what policy scholars might gain from employing a relational perspective. But this, by no means, exhausts the possibilities. One might go further by viewing the entire policy process as relational, as network governance scholars aspire to (e.g., Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). And relational perspectives are not just useful for describing policy processes but can be used for prescriptive purposes as well, as the literature on the relational state (e.g., Cooke et al., 2012) envisions, so long as scholars are able to discern good from bad relationships between state and other actors. Thinking back to the voucher program earlier described, contrast the notion of the autonomous rational actor constructed by the voucher initiative (a quasi-market instrument) and the broader notion of civic engagement (or entanglement, if you would prefer) suggested by a relational perspective.

For researchers, a relational orientation beckons attention to the spaces in between traditional objects of analysis –i.e., by looking at informal and not just formal elements of a program, observing everyday interactions rather than just structured processes, and characterizing actors not just with static identifiers but as connected beings working out (or performing) who they are within a web of relationships. Relationality speaks to not just practice, but identity and meaning. Returning to the simple example we began the article with, one might ask what it means to be a conservative (or liberal) today? It would be not enough to think of them in and of themselves –rather, as Dobson puts it, these terms "only make sense because they are always independently 'in frame' together, possible and recognisable only in relation to each other, and because they are ever only constituted via situated interaction with material, affective, social, and symbolic 'others' " (Dobson, 2015, 200). And, lest one sense a structuralist argument in this, we posit that such meanings are never fixed, and seeming entities are characterized by emergent properties.

These propositions, however mild, have the potential to inform a constellation of extant fields in policy scholarship. Consider the study of policy process, wherein scholars invariably recognize the importance of interactions between state and nonstate actors. Here, the difficulty lies in subsuming these interactions within the categorical, as part of the structuring of the field, or focusing primarily on the agency of the individual actor, expressing individualized preferences through such interaction. But what emerges in such interaction that is both generated and generative of these interactions—i.e., constituting a "we" that is not a super-ordinate category but a relation (Donati & Archer, 2015). Or consider the literature on wicked problems in policy, its rejection of linear-rational solutions, and its (relational) reorientation toward community formation and congruence (e.g., Simmons, 2023). Methodological challenges notwithstanding, we urge the reader to consider the power in understanding institutions as unfolding relations. We cannot spell out, in any definitive way, how relational analyses should be conducted—this remains for forthcoming scholarship to work out. But, in this research note, we sketch some of the outlines of its potential unfolding.[6]

[6] While it's not possible (or desirable) to attempt to delineate or circumscribe what relational policy analysis is, a cursory look at extant policy scholarship (utilizing a relational lens) will help the reader discern the emerging outlines of this field. There is recent work in the area of implementation, such as Peters and Mulligan (2019), Loyens (2019), Peake and Forsyth (2022), and others. There is incorporation of relational ideas in work on water resources (Brouwer and Brouwer, 2015; Brugnach et al., 2021), participatory governance (Medina-Guce, 2020; Pera and Bussu, 2024), resilience (e.g., Berkes, 2023; Clark, 2024; Nkhata et al., 2008), and international aid and diplomacy (Alta and Mukhtarov, 2022; Nagy, 2024; Robinson, 2024;

Conclusion

The relational dimensions of public policy have garnered scholars' attention since the early growth of the field. More recent scholarship has begun to systematically conceptualize and operationalize relationality. In this review, some of the intellectual origins of the relational perspective were recounted along with current directions in this area of work. This is a good point in time to begin reflecting on current trajectories of the work and open questions, as well as ensuing research can revolve around.

- How might scholars carry out thick descriptions of relationality and relationship in ways that deepen our understanding of their role in policy life?
- Through what mechanisms does policy emerge from the working and reworking of relationships across the network of policy actors?
- How do the relational elements of a policy situation interweave with formal policy processes and institutions (e.g., the regulatory and administrative state)?
- How do we evaluate relational quality, and how do we foster relational capacity across the network?
- What new insights can the relational perspective offer in our understanding of participatory, collaborative, and deliberative processes?
- How can we reinterpret existing concepts and themes, featured in policy studies, through a relational lens, and what new insights can emerge from this reinterpretation?

The last point is particularly instructive for researchers. Reinterpretation can be a fruitful area of inquiry, and it may involve deliberate employment of concepts (identified by the relational sociologists) in the policy field. Some immediate implications come to mind.

Consider the idea of processual thinking. Institutions, in this frame of analysis, are seen less as established systems, but as ongoing interactions between individuals and organizations that need to be maintained anew with each encounter. A new program (e.g., school vouchers) involves initiating and maintaining new sets of relationships and quotidian interactions across a network of actors. Policymakers should begin to understand that the institution of the new program does not begin with the formal (e.g., a budget, organizational template, rules) but the initiation of these complex processes on an everyday basis.

Co-production has become, by now, an important theme in policy studies. But the lens of relationality can change how we understand particular ideas about collaborative policy processes –e.g., deliberation, participation, and consensus-building. Such processes are not just interactions among entities but generative in terms of their identity, activity, and meaning. When one encounters the "other", such encounter is generative of who one is, how one thinks, and what one does. Otherwise, these concepts can become essentialisms themselves. Rather, we can understand them as nothing in and of themselves but phenomena that are manifested in each and every interaction.

One purpose of a research note is to help organize concerted efforts, from varied groups of researchers, to build up new and promising lines of exploration. Reflecting on the title of this piece, there is not, as yet, a definitive movement or community in policy studies that we might

Footnote 6 (Continued)

Rudyak, 2023). And there is a growing interest in bringing the relational perspective to the study of wicked problems (Selg et al., 2022), such as climate action (e.g., Divakaran and Nerbonne, 2017; Walsh et al., 2021; Marion Suiseeya, Elhard, and Paul, 2021; Jennings, 2023), COVID-19 (e.g., Ball, 2023; Bynner, 2024; Simmons, 2023), and others.

identify with its "relational turning", but policy scholars have long understood the importance of the relational dimension, and the field is well poised to make inroads in the coming years.

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