**Relational agency: Relational sociology, agency and interaction**

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**Abstract**

This article explores how the concept of agency in social theory changes when it is conceptualised as a relational rather than an individual phenomenon. I begin with a critique of the structure/agency debate, particularly of how this emerges in the critical realist approach to agency typified by Margaret Archer. It is argued that this approach, and the critical realist version of relational sociology that has grown from it, reifies social relations as a third entity to which agents have a cognitive, reflexive relation, playing down the importance of interaction. This upholds the Western moral and political view of agents as autonomous, independent, and reflexive individuals. Instead of this I consider agency from a different theoretical tradition in relational sociology in which agents are always located in manifold social relations. From this I create an understanding of agents as interactants, ones who are interdependent, vulnerable, intermittently reflexive, possessors of capacities that can only be practiced in joint actions, and capable of sensitive responses to others and to the situations of interaction. Instead of agency resting on the reflexive monitoring of action or the reflexive deliberation on structurally defined choices, agency emerges from our emotional relatedness to others as social relations unfold across time and space.

**Keywords**

The aim of this article is to begin to conceptualise agency as a relational rather than an individual phenomenon. However, to do this requires that we begin to reconceptualise the understanding of agency, selfhood and personhood. Existing concepts understand agency as to do with the individual, hence the term 'agent' or 'actor' is used in the social sciences whenever we refer to the agential power of individuals. In an everyday sense, the Oxford English Dictionary (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) defines agency as 'action or intervention producing a particular effect' or 'a thing or person that acts to produce a particular result'. The origin is from the Medieval Latin *agentia* or doing. Similarly, an agent is 'a person or thing that takes an active role or produces a specified effect', 'the doer of an action'. In social science the everyday definition comes into play, especially when it is used in a passing reference, to refer to persons that perform certain actions and thus produce an effect on the social world. However, social scientists focusing on agency as a topic in its own right define it in more specific, yet different, ways. Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer, for example, both define agency in terms of an actor's reflexivity, because we are agents precisely at the point of consciously choosing a course of action in circumstances where we could have acted otherwise (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1979, 1984). Despite the many other differences between these two theorists in their conception of agency, reflexivity, and structure, their very basic agreement preserves the notion of agency as an individual possession, in this case centred on reflexivity.

However, in this way of seeing things, 'structure' can seem to be something external to individuals (as in Giddens's 'rules and resources' or Archer's 'structural and cultural emergent properties') while agency itself is a property of individuals, in this

case reflexive cognitive powers. I will challenge this conceptualisation here, suggesting that we can no longer use the concept of agency in the way that Giddens and Archer do, associated primarily with reflexivity. Instead, I will suggest that agency is closer to the definition offered by the OED and is to do with people producing particular effects in the world and on each other through their relational connections and joint actions, whether or not those effects are reflexively produced. In this relational understanding of agency individuals are to be thought of as 'interactants' rather than as singular agents or actors. Additionally, the terminology of 'structure' is abandoned in favour of the analysis of relational connections between interactants; that is, webs or networks of relations and interdependencies, both interpersonal and impersonal, in which interactants and their joint actions are embedded. To achieve this, I will consider how current trends in 'relational sociology' conceptualise social relations, locating myself closer to the emerging relational paradigm of thinkers like Crossley (2011), Dépleteau (2013) and Emirbayer (1997). However, I begin with a critique of how relational sociology is conceptualised in critical realism and, alongside this, of Archer's work on agency.


**Critical realism, relational sociology and agency**

Other than their agreement on a very basic definition of agency, Archer criticises Giddens because he 'advances a non-relational conception of structure, redefined as "rules and resources"' (Archer, 1995: 106). Instead of this Archer proposes that critical realists like herself understand structure as referring to 'actual forms of social organisation, that is, to real entities with their own powers, tendencies and

potentials', meaning that 'the social relations upon which they depend are held to have independent causal properties rather than being mere abstractions from our repetitive and routinised behaviour, and, most importantly, because these relations which constitute structures pre-date occupants of positions within them, thus constraining or enabling agency' (Archer, 1995: 106). This leads Archer to her well-known position that theories of 'structuration' conflate structure and agency, because the two are seen as mutually constitutive. Instead of a 'duality of structure', as in Giddens's work, Archer (2000) argues for an 'analytical dualism' in which the relative autonomy of structure and agency is preserved, each having their own generative mechanisms and causal powers. In Archer's 'morphogenetic approach', structure emerges over a longer timeframe ($T^1$) than the life of any single individual, being the result of agency in the past. In the present, this structure confronts individuals as an external reality because the lives of individuals, born into a given social structure, exist in a shorter temporal domain. This is the realist claim that structures (such as social organisation and the array of roles and occupations in society) have a reality of their own external to individual ideation, or to discourse and epistemology. Thus, structure conditions agency in the present timeframe, but individuals can interact ($T^2$-$T^3$) to reproduce (morphostasis) or elaborate (morphogenesis) structure, which leads to structure ($T^4$) that future actors work with or against. However, Archer says little about interaction ($T^2$-$T^3$) and it seems this only occurs when individuals become corporate agents who, having realised that their own individual concerns and interests align with others, act together to conserve or change the system. Yet this makes interaction into a secondary phenomenon leaving reflexivity as the lynchpin of the mediation between structure and individual agency.

Thus, analytical dualism separates out the reality of structural and cultural emergent properties (SEPs and CEPs) from the reality of personal emergent properties (PEPs).

But this has two consequences. First, it means that 'social relations should be accorded the status of an ontological "stratum", that is a level of *sui generis* reality embodied in "social facts"', which is 'a non-observable but equally real level of reality, where the relation is the *tertium'* (Donati, 2011: 12-13), or 'the third'. This leads to confusion evident in the quotation from Archer above: are SEPs and CEPs a third reality that *depend* on social relations, or do relations themselves constitute the 'structure', in which case we could substitute the term relation for structure. However, it is clear that the former is the case for critical realists, who reify the emergent 'properties' of relations as a third element with their own reality and causal powers (Dépelteau, 2013). Second, individuals confront these given structures with their personal powers of reflexive agency, which enable them to make choices within the structure according to their own order of concerns, prioritised within the private 'inner conversation' (Archer, 2003). This means, though, that in the critical realist position, individuals relate to 'the third' – to structure that emerges from agency over time – rather than to each other, and do so reflexively. Although Archer claims that she understands reflexivity as a 'thoroughly relational phenomenon', it is defined as 'the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts' (Archer, 2013: 146). But this makes the relation to a reified 'structure' a purely *mental* one, so that agents appear unrelated to each other and also disembodied, as what relation there is here seems devoid of bodily form in terms of interdependency and need. This has to be so because in order to

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maintain the analytical dualism between structure and agency Archer *must* preserve the irreducible privacy of the inner conversation (although this is 'conditioned' by the social conversation, and vice versa), so that the structural, cultural, and personal are strata of reality with their own emergent properties.

This has led King (1999) to claim that Archer's view of structure is drawn from an individual, egotistic perspective, and Dépelteau to argue it is based 'on an inconsistent use of egocentric and relational perspective' (Dépelteau, 2008: 52). Actually it is based on a view that shifts between the structural (emergent properties with their own causal powers) and the agential (individuals with their own emergent reflexive powers), all the time trying to resolve this analytical dualism by putting the two into 'interplay'. Dépelteau also points out that the role reflexivity is given of mediating between structure and agency makes the internal conversation into 'a conversation *about* the society, not *within* the society' (Dépelteau, 2008: 58). In other words, Archer's dualism prevents a truly dialogical or intersubjective and interactive perspective from emerging because the social conversation between people is secondary rather than primary: the voices and emotional/evaluative responses of others do not get inside this inner conversation and affect us at a deep level, forging the self, its own responses, and identity; certainly not until the point at which agents become corporate actors. However, even at this point the process of intersubjective change is barely explored, something evident in Archer's definition of reflexivity itself. In the next section I will argue that reflexivity, as a dialogical process, should be understood as an aspect of the relational fabric in which bodily selves are embedded.

For now, these issues take us to the notion of the person and self in Archer's work. For her, the PEPs (personal emergent properties) are analytically separate from structure because humans belong to three orders of reality – the natural, the practical, and the social. Because individual agents have roots in the non-social orders of the natural and the practical, from which (following Merleau-Ponty (1945)) they derive the bodily reflexive powers that allow for the reflexivity of the internal conversation, they are private persons before they are social selves with a social identity. Human agents can never be reduced to the latter. The problem with this, though, is that the *analytical* conceptual distinctions made by Archer lead to artificial dualisms between things that are not separable *ontologically.* The most curious of these is between the practical and the social order, a distinction Marx is called on to support because, according to Archer (2000), he claims that the practical cannot be reduced to human ideation. But because Archer claims that the practical realm is analytically distinct from the social, which is where humans become aware of their worth in symbolic communication, this reduces the social to ideation and discourse, the very 'epistemic fallacy' realists rightly condemn when it is committed by post-structuralists and postmodernists.

The point Marx and Engels made was that humans begin to distinguish themselves from other animals when they enter into *social relations* (as opposed to the natural relations of the animal world) in order to *produce* – through the socially organised, practical activity of labour – their means of subsistence, resulting in 'a definite *mode of life'* (Marx and Engels, 1846: 42). In so doing humans begin to transform nature through socially organised modes of production, producing artefacts not found in

the natural world, including tools and technologies of production, and in the process transforming themselves – their needs, the relations between them, and, with the creation of gestures, symbols, and language (new forms of communication necessitated by the social division of labour), transforming their consciousness. It was in this sense that Marx criticised Feuerbach for resolving the religious essence into the human essence, when 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx, 1845, 157; Burkitt, 1991, 2008). This means that a dualism between the practical and the social is wholly artificial because Marx's point was that, for humans, the practical *is* the social. In the practical realm of society humans enter social relations of production and engage with socially produced artefacts that transmit the heritage of our material culture and mode of life: this has transformed, although not totally controlled, nature, and has also has changed the nature of the human body (Burkitt, 1999). For example, Washburn (1960) showed how tool use and production changed the form and dexterity of human hands, promoted bipedalism, and freed the mouth from carrying, allowing for the development of speech.

Children are born into this mode of life and so they encounter nature through the mediation of the social world. Additionally, children are born into a social world of other people to whom they are related – caregivers, teachers, siblings, and playmates – and these social relations also form the mode of life in which children construct their identities. Although Archer is right to say that for Merleau-Ponty an infant's first perceptions of the world are based in the internal sensations of its own body, he then goes on to say that these perceptions are inadequate in and of

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themselves, and that without other people to reflect their own image back to them, children would never enter into their 'own field of vision', developing an image of themselves and, eventually, an identity (Merleau-Ponty, 1960). In other words, personal identity is impossible without the social relations that children are bound up in from the moment they are born, leading Merleau-Ponty to develop an intercorporeal and intersubjective understanding in which humans 'are this very knot of relations' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: xxxv). This is the case even for pre-linguistic children, as psychologists like Colwin Trevarthen (1993) and Daniel N. Stern (1985) have shown through studying the interactions of parents with their babies and infants that they communicate with them through looks, gestures, and sounds – such as cooing and the musical properties of words that convey something of their meaning – and how from this infants begin to perceive themselves and their world through their caregivers' feelings and attitudes. Thus the artificiality of Archer's analytical distinctions between the natural, practical, and social orders – ones that, once they are made, need to be *put in relation* – obscures the fact that they are *interrelated from the very beginning:* in the morphogenesis of society, in the evolution of the human body, and in the childhood development of each individual.

Archer defends her position against what she sees as 'sociological imperialism' saying that those who want to privilege the social have to convince sceptics that 'society is the gatekeeper of the whole world', instead arguing that 'we can have *non-social relations with non-social reality'* (Archer, 1995: 290, emphasis in original) and that this forms the basis of private, non-social consciousness. She also wants to uphold a spiritual, transcendental aspect to being human. While much of this is

laudable in the sense that Archer resists reducing agents to mere social cyphers or social dopes, entirely constructed and moved in their doings by social structure, it is nevertheless unconvincing. As I hope to have shown here and elsewhere (Burkitt, 1991, 2008), being a unique individual with real agentive powers is not antithetical to social being. This is because individuals derive their capacities to produce certain actions or effects from social activity itself, and they also have needs that socially organised activity develops and aims to meet (Sève, 1974). Thus, individual personhood does not need non-social roots to found and sustain it, for this may be *a mundane fact of contingent life experience within a unique familial and individual biography, which is singularly embodied **within** social relations and a given mode of life.* Even our conception of and relation to a spiritual realm goes by way of socially constructed and shared religous beleifs and practices that create a sense of transcendence. However, there is much more to Archer's struggle to maintain analytical dualism than the desire to avoid social reductionism. Her strong religious convictions lead her and other critical realists to posit God as the ultimate non-observable generative mechanism that creates and sustains the whole of reality and enables the possibilities within it (Archer, Collier and Porpora, 2004). However, as Vandenberghe (2005) points out, this means that Archer should include the transcendental realm more prominently in her social theory as an order of its own, for at the moment it is smuggled into the practical order. Archer could also challenge more explicitly thinkers like Marx and Merleau-Ponty for whom social relations were the human essence, instead arguing with Feuerbach that the religious essence is the foundation of and transformational element in the human spirit, the ultimate reason why humans can stand apart from their social relations.

Despite this, Archer's work on reflexivity and agency is important. In recent work she has attempted to show how different styles of reflexivity influence the way individuals deal with the increasing tendency to morphogenesis in society, a tendency which favours what she labels 'meta-reflexivity' and 'autonomous reflexivity' over 'communicative reflexivity' and 'fractured reflexivity' (Archer, 2012). The reason this is important is because it counters the trend common in social theory for theorists to identify certain social and cultural trends, such as 'liquid', 'late', or 'second-wave' modernity, and to assume that agents either uncritically follow the pattern of these trends or get left behind. For example, in Giddens' work on the increased pace of change in late-modernity and the abandonment of custom and tradition, it is simply *assumed* that agents must become more reflexive (Giddens, 1991). For Archer, everyone thinks in the four different styles of reflexivity at different times and in various situations: however, for each individual one of the modes of reflexivity is dominant depending on the 'relational goods' or 'evils' they have inherited from their natal backgrounds. Thus, agents are understood to respond differently to the emergent structural and cultural properties of late-modernity, meaning that the spread of social trends are not even or uniform across the social order. In her work, what characterises late-modernity is 'emergent morphogenesis' in which social and cultural systems produce ever greater sources of variety, creating contextual discontinuity for social actors. Yet their dominant mode of reflexivity will very much determine how they respond to this.

However, problems remain around basing agentive powers solely in reflexivity. First, Archer's (2003, 2012) empirical work on reflexivity, from which the classifcation of

different types of reflexivity emerged, is based on how people *think* about their

relation to the social world and to others rather than on what they *do.* It focuses on

thought rather than practice. In Archer's scheme of things this is entirely logical as

the reflexive relation to the social world is seen as a mental one. For example, meta-

reflexives and autonomous reflexives (in terms of the dominant mode) are seen as

the main beneficiaries of emergent morphogenesis because their natal backgrounds

have made them more independent reflexive thinkers. In the case of meta-

reflexives, they have strong and critical internal conversations. Their natal

backgrounds have provided them with the relational good of stability, yet there is

conflict or tension between the opinions or values of their parents, meaning that for

these people the social order is not internalised and normalised but problematised.

Meta-reflexivity allows people to go through the process of discernment,

deliberation and dedication (the DDD process): that is, to engage in productive and

purposeful internal conversations in which they can define and dovetail their

concerns, develop concrete courses of action as their projects, and establish

satisfying and sustainable practices. On the other hand, fractured reflexives are

those whose internal conversations are under-developed and impeded, meaning

that they are 'emotives' who live by their 'first-order emotions' – that is, emotions

tied to present circumstances and immediate concerns, rather than being

'transvalued' into 'second-order emotions' by reflexive articulation and deliberation

through which they can be aligned to ordered and prioritised concerns and

expressed as effective action (projects). Thus, instead of establishing satisfying and

sustainable practices, the fractured reflexives live by 'presentism': as

*'événementalistes* they do not attempt to achieve governance over their

lives…because, in effect, they have recinded the agential power to become (something of) their own "sovereign artificers'" (Archer, 2012: 279-281). Such fractured reflexives have come from backgrounds where they have experienced 'relational harm' and thus rejected these as the source of their distress. Yet this version of reflexivity elevates cognition, downplaying the way we all make our way through the world emotionally in the ordinary relationships of everyday life (Brownlie, 2014), something I will return to in the next section.

Second, although Archer claims she wants to focus on this 'real' dimension of the relationality between people, as opposed to merely considering the relation between people as bearers of roles or positions, she defines this as a first person orientation to the emergent 'relational goods' or 'evils' that are generated as emergent properties of people's relationships (Archer, 2013). Again, we encounter Donati's *'tertium'* or 'third' as an emergent property dependent on social relations but forming a reality of its own, a position Archer endorses (Archer, 2013; Donati, 2011). Thus, despite saying we should consider the real relations between people, Archer conceptualises this as each individual's relation to the third emergent property, this time defined as relational goods or evils: 'Ego and Alter both *orientate themselves* not directly to one another but to the emergent relational goods they generate' (Archer, 2013: 157). Once more, Archer has reified aspects or dimensions of people's real relationships, like love and trust, into emergent properties to which people relate, rather than relating and interacting directly with one another. It is also strange that she talks of relational goods and evils as if people's real relations could be classified as generating one or the other. In reality most relationships will be

composed of both good and bad elements and people come to feel ambivalent things towards one another. This is something hinted at when Archer (2012) talks of the stability and tension in the natal backgrounds of meta-reflexives: yet these backgrounds are characterised as composed of relational goods because of their stability, and the possible ambivalence felt by her research participants is not explored. Indeed, Archer hardly mentions emotion in her account of the meta-reflexives and autonomous reflexives, focusing on emotion only in her account of the fractured reflectives, which suggests that when emotions and concerns are properly prioritised in a cognitive hierarchy, reflexive rationality subordinates potentially unruly emotion.

Third, if we take Merleau-Ponty's view seriously that most of our intentional actions emerge out of our being-in-the-world, or our being-in-relation, this means that the origin of agency is not conscious reflexivity, the latter being only a part of intentional action: action begins in those non-conscious areas of life, such as habituated activity, which only become subject to reflexive deliberation at certain points or under certain circumstances (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). But Archer brackets off this realm because 'non-conscious features may play a part in the depiction of the passive agent, to whom things happen, but by definition can play no part in the conscious reflexive deliberations of the active agent' (Archer, 2003: 25). In her later work Archer (2010, 2012) discounts habit altogether because the 'contextual discontinuity' of emergent morphogenesis makes reliance on routine impossible. However, it is only possible for Archer to rule out habit as a basis for agency because she persists in defining habit as 'routine', despite critically engaging with the work of

Joas (1992) who understands habit as part of creative activity. John Dewey (1922) also understood certain forms of habit to be creative, arguing that habit only becomes routine under certain conditions, such as monotonous and repetitive types of work. Dewey also had an understanding of the non-conscious realm of human life as composed of meanings that are implicit in consciousness or in situations, which are not fully realised or articulated. As I have shown elsewhere this allows us to formulate ideas of a dialogical unconscious which does not have to rest on Freudian concepts but can be informed by pragmatist and dialogical thinkers (Burkitt, 2010a). Nevertheless, non-conscious elements in our behaviour and thought can have a crucial impact on our consciousness, reflexivity, and actions without us fully realising this.

Finally, Archer's view of agency is imbued with moral and political conceptions of the person and self which say that 'when I am an agent, I am, I count. But when I am passive, incapable, constrained, dependent, I am less a person, I count less' (Reader, 2007: 580). In Western culture there is a *moral imperative,* absorbed into social theory, that individuals *should be* active, intentional, autonomous, independent, capable, and constantly willing and able to make deliberative choices in their lives. This is reflected in evaluative comments that Archer makes about the different reflexives in her study, especially those categorised as predominantly fractured reflexives. Because they are described as 'emotives' neither in control of their emotions nor their circumstances, resulting in impeded reflexivity, their subjectivity 'makes no difference to the play of objective circumstances upon them...In short, they make no difference' (Archer, 2003: 299-300). These are passive subjects who

simply endure circumstances and, thus, seemingly do not count, either as agents or persons. They are disqualified from the status of persons because they have failed to reflexively order their concerns and dedicate themselves to a project, central elements of what, for Archer, makes for personhood. Instead, fractured reflexives 'remark no pattern in their social circumstances, no repetitions representing regularities and no changes whose trajectories signal in which direction' [they should travel?] (Archer, 2012: 279). But Archer has already criticised theorists of habit for thinking (in her reading) that any kind of pattern, repetition, or regularity is possible in emergent morphogenesis: how, then, can this be established in the face of 'contextual discontinuity' by any form of reflexivity? Even predominantly meta-reflexives will struggle in such conditions to establish purposeful projects and sustainable practices much beyond their immediate circumstances. However, the meta-reflexives are evaluated in much more positive ways by Archer, attaining the level of personal and social selves and being seen as effective agents, purposeful and dedicated in roles and projects. Although Archer thinks that their ability to achieve governence over their lives and attain the agential power to be their own sovereign artificers is based on personal powers, there is more than a hint here of the governmental and disciplinary forms of power that Foucault (1982) analysed in modern Western institutional and political systems, which become ingrained in individuals through institutionalised practices of self-discipline and self-government.

Archer's relational sociology is therefore highly problematic as we rarely get a glimps in her work of people relating or interacting directly with one another: instead, people relate to emergent properties of relations and do so through cognitive,

reflexive styles. This obscures the more embodied, emotional, interdependent forms

of relating in which reflexivity develops and is enmeshed. In this latter view, agents

are no longer seen to be related to third kinds but directly to one another in

different forms of social relations in which they appear as interactants.


**Relational agency: interdependence, interaction and interactants**

There are two points on which all relational sociologists would agree with Donati;

that *'in the beginning there is the relation'* and that from this 'subjects and objects

are defined relationally' (Donati, 2011: 17-18). However, instead of the reification of

structures or properties as the result of the past agency of individuals, we can take a

relational perspective in which, as Marx said, social formations are not an

abstraction confronting individuals because they are nothing more or less than 'the

sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand' (Marx,

1857: 265). These relations have a history but they cannot be reduced to past agency

alone or reified as structure. Indeed, relations are relatively fluid and ongoing –

some more enduring than others – as people enter and exit them at different points

in time (being born and dying, hired and fired, making-up and breaking-up).

Relations also change as they have to adapt to current circumstances, something I

will give an example of in this section. For those relational sociologists who take a

similar view and are not critical realists this does *not* automatically mean that they

are postmodernists, nor that they see relations as products of, or ends in,

themselves (Donati, 2011). As I have pointed out here and elsewhere (Burkitt, 1999)

we can conceptualise humans as in relations that transform the real through their productive joint activities as well as in relations of communication. Fish also notes that the Marxist idea of relations of production is important for relational sociologists, as it explains what they are studying; that is, not simple relations between objects or organisms that may determine their form but of which they are not conscious: rather 'human beings are unique insofar as they create through their practical life activity their relation to nature, their social relations to one another, and, therefore, themselves' (Fish, 2013: 37). The point here is that this gives relational sociology greater ontological depth, as it is not simply relations, and the objects and entities produced in relations, that is the focus of study; more specifically, it is *social* relations and the mode of life humans produce through them, including material culture and technology, that relational sociologists need to bring into the analysis.

Also within social formations at any one time there exist different forms of social relations that cannot be reduced to each other or to any one type of social relation. Although Marx and Engels are often accused of reducing all social relations to the base of economic relations, in *The German Ideology* their critique of utilitarianism is about the 'stupidity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness'. What distinguishes capitalism, however, is not that all other social relations can be reduced to economic ones, but that in this mode of production capitalist relations tend to dominate all others, so that 'all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation' (Marx and Engels, 1846: 109). In speaking of people's 'manifold relationships' Marx and

Engels refer to activities and relations like speech and love – to personal and intimate relations – along with 'the meaning *peculiar* to them' (Marx and Engels, 1846: 110). The fact that as individuals we are always embedded in some aspect of manifold relationships helps to explain something of what is going on in social relations when individuals act as agents: we are not engaged in different forms of relations and interactions purely to reproduce or elaborate structures on the basis of our own interests, but because the meaningfulness of the particular activities we engage in with others is deeply fulfilling for us. To bring meaning back into the equation is not to reduce 'structure' to the interpretations of an individual, but to *understand the different meanings associated with different forms of relationship.* As individuals we may come to feel more distant or alienated from *some element* of the manifold social relations, such as work or politics, finding greater fulfilment in friendship, sport, or family and their associated meanings and values.

My main point here, though, is that we never confront social structure as a single individual, because we are always nested in some aspect of social relations – either those that are interpersonal, such as family or peer group relations, or the more impersonal or formal relations of work, organisations, economics, or politics. A key concept here is Elias's (1978) notion of 'interdependence' in which he claims that as humans we are all reliant on one another for meeting emotional and sexual needs, but in highly complex and diverse societies with an advanced division of labour we also fulfil different economic, social and political functions. In these interdependencies there emerge power imbalances as some attain greater positions of power or control of key resources, but in highly interdependent societies there is

also greater constraint over other people and groups, particularly around the control and use of the means of violence. This has implications for agency because how we act, the powers we accrue or the constraints upon us, does not rest on our relation to structure but on the nature of our interdependence with others and how this shapes our mutual interactions. This is another reason why relations cannot be reduced to 'shared meanings' as they involve a range of interdependencies that are physical, meaningful, emotional, practical, economic, political, and social, all of which involve the various things we do for each other – support and constraint, satisfaction or frustration of need, and fulfilling certain roles and functions. This can happen at the interpersonal level where, for example, my students support my lecture by sitting quietly at appropriate times and at others by asking questions or joining in discussions; but it also happens at an impersonal level of interdependence where cleaners and porters prepare the lecture room and power-workers at a plant somewhere provide the energy to heat and light it and power the equipment. None of us could be agents in any effective way in the modern world without such interdependence.

This is one of the reasons why Dépelteau has argued that 'deep' relational sociologists should not use the concept of agency, instead following Emirbayer who employs the concept of 'transaction' to explain the relational nature of action (Dépelteau, 2013; Emirbayer, 1997). However, I will continue to use the term interaction here because this does not necessarily mean that relations are caused by the pre-given essences or characteristics of two or more actors (Dépelteau, 2015). In a sociological sense (following the tradition of pragmatists like G.H. Mead and C.H.

Cooley) interaction is the meaningful formation of relationships and the identities within them. Together with the concept of interdependence, I shall argue here that agents (in the singular) should be re-conceptualised as interactants or interdependents and that agency appears only amongst people in their relational contexts. Here, of course, I am defining agency in the wider sense of action that produces an effect on the world and on others, rather than in the narrow sense of reflexive choice in situations where people could have acted otherwise, the latter being one element or moment of agency.

A good example to illustrate this position is the case of people's choices about the type of intimate relationships now open to them in Western countries, including the option some are taking to live apart together (LAT). Archer (2012) associates LAT with autonomous reflexivity, which is the result of people becoming 'enforced independents' due to rates of divorce, separation and re-partnering across continents like Europe. Autonomous reflexivity is a dominant mode of thought in which internal conversations are self-contained, leading directly to action that is planned in a style closest to the classic form of instrumental rationality. As independents (albeit enforced), often from a young age because of the relational problems stemming from natal backgrounds composed of changeable, broken, or fragile relationships, this style of reflexivity becomes the natural dominant mode for certain people.

However, Duncan's (2014) research on LAT reveals this situation to be more complex in terms of relationality, agency, and reflexivity, giving us more of an insight into relational agency. From a qualitative sample of twenty-nine women, drawn from a

much larger national survey of LAT in Britain, Duncan distinguished three broad categories that practiced LAT at the time of the research in 2011 – the constrained, the strategic, and those expressing vulnerability. The constrained group were those women who were planning to cohabit with their partners as soon as possible but were prevented from doing so by things like the affordability of housing, their partner's debts, job location, visa issues, their partner's incarceration, and family opposition to the partner. While the constrained group were certainly enforced independents, their situation was not related to autonomous reflexivity: indeed, their thinking is highly oriented towards others, whether that is the wishes and objections of their families, or the eventual long-term goal of living with their partner in a more conventional relationship. Even when the constrained group were prevented from living with their partner because of the power of state agencies – for example, in resolving visa issues – this is not simply the relation to an external 'structure' or organisation that results only from past agency; indeed, the operation of such agencies may result from current government policies, which in turn respond to perceived current public opinion. Thus these organisations are not *sui generis* entities, but fluid and changeable in form, something that results from external relations (with the current government and its policies and with other state or voluntary agencies) and from internal relations (re-organisations resulting from changing aims and objectives, or from changes in funding arrangements). In turn, this will affect the relation of the organisation to those who are dependent on it for decisions that will massively affect their lives. Indeed, all the things that constrained the options of these women in relation to their partners were relations to and interdependencies with others, whether these were organisations or individuals.

Thus it is not others, as individuals or organisations, that constrain us but the nature of our relationship to them.

Closer to Archer's autonomous reflexives are the group of women Duncan classifies as 'strategic' in their adoption of LAT. This group particularly valued their individual autonomy and freedom from male authority, thus challenging and undoing traditional gender roles to some degree. However, this is only to a degree. What is interesting from Duncan's findings is the *complexity and ambivalence in these women's relational situations.* Even the constrained group recognised and valued the space and relative independence that results from LAT, while the strategic group often felt guilty about the perceived 'selfishness' of their relative independence and, seemingly as a result, would end up doing domestic chores for male partners they did not live with. In this and other ways the women in the strategic group still referred back in their talk, thought, and actions to meanings of the 'conventional couple', seeing in it certain benefits that they may choose to take up when they need help and emotional support, such as during illness or pregnancy. In other words, the women's strategies of relative independence from men were compromised by the relational bond with their partner and by the interdependence that results from this for both of them. As Duncan points out, both groups of women 'negotiated the conditions of bondedness from within, not beyond, their relational ties with their partners and [with] hegemonic ideas about family' (Duncan, 2014: 12). One could also add here that they did this from within relational ties not just to partners but also with consideration to the views and feelings of others, such as family and friends.

This became even clearer with the group of women who felt cohabitation would place them in a vulnerable position. There were two major reasons for this. First, some women chose to live apart from their partners because of the perceived needs of dependent children. Second, fears of emotional distress, especially where women had previous experiences of conjugal partnership breakdown, also influenced the choice to live apart. This was particularly acute for those who had suffered male violence. However, when asked why they stayed with (if not lived with) male partners they clearly had serious reservations about, the response was about a desire for connectedness expressed in terms of love, meaning that these women clearly received a level of emotional support and intimacy from their partners. Indeed, the adoption of LAT was a way of maintaining this connection and intimacy in unfavourable circumstances that also involved avoiding fears of distress and harm.

What we see from this is that these women do not relate to 'third' or *sui generis* properties with their own causal powers, but to other individuals and agencies in relational networks with relative imbalances of power. Nor do the women relate to third properties such as 'relational goods' or 'relational evils' that emerge on the basis of their interpersonal relations. Instead, they are embedded in everyday relations that are ambivalent, with different aspects of those relations being both good and bad. Furthermore, we are not related to an external structure by the way we reflexively deliberate upon it: instead, we are embedded within the fabric of our ordinary relationships and it is from within these that we come to feel and think about them and the ambivalences within them, our emotional connections to others

forming a central element of our agency that sometimes is pre-reflexive or only partially reflexive.

This illustrates how, as Emirbayer and Miche put it, agency is a relational and 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement', that is 'informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963). Thus, in Duncan's (2014) research, the women's agency was informed by the past in terms previous experiences, habit, and hegemonic ideas about coupledom; it was also oriented to the future in terms of plans to cohabit or by piecing together different traditions and alternative ideas about intimacy in an imaginative process of 'bricolage'; yet the contingencies of the moment also played a role in agency, such as financial concerns, family opinions, or the perceived needs of dependent children. However, Emirbayer and Mische fall into the trap of focusing on the relationship of the *individual agent* to the social situation, failing to see that these situations are those in which we may be able or unable to do certain things because of our bonds with others. Thus they fail to create a truly relational view of agency, ultimately stating that 'contexts cannot themselves serve as the point of origin of agentic possibilities, which must reside one level down (so to speak), at the level of self-dynamics' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 974), thus taking an individual view of agentic powers.

Instead of this, seeing persons as interactants and as interdependent *within* various situations means we can no longer theorise them as agents in an unproblematic way

and, as Reader (2007) points out, many things that in the West are considered to be non-agential may be part of personhood, such as patiency, incapacity, necessity, and dependency. For her, in terms of actions these 'always and as such have *patients, beings which the action affects*' (Reader, 2007: 588). To put this more sociologically, as interactants no person is ever completely an agent or a patient in any one moment of interaction: instead we are always both agent and patient, acting upon others and being acted upon by others to varying degrees. Reflexivity and deliberative choice is also limited in different situations by contingencies outside of reflexive scope. In this sense, as subjects with a dialogical inner conversation with both personal and impersonal others (the latter in terms of, say, 'the voice of reason'), interactants are polyphonic selves that form within and interact within the webs of complex, fluid, dialogical social relations. Reflexivity is a hollow that opens up in the fabric of interrelations, and while it forms an essential capacity for interaction alongside other capacities, it is variable, intermittent, and limited, bounded by the network of intentional actions beyond the scope of comprehension. This also includes some of our own intentional actions for, as Merleau-Ponty showed, intentional action often begins in the realm of being-in-the-world and the elemental interrelatedness of being, or what he came to call 'field being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). This means we are not always reflexive in terms of the origins of our own actions, or of the intentions of others we interact with. Consciousness is then surrounded by non-consciousness, including a dialogical unconscious of voices that are latent, implicit, or suppressed, but that continue to influence the things we do and how we think (Burkitt, 2010b).

Furthermore, we act in multiple webs of interdependence in which no one is ever completely independent or dependent but always somewhere on the continuum between these two abstractions. As I illustrated above, this means that in the exercise of capabilities, capacities, and powers we are reliant on others for so much that we ourselves are not skilled or able to do. Thus 'human capabilities and powers also refer to incapacities and vulnerabilities' (Reader, 2007: 590), something which Duncan (2014) illustrated in his research on LAT. This also showed how relations and interdependencies have an emotional dimension to them, which usually involve feelings of compulsion, attachment, loyalty, affiliation, identification, trust, love, need, friendship, or their opposites and, most crucially, ambivalences. These emotions bind us into webs of interdependence in which our interactions develop in a context where we act according not only to our own needs and wishes but to those of others as well. For example, in terms of family relationships, Smart (2011) has said that people make decisions '(about wills, or about moving, or about caring) in relation to others and not simply in terms of their own specific or separate needs and desires.' Thus, in this view, reflexivity is relational not only because it involves individuals thinking about their relationships to others or to a social context: it is relational because relationships are at the heart of reflexivity and shape its dialogical form. As Smart puts it in terms of families, it is a form of thinking and feeling 'ordinary people have as a consequence of being part of a web of connectedness where their concept of self (and self value) is tied into how they behave towards significant others' (Smart, 2011: 17). As Dunning and Hughes say of Elias's approach, 'a person's "plans", "intentions" and "actions" within any "encounter" are always inter-related and interdependent with the "plans", "intentions" and "actions" of

others, and these interdependencies are parts of chains which stretch across time and space' (2013: 155). Thus, people's relationships are always central to their reflexivity, rationalities, and emotions. Thinking this way can avoid the abstraction and reification of terms like 'structure', 'agency', 'constraint' and 'enablement', which are not ontologically or analytically dualistic.

Thus, Quỳnh Pham's discussion of the communal agency of women in the Middle East questions Western notions of freedom as autonomy, turning instead to contexts of 'bondedness' where women must endure and negotiate being embedded in relations of power and webs of sociality where they are often subordinate to men. For Pham, in their relationships with men, women's agency works through a form of 'bonded response-ability' in which married partners subtly adjust their actions to one another, so that '"strategic" interactions do not abruptly alter or undo relations of power...but take time to meaningfully negotiate common terms of everyday living' (Pham, 2013: 35). Thus, for everyone involved in relationships, with varying degrees of power, 'conducting oneself with/in bonds calls for a highly nuanced and elastic range of dexterity and mobility in order to steer the course of interactions' (Pham, 2013: 35). Such a view goes against the dualistic version of structure/agency, where a reflexive individual confronts an external structure, making choices within it or finding their own personal way through it, because this is 'premised upon the distancing of an autonomous interiority from external social forces' (Pham, 2013: 35). Instead, *social relationships should not be understood as merely constraining or enabling agency, but as constituting the very structure and form of agency itself.* In this view, 'one's action is rarely one's own and rarely for one's own sake only, for it is

pulled, pushed, harmonised, agitated, coaxed, pleaded...by multiple bonds. In this sense, one could say it is always already co-authored' (Pham, 2013: 37).

This helps to illustrate the relational ontology of agency I have been arguing for here. The social universe is composed of the sum of manifold relations, some impersonal and some interpersonal, in which individuals are located, forming the contexts in which agency is not simply enabled and constrained (as if it were a power separate from relations) but is constituted within relationships as they unfold across space and time. Agency cannot be reduced to any specific situation in which these relations unfold because each interactant has a personal biography that cuts across and intersects the manifold relations at different times and places. Also, agency cannot be defined solely by reflexive thought and action because reflexivity is not continuous and constant. Individuals or collectives can be interactants when they act out of habit or are not fully conscious of all the contingencies that form the context of their action, yet still create an intervention that produces a particular effect, even if the outcomes are unintended. Although it may be morally and politically difficult for Western academics, a relational ontology must begin to contemplate the full complexity of agency whereby this can no longer be conceptualised as an absolute power but has to be understood as a matter of degree. In interrelation, interdependence, and interactions with others, interactants are always active and passive, powerful and yet vulnerable to various degrees, acting on others and being acted on by those others. As interactants we deliberate and make choices but without choosing or always fully comprehending the contextual parameters in which those choices are made. We also choose and formulate plans and intentions in

interdependence with others, never standing before all the manifold relations as an isolated, autonomous individual. In these interdependencies each interactant has capacities for action yet there are areas where we lack capacity or these are not fully developed and we need to rely on others. Interactants are also emotionally bonded and interdependent with particular others and our actions and choices are formed not simply by a cognitive reflexivity, but by internal dialogues and external deliberations infused by the emotional valences of our most important social relations, ones that are often shot through with ambivalence and contradiction. When agency unfolds it does so within manifold social relations that are contradictory and between interactants who are deeply dialogical, polyphonic, personal and social selves.

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