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The Field of Relational Sociology¹

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Abstract

I offer a qualitative sketch and a brief empirical analysis of relational sociology as a scientific field. The field consists of scholarly communication that adheres to the label "relational sociology", articulating and elaborating the idea that the social world is structured in relations. Within this general orientation, very different versions of relational sociology exist. These rest on diverging conceptions of the key term "social relations" and on different epistemological approaches (pragmatism, critical realism, constructive empiricism). These patterns are reconstructed by way of correspondence analyses of co-citation patterns of authors in the chapters of *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*. Contemporary self-proclaimed relational sociologists (Crossley, Dépelteau, Donati, Emirbayer) here co-feature with sociological classics rebranded under the label as key references in the field. The major division reflects a separation between authors working on the theoretical reflection of network research, on the one hand, and those focusing on the theoretical formulation of a social world made of relations, on the other hand. This second tendency then bifurcates into pragmatism-inspired authors and critical realists.

Keywords

author, citation, relational sociology, scientific field

^{1.} You can read the article "Relational Sociology of the Scientific Field: Communication, Identities, and Field Relations", by Jan Fuhse included in this Special Section here: http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i26.374144

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The Field of Relational Sociology

El campo de la sociología relacional

Resumen

Ofrezco un esbozo cualitativo y un análisis empírico conciso de la sociología relacional como campo científico. El campo consiste en la comunicación académica que obedece a la etiqueta «sociología relacional», que articula y elabora la idea de que el mundo social se estructura en relaciones. Dentro de esta orientación general existen versiones muy diferentes de la sociología relacional, que se basan en concepciones divergentes del término clave, «relaciones sociales», y en enfoques epistemológicos diferentes (pragmatismo, realismo crítico, empirismo constructivo). Estas características se reconstruyen por medio de análisis de correspondencia de características de cocitas de autores en los capítulos de The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology. Los autoproclamados sociólogos relacionales y contemporáneos (Crossley, Dépelteau, Donati, Emirbayer) son coprotagonistas aquí junto con sociólogos clásicos como referentes importantes en el campo. La división principal refleja una separación entre los autores que, por una banda, trabajan en la reflexión teórica de investigación en red, y en aquellos que, por la otra, se centran en la formulación teórica de un mundo social hecho de relaciones. Esta segunda tendencia también se divide después en autores inspirados en el pragmatismo y en los realistas críticos

Palabras clave

autor, cita, sociología relacional, campo científico

1. Introduction²

The concept of scientific fields denotes arenas of mutual orientation in scientific or academic discourse (Bourdieu 1975; 1997). These consist of communicative events – publications, but also presentations and informal talk – that primarily relate to each other, picking up on ideas and arguments from previous communication in the respective fields, and referring to key publications and authors. Every scientific field thus organises around a set of ideas and authors with a distinct "style of thought" (Fleck [1935] 1979). This makes for the boundary of meaning separating the field from the outside world, in particular from other scientific fields (Abbott 1995).

Of course, this separation is always gradual, with publications in one field frequently building on ideas and authors from neighbouring fields. Also, a field features internal competition and diversity within the general orientation separating it from its environment. Authors strive to innovate on the prevalent ideas and present their work as superior to that of others in the field. While a scientific field – say: sociology – reproduces its general orientations in publications and presentations, the drives towards distinction and innovation make for its heterogeneity and dynamism.

I take fields to consist of specific communication, and authors only feature as projection points in the field – as cornerstones to which ideas are attributed and around which discourse is organised (Foucault [1969] 1998). While we have some ideas about authors subjectively looking for recognition and distinction, the analysis

of communication in the field focuses on what ideas (and what other authors) authors are associated with.

I lay out this perspective in a companion piece (Fuhse 2020). This short paper applies the framework to the field of relational sociology (RS). In what sense, and to what extent, does RS have a boundary of meaning and constitutes a subfield within the field of sociology, itself a subfield of the scientific field? Which are the key authors of RS, and how are they related to each other in field-internal communication? This should indirectly also tell us something about different approaches and directions within the field, as associated with different reference authors.

I first offer a short qualitative account of the field of relational sociology (section 2). My first-hand knowledge as participant in the field here undoubt-edly makes for a biased presentation. In section 3, I complement this sketch with a small quantitative analysis of citation patterns in RS. A correspondence analysis of the authors referred to in the chapters of *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau 2018a) gives us information about the key authors in the field, but also about different approaches associated with them.

2. Relational sociology

Mustafa Emirbayer's "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology" (1997) was a rallying cry that powerfully reframed theoretical debate.

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^{2.} I would like to thank the autonomous reviewer for helpful suggestions, Jakob Lutz for the tedious work of cataloguing the references in the Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology, and Oscar Stuhler for critical feedback and for helping with my amateur coding in R.

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Diverse approaches from Marx to Bourdieu were christened as "relational sociology" and declared not only different, but superior to individualist and holist approaches. Like the "Communist Manifesto", this rallying cry resonated with work done previously or around the same time, especially with a new approach to social networks around Harrison White (of which Emirbayer was a part; Pachucki / Breiger 2010; Mische 2011; Erikson 2013; Fuhse 2015). Broadly speaking, this approach turns away from a purely structural understanding of networks. With a strong infusion of pragmatism, interactionism, and Bourdieu's theory of practices, it conceptualises networks as interwoven with meaning and culture (stories, identities, categories, styles, language etc.). Prominent proponents of the approach include White, Emirbayer, Peter Bearman, Ronald Breiger, Paul Di-Maggio, Roger Gould, John Levi Martin, Ann Mische, John Mohr, Margaret Somers, and Charles Tilly.

While this approach has continued to spur important and innovative work, much of it does not explicitly identify as "relational sociology". Instead, the current wave of self-proclaimed RS really started around 2010, with prominent publications by British former movement researcher Nick Crossley (2011) and by Italian theorist Pierpaolo Donati (2011; following up on his Introduzione alla sociologia relazionale from 1983). Both became part of an international movement of self-declared "relational sociologists". Canadian sociologist François Dépelteau played an important role in assembling this motley crew of theorists with an emphasis on "relations" in the social world. He edited two volumes with Christopher Powell on "conceptualizing" and "applying relational sociology" (Dépelteau / Powell 2013; Powell / Dépelteau 2013), as well as an impressive handbook (Dépelteau 2018a). Also, he organised an internet discussion group, a research cluster, and a number of workshops and sessions at international conferences.

While this movement shows internal links, it subsumes wildly differing approaches: Donati advocates a "critical realist relational sociology" with social relations like friendship, the family, social movements and other collectives, as well as individual persons as basic entities (2015). Crossley combines inter-actionism and French pragmatism (Merleau-Ponty) to account for collective mobilisation and for the creation of culture and cultural creativity out of networks (2011; 2015a; 2015b). Dépelteau's "deep relational sociology" rejects all conceptual dualisms and ideas of structure over and above "transaction processes" (2008; 2015). This lies closer to Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory than to Donati's critical realism, Crossley's interactionist network theory, or the network studies around White. Other contributions discuss relational aspects of Georg Simmel, Gabriel Tarde, George Herbert Mead, Norbert Elias, Gilles Deleuze, Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, Michael Mann, and postcolonialism (Dépelteau 2018a). The different positions within relational sociology have been mapped by Dépelteau (2018b), Riccardo Prandini (2015), and myself (Fuhse 2015: 36f).

This "relational sociology" is not overly homogeneous with regard to assumptions and arguments. Its symbolic coherence and boundary rest on dedication to theory and to the notions of "social relations" or "relational sociology". Contention and competition in the field centre around the meaning of these notions. According to Emirbayer (2013), "relational sociology" and "relational thinking" were "fighting words" of scholars like White, Tilly, and Bourdieu. They were probably less designating a common endeavour, than aimed *against* sociological approaches centred on "substances" like the rational individual or a functionally integrated society. The label works as part of the boundary marking relational sociology in opposition to other approaches, rather than subsuming a coherent whole.

Relational sociology thus only partly constitutes a common approach and perspective. Rather, it defines itself negatively against other approaches, without a positive definition and orientation. This conforms to the definition of a field given above: authors orient towards each other in a common discourse and around the coveted label "relational sociology". The unity of the field is achieved and visible in mutual references, in discussions (as in the e-mail group organised by Dépelteau), in common publications that subsume divergent perspectives under the same unifying label, and at symposiums and workshops. Relational sociology is less united in the commonality of ideas than in discursive practices. Its authors take part in the same game, pay attention to each other's work and distance themselves from each other as often as they claim allegiance to a common approach. Therefore, it makes sense to examine relational sociology as a field of contention and competition, rather than a harmonious collective.

Generally, authors cite mostly those works and authors they by and large agree with – to invoke support by trusted authors for their own arguments, and to place themselves in an "imagined community" of academics holding similar views. A relational sociologist is unlikely to cite natural scientists, but she will also tend to cite other relational sociologists more often than rational choice theorists or quantitative demographers. We might send a token reference to Parsons or to Coleman to distance ourselves from them. But we need a lot more references to our intellectual companions to elaborate our position. Of course, this includes authors who will not or cannot reciprocate our citations, such as the classics of relational sociology: Georg Simmel, John Dewey, Norbert Elias, and Pierre Bourdieu. As authors to which we attribute ideas, and as projection points, they can still feature in the field of relational sociology long after their biological death.

3. Relating relational sociologists

A brief investigation of citation patterns will help us get a rough sense of the field of relational sociology in its current state. I focus on the authors cited most often in the *Palgrave Handbook*

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of Relational Sociology (Dépelteau 2018a). This admittedly convenient choice should give us a sense of which authors currently wield the most authority in relational sociology. But the citation patterns, rather than mere numbers, also show which authors tend to be cited together, thus indicating different approaches and currents in the field. The *Handbook* has 686 pages with 33 chapters and 2195 references to 1008 authors, including co-authors.

Following the examples of Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1984: 126ff) and Ronald Breiger (2000), I resort to correspondence analysis of binary data to study the constellation of the field. This requires dichotomising the data: cell entries in the table now represent whether a particular author is cited (1) in one of the 33 chapters, or not (0). Only authors who are cited by more than one chapter give us information about the pattern in the field. To simplify matters, I only consider authors cited in at least six different chapters and at least once as first author.3 This includes classics and eminent contemporary sociologists rebranded (and enlisted) as relational sociologists (Archer, Bourdieu, Dewey, Elias, Latour, Simmel, Tilly, White), as well as authors active in the current debate on relational sociology (Crossley, Dépelteau, Donati, Emirbayer, Mische, Powell, and myself). The data and the R code for the analyses are available by request.

In this analysis, the chapters serve as a proxy for ideas. This assumes that the different chapters of the *Handbook* cover different aspects of the ideational realm of relational sociology. I do not investigate this level of ideas further. But the analysis reveals how different authors are associated (seen as relevant sources) with various facets of relational sociology. It should be noted, though, that some of the reference authors wrote chapters on their own positions in the Handbook, thus featuring both as authors of chapters and as projection points of references here. Hence, the chapters by Crossley (chapters #24 and #30), Dépelteau (#1 and #25), Donati (#22), and myself (#23) skew the analyses.

The correspondence analysis reconstructs a simple version of the space of authors and ideas in relational sociology (the first two dimensions, covering about 30 percent of the overall co-variation), based on the contingency table of Handbook chapters and cited authors (Figure 1).⁴ The vicinity of two authors in this socio-symbolic constellation signals that they feature in similar chapters, and that they are referred to in connection with similar topics and arguments. The relatively

high cut-off of six chapters was necessary to avoid crowding the figure with too many names. This cut-off is somewhat arbitrary, but ensures that the most relevant authors are included in the analysis. Lower cut-offs (e.g. a minimum of four chapters for cited authors) lead to similar patterns, but render the arrangement less clear.

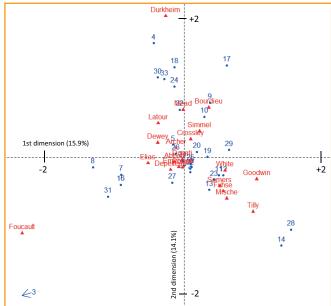


Figure 1: Correspondence analysis of chapters and cited authors in the Handbook Correspondence analysis of citations of authors (red pyramids, with labels) in at least six chapters (blue balls, numbered) in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, first two dimensions. The chapters of the Handbook are listed (with the numbers in the diagrams) in the appendix.

Visual inspection reveals Émile Durkheim (on the top left of the diagram, cited in seven chapters) and Michel Foucault (bottom left, also 7) as outliers in the citation patterns. Both are classics in sociological theory, but only cited in a few very specific chapters as relevant for relational sociology. Both adopt different versions of holism contrasting with the relational perspective: Durkheim views society as an integrated entity characterised by a division of labour and by mechanical or organic solidarity. And he advocates for studying social facts on the basis of statistics of individual cases, rather than of patterns of interaction. Foucault analyses the organisation of discourses by inherent rules and, later, the disciplining of individuals by social structures. Though Foucault's concept of power shows some

^{3.} This conveniently sets the cut-off for inclusion to the number of references to myself in the *Handbook*. Co-authors omitted from the analysis include Loïc Wacquant, only cited as Bourdieu's co-author (eight times), and James Dewey's co-author Arthur Bentley (nine times). Jeff Goodwin is mostly cited as Emirbayer's co-author, but has one reference to a first-authored publication. Ann Mische features as co-author of Emirbayer, but also of a number of sole-authored and first-authored references (with Harrison White as co-author). Co-authorship would add another layer to the analysis, but is not included here for the sake of simplicity.

^{4.} Only the first two dimensions can easily be presented in publications. Unfortunately, this does not constitute a natural stopping point in this analysis: dimensions 3 and 4 cover a further 11.9% and 10.8% of the co-variation.

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relational aspects (Selg 2018: 549ff), Durkheim and Foucault mainly feature as opponents of relational thinking in the Handbook.

The rest of the authors occupy a relatively crowded oval space around the centre of the diagram. To zoom in on the differences among this core, I conducted a second correspondence analysis without the two outliers Foucault and Durkheim.⁵ The two first dimensions here cover a similar share of the covariance (30 percent; Figure 2). This diagram gives us a better sense of the patterns of division and similarity in relational sociology.

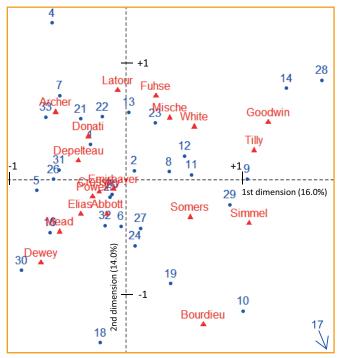


Figure 2: Correspondence analysis of chapters and cited authors without Durkheim and Foucault

The first dimension (with 16 percent of the covariance) reflects the division between the "New York school of" relational analysis (Mische 2011) and other authors in RS. Ann Mische (cited in 14 chapters), Harrison White (9), Charles Tilly (8), Jeff Goodwin, and Margaret Somers (both 6) on the right side of the diagram were involved in the original discussions about a theoretical reflection of social networks as interwoven with meaning in New York in the 1990s, from which Emirbayer's "Manifesto" emerged. Overall, these authors form an "invisible college" with dense interaction and social relationships between them breeding a common orientation and joint theoretical perspective (Crane 1972; Fuhse 2015: 21ff). I approached this group around White and Tilly in the mid-2000s and follow their general approach (referenced in 6 chapters). Goodwin is mostly cited in the Handbook as

co-authoring Emirbayer's earlier critique of network analysis as forgetting culture and agency (Emirbayer / Goodwin 1994). His placement apart from Emirbayer marks that this critique was more often cited in the chapters focusing on networks and on the group around White (like my own [#23], as well as chapters #12 to #15).

We also find Georg Simmel (8) on the right side, as the sociological classic most clearly associated with network thinking. Pierre Bourdieu (13) is located near the New York school on the first dimension, too (but not on the second dimension). Apparently, he is a central reference in this context, but also for other authors.

The first dimension pits these authors against those on the left side. Mustafa Emirbayer is squarely located in the centre, due to his many citations from all parts of the field (22 chapters). His name is barely discernible in a cloud of other central authors: Nick Crossley and Christopher Powell in particular (both 13), with François Dépelteau (20) and Andrew Abbott (11) nearby. Dépelteau and Powell define the field with their oftcited volumes from 2013 (and with the *Palgrave Handbook* edited by Dépelteau). However, Dépelteau and Powell are predominantly cited by chapters dealing with the left side of reference authors, less with the "New York school".

Pierpaolo Donati (16) occupies a similar position on the first dimension, but is a bit removed to the top left. Even further in this direction, we find prominent British theorist Margaret Archer (11), who joined the movement of RS relatively late with a book co-authored with Donati (Donati / Archer 2015). Donati and Archer pursue a theoretical description of the social world based on the epistemology of critical realism (first advanced by Roy Bhaskar). They proclaim social relations, broadly defined as positive collaborative collectivities from dyadic relationships through the family to social movements and voluntary associations, as ontologically "real" basic units of the social.

This contrasts with the pragmatist positions of Crossley and Emirbayer, leaning into the constructivist levelling of human and non-human entities in the cases of Dépelteau and Latour (at the top of the diagram), and with the constructivist-empiricist approaches on the right side (see Fuhse 2015: 28ff for a provisional sketch of this epistemological position). Latour seems to fall somewhere between the critical realists Archer and Donati, on the one hand, and the constructivist network theorists (White, myself), on the other hand. This might come from a curious combination of constructivist and proto-realist arguments, and / or from Latour being invoked as a counterpoint by both camps. This would merit further consideration, but I refrain from ad hoc speculation here. Also, we have to keep in mind the relatively modest share of covariance covered by the two dimensions depicted.

^{5.} This analysis omits chapter 3 from the Handbook for not citing any of the remaining 19 authors (Tonkonoff 2018). That is unfortunate, but the chapter does not contain any information on how this core of authors relates.

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Overall, the authors at the top left share a concern for developing their very own theoretical perspectives, with social relations (Archer, Donati) and processes in them (Dépelteau, Latour) as key features. We could argue similarly for Crossley, Emirbayer, and Powell (and for Abbott), but here a second ingredient or impetus becomes important: the extensive reference and re-working of arguments from classical authors like Norbert Elias (14), John Dewey (11), and George Herbert Mead (6). All of them are to be found at the bottom left. Dewey and Mead mark the pragmatist and interactionist roots of relational sociological thinking by Crossley, Dépelteau, Emirbayer, and Powell (to varying extents), but they are quite far from the network thinking around White. I see Elias's theory of configurations closer to networks, but he places close to the other two on the far left here, as a third classical key author drawn on here. All of them are more important for the core from Abbott to Dépelteau, but less important for the critical realists in the top left, or for the "New York school" on the right of the diagram.

The second dimension (covering 14 percent), then, is not as straightfor-wardly interpretable as the first. On the left, it pits authors closer to pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (bottom) against critical realists (top), with the odd positioning of Latour. On the right, White, Mische, Goodwin (mostly with the Emirbayer / Goodwin 1994 article), and myself are more closely connected to network research than Bourdieu, Somers, and Tilly. Simmel and Bourdieu are the only "classics" featuring on this side, with Simmel closer to networks. After the elimination of Durkheim and Foucault, Bourdieu constitutes the new outlier in this analysis. But note the big difference in the positions of Bourdieu and Simmel in the correspondence analyses with or without Durkheim and Foucault. Both Bourdieu and Simmel were relatively central in the original analysis, moving to the periphery when omitting Durkheim and Foucault.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Overall, this piece offers some support for considering relational sociology a scientific field (Bourdieu 1975; Fuhse 2020). Starting with the notion of "relational sociology", communication builds on the ideas, identities, and relations between them, from previous publications in the field. The label and the contested idea of social relations make for a certain symbolic integration. Given the prominence of the label, of some ideas associated with it, and of reference authors like Crossley, Dépelteau, Donati, Elias, and Emirbayer we may call them "institutions" governing the communication in the field. However, fields are characterised by competition and contention, not consensus. In the case of RS, competing versions are on offer. As in Bourdieu's analyses, these constitute different ways of seeing the world,

including the field itself. Relational sociology looks different when adopting pragmatism, critical realism, or constructivism. These different approaches are not only connected to diverging ideas, but also to different reference authors.

The correspondence analyses offered in section 3 makes use of this duality of authors and ideas to reconstruct a rough and provisional sketch of the field. The co-citation patterns in *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (Dépelteau 2018a) reveal which authors are referred to in connection with the same ideas (as treated in the Handbook chapters). This analysis is admittedly limited, working with binary data, with an arbitrary cutoff point, and only considering the first two dimensions covering about 30 percent of the covariance. Also, the convenient choice of the *Palgrave Handbook* means that idiosyncratic choices and contingencies on the part of its editor and authors (and non-authors) play a role in this analysis.

Nevertheless, we can discern some important features of the field of RS:

- Durkheim and Foucault do not really form part of the field, judging by their peripheral positions. Of course, relational sociology can still draw on their ideas and incorporate them into the canon. But up to now, they fall out-side of the core of the approach.
- 2. The field shows a cleavage between the "New York School" of relational analysis (Mische 2011) with its focus on methodological advances and theoretical reflection of network research on the one hand, and the reconstruction and development of a theoretical approach of RS out of engagement with classical authors (Dewey, Mead, Elias), on the other hand.
- 3. A lesser division pits the authors associated with pragmatism against those adhering to critical realism.

However, given the reduction of co-citation patterns to two dimensions, and the various meanings that citations can have, a few odd placements should not surprise us. In particular, Latour and Bourdieu have somewhat peculiar positions in space. However, given their unique versions of relational thinking, it is not quite clear where they *should* be placed.

Importantly, the analysis does not examine *authors* as producing or driving the field, but as projection points with which particular ideas and relations to other authors are associated *in discourse*. Ideally, we would complement this analysis with a more thorough examination of the ideas associated with authors, and of other kinds of relationships (co-authorships, personal relationships). The new methods of automated text analysis and computational social science give us tools to examine the sociocultural formations of scientific fields with an interplay of actors and ideas. This lies beyond the confines of the rather provisional analysis in this chapter, but is a topic for future research.

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Appendix:

List of chapters in The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology (Dépelteau 2018a):

Number	Author	Title
1	François Dépelteau	Relational Thinking in Sociology: Relevance, Concurrence and Dissonance
2	Frédéric Vandenberghe	The Relation as Magical Operator: Overcoming the Divide Between Relational and Processual Sociology
3	Sergio Tonkonoff	Sociology of Infinitesimal Difference. Gabriel Tarde's Heritage
4	David Toews	Pluralism and Relationalism in Social Theory: Lessons from the Tarde-Durkheim Debate
5	Jean-François Côté	G.H. Mead and Relational Sociology: The Case of Concepts
6	Osmo Kivinen / Tero Piiroinen	Pragmatist Methodological Relationalism in Sociological Understanding of Evolving Human Culture
7	Peter Lenco	Deleuze and Relational Sociology
8	Olli Pyyhtinen	Triangular Relations
9	Christian Papilloud	Bruno Latour and Relational Sociology
10	Christian Papilloud	Georg Simmel and Relational Sociology
11	Natàlia Cantó-Milà	Georg Simmel's Concept of Forms of Association as an Analytical Tool for Relational Sociology
12	Jorge Fontdevila	Switchings Among Netdoms: The Relational Sociology of Harrison C. White
13	Emily Erikson	Relationalism and Social Networks
14	Jean-Sébastien Guy	Is Niklas Luhmann a Relational Sociologist?
15	Chares Demetriou	Charles Tilly and Relational Sociology
16	Tõnis Saarts / Peeter Selg	Mann and Relational Sociology
17	Christian Papilloud / Eva-Maria Schultze	Pierre Bourdieu and Relational Sociology
18	Julian Go	Relational Sociology and Postcolonial Theory: Sketches of a "Postcolonial Relationalism"
19	Andrea Doucet	Shorelines, Seashells, and Seeds: Feminist Epistemologies, Ecological Thinking, and Relational Ontologies
20	Lily Liang / Sida Liu	Beyond the Manifesto: Mustafa Emirbayer and Relational Sociology
21	Douglas Porpora	Critical Realism as Relational Sociology
22	Pierpaolo Donati	An Original Relational Sociology Grounded in Critical Realism
23	Jan Fuhse	Deconstructing and Reconstructing Social Networks
24	Nick Crossley	Networks, Interactions and Relations
25	François Dépelteau	From the Concept of 'Trans-Action' to a Process-Relational Sociology
26	Ian Burkitt	Relational Agency
27	Peeter Selg	Power and Relational Sociology
28	Chares Demetriou / Eitan Alimi	Relational Radicalization
29	Christian Morgner	The Relational Meaning-Making of Riots: Narrative Logic and Network Performance of the London "Riots"
30	Nick Crossley	Music Sociology in Relational Perspective
31	Sarah Hillcoat-Nallétamby	Relational Sociology: Contributions to Understanding Residential Relocation Decisions in Later Life
32	Scott Eacott	Relations, Organising, Leadership and Education
33	Christian Papilloud	Marcel Mauss, the Gift and Relational Sociology

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