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François Dépelteau and the generation of a relational intellectual community

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Abstract

François Dépelteau is a major figure in the contemporary rise of relational scholarship. His untimely passing casts a shadow over the relational research community, particularly those with close ties to the Canadian sociological association research cluster. This paper seeks to honour the contribution and legacy of François through a relational analysis of a relational research community. Mobilising Eacott's *relational* approach, this paper turns relational scholarship upon itself to argue that the relational research community is organised around two fundamental questions – the explanatory and the empirical. François was not only embedded in, but embodied, this relationality. His approach to scholarship serves as an invitation, an invitation to think with, through and where necessary against relations in the pursuit of offering generative insights. François generated the conditions for many previously disparate researchers to come together and the challenge has now shifted to us – the relational research community – to honour him and continue this research agenda.

Keywords

organising activity, auctor, spatio-temporal conditions, relational, sociology, community, François Dépelteau

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Resumen

François Dépelteau es una figura importante del auge contemporáneo del saber relacional. Su fallecimiento prematuro proyecta una sombra sobre la comunidad de investigación relacional, y, en particular, sobre quien tiene vínculos estrechos con el grupo de investigación de la asociación sociológica canadiense. En este artículo se rinde homenaje a la contribución y al legado de François a través de un análisis relacional de una comunidad de investigación relacional. Con la movilización [eliminada para revisión] del enfoque relacional, el artículo se centra en el saber relacional para argumentar que la comunidad de investigación relacional se organiza alrededor de dos cuestiones fundamentales: la explicativa y la empírica. François no solo estaba dentro de esta relacionalidad, sino que también la personificaba. Su punto de vista del saber resulta en una invitación, una invitación a pensar con, a través de y cuando sea necesario contra las relaciones en la búsqueda de ofrecer conocimientos generativos. François creó las condiciones para que muchos investigadores que no conectaban entre sí se unieran, y ahora el reto recae sobre nosotros, sobre la comunidad de investigación relacional, para homenajearlo y seguir con este programa de investigación.

Palabras clave

organización de la actividad, auctor, condiciones espaciotemporales, relacional, sociología, comunidad, François Dépelteau

Introduction

Early morning, at least it was in Sydney Australia, on the 23 November 2015 I received an email from François Dépelteau. The email served two purposes. First, it was to let me know he had come across my work and found it interesting. Being aware of François' work courtesy of the conceptualising and analysing relational sociology books with Christopher Powell (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013; Powell & Dépelteau, 2013), to have my work acknowledged and validated by him was intellectually pleasing. However, it was not the kind words but the second purpose of the email that was most telling about my interactions with François. He said that my work would be of interest to members of the Relational Sociology Cluster of the Canadian Sociological Association / Société canadienne de sociologie¹, and that I would find the work of members and emerging projects of equal interest. Rather than just seeking to build a critical mass to artificially inflate the scope and scale of the cluster, what was on offer was an invitation, an opportunity to be part of an intellectual community. Consistent with my unfolding relations with him over the following few years, François not only promoted but lived a relational approach. Through his ideas and commitment to relationality, he was constitutive of and emergent from a relational community.

François' untimely passing meant that I never got the opportunity to meet him in person. Instead, my interactions were limited to 150-200 emails between 2015 and 2018. Throughout those emails there is a sharing of ideas, working papers and feedback, and general strategising about building research programmes, both individual and collective. What I found most impressive about François was his commitment to the logic of academic work – argument and refutation. While he never used that language to describe his way of working, he was deeply committed to rigorous and robust scholarly debate. Significantly though, François did not seek to impose a single version of relational scholarship even if he did desire some clarity of the overarching project of relational sociology and what are relations. He wrote about the importance of controversy and distinctions within academic communities and their importance for advancing understanding (Dépelteau, 2018a). By not imposing a single version of relationality, François is embedded in and embodying of a relational community. While evidenced through traditional academic outputs (e.g., edited collections, the handbook, book series, conference sessions), collectives (e.g., the cluster), and connections with individuals, this relational research community can be explained in terms not necessarily associated with thinking of its constitution being made up of things. In other words, we can describe and explain the contribution and legacy of François to this community relationally.

1. See: <http://www.csa-scs.ca/files/webapps/csapress/relational/>

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In early 2018, during my last conversation with François, he challenged me to continue developing my *relational* approach.² In particular, he pushed me to move beyond the theoretical articulation of the work [e.g., Eacott, 2018] to show what it could do with regards to describing and explaining the problems and possibilities of the social world. I have sought to honour this challenge by returning to the Canadian Sociological Association / Société canadienne de sociologie to present ongoing work and sustain connections with cluster colleagues. Continuing to honour this challenge, it seems only fitting to mobilise the *relational* as an analytical resource in this paper. However, I am aware that the very act of crafting an analysis of François (and the relational research community to which I identify) runs the risk of objectifying a real person – one whom I never met in person. What this requires is a constant vigilance to ensure that I am not making François into a substance (an external knowable entity) and therefore violating the fundamental premise of relational scholarship.

Analytical approach

While the legacy of François Dépelteau continues to permeate throughout the relational research community, his final gift to me is in generating an opportunity to make public an analysis mobilising my *relational* approach to demonstrate the possibilities (and problems) of *relational* analysis. Best articulated in 'Beyond Leadership' (Eacott, 2018), the relational as methodology concerns our ontological complicity with the world as it is; problematising common labels; thinking through the embedded and embodied nature of the social to overcome analytical dualism and offer a generative contribution, not merely critique. Bringing the focus of this Special Section on the contribution and legacy of François Dépelteau into conversation with the *relational* approach, the analytical approach of this paper can be expressed as:

- The centrality of 'François Dépelteau' in the relational sociology community makes it difficult to epistemologically break with the ideal form of him;
- Rigour and robust social scientific inquiry calls into question labels of 'relational research community' and/or 'intellectual movement';
- The relational sociology community is at once constitutive of and emergent from the image of relations we hold;

- In turning relational analysis upon itself we can go beyond orthodox analytical dualisms and hyper-differentiation that exist throughout much social thought and analysis; and
- In doing so, there is a generative – not just critical – means to theorise the contribution and legacy of François Dépelteau and the relational research community.

The type of analysis made possible by this *relational* approach is to make public an analysis of the contribution and legacy of François Dépelteau, and arguably an emerging relational research community to which I identify, without uncritically objectifying both. That is, by shifting from a substantialist to relational ontology, we are able to demonstrate constant vigilance against objectifying while still describing and explaining what is unfolding in the social. There is recognition of the at once constitution and emergence of the social world through our relations. With the centrality of François Dépelteau to the contemporary momentum of relational sociology, and this paper being a contribution to a Special Section devoted to his contribution and legacy, the *relational* approach helps to highlight the enduring struggle to break from substantialism and offer a productive contribution that is a viable alternative to describing and explaining unfolding activities without defaulting to an analysis that starts and ends with critique or uncritical advocacy.

In crafting my argument I draw on the three key concepts of the *relational* approach: *organising activity*, *actor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. The very genesis of relational sociology is a break from substantialism. To adhere to this break means it is inappropriate to consider François Dépelteau and/or the relational research community as a static external and knowable entity. Instead, there is a need to focus on how the very idea of François and the relational research community organises the social world or in *relational* terms serves as an *organising activity*. In doing so, there is a move away from, or more specifically a dissolving of, the perceived distance between activities and context. This leaves traditional ideas of actors (those acting upon) or agents (those exercising agency over) and a separate context constrained by substantialism. To overcome this perceived distance between substances we have the concept of *actor*. Meaning 's/he who generates',³ this shifts the focus from the interactions among entities (a variable-based approach to understanding the social world), to one based on relations. Having dissolved the distance between activity and context, or more specifically denied its existence in the first place, we similarly cannot talk

2. As stylistic points, *relational* when referring to the explicit research programme is always italicised. The concepts of *actor*, *organising activity*, and *spatio-temporal conditions* are in lower case, and the latter is always plural. Such specificity may appear as prescriptive, and to some extent is it, however, it is also important for establishing distinctions, maintaining theoretical coherence, and reminding the reader that there is a sophisticated set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions in such terms.

3. Pierpaolo Donati (2015) has a single, in parentheses, reference to the concept 'actor' including the definition of 's/he who generates' (p. 88), but I am unaware of any other publications where he further develops this idea.

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of time and space as separate to activity. To this end, I mobilise *spatio-temporal conditions*. Taken together, the three *relational* concepts have the logic of *auctors* generating *spatio-temporal conditions* through *organising activity*. Embedded and embodying a relational ontology, the logic of the *relational* as a methodology proves a framing that concerns both description and explanation of how our understanding of the contribution and legacy of François Dépelteau and the relational research community is at once constitutive of and emergent from our image of relations.

An embedded and embodied auctor

François completed his doctorate in political science with Carol Levasseur at Laval University (Québec City)⁴, but his interest in relational scholarship was heightened following reading Norbert Elias' (1978[1970]) 'What is sociology?' and Mustafa Emirbayer's (1997) manifesto for a relational sociology (Guy, 2019). Most influential in his ongoing scholarship, at least from my reading, is the work of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (1949). It is this pragmatist influence that leads François in a 2015 paper to raise what he sees as two fundamental questions for the unfolding development of relational scholarship: i) the practical question of why do we need relational sociology?; and ii) the ontological question of what do we study in relational sociology? (Dépelteau, 2015). In addition, this 2015 paper featured in a Special Section of *International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie* that featured Pierpaolo Donati, Nick Crossley, Jan Fuhse, and Riccardo Prandini. Jean-Sébastien Guy (2019) notes that appearing among this group of scholars confirmed François' status within this emerging intellectual movement. The two questions that François asks, what I would label the explanatory (ontological) and the empirical (practical) questions, serve as an *organising activity* for the relational intellectual community and François is embedded in and embodying of these questions.

Despite the contemporary interest, there is a long history to relational scholarship in the social sciences which Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) traces back to at least the preSocratic thinker Heraclitus. Even with this lengthy history, orthodox approaches remain substantialist. This is what makes an analysis of François' contribution so interesting. There is little doubt that François is deeply embedded in the contemporary rise of relational scholarship through the edited collections with Christopher Powell (Dépelteau & Powell, 2013; Powell & Dépelteau, 2013), the establishment of the Relational Sociology Cluster in the Canadian Sociological Association, launching the book series with Palgrave⁵, and notably,

the Handbook of Relational Sociology (Dépelteau, 2018b). As Frédéric Vandenberghe (2018) notes, Dépelteau is 'the man who put RS [relational sociology] on the agenda' (p. 638). The name 'François Dépelteau' has become synonymous with relational sociology, and in particular the Canadian-centric community of scholars – more than just corresponding to a real person, the very idea of François is relational. These relations are emergent from his approach to working, both the product of those activities and the accounts of those who worked with him, and are central to how we understand relational scholarship. In many ways, this is not surprising. As François (2018a) notes, 'relational thinking is much more than a call for studying relations. It is a worldview insisting on our interdependency rather than our independence' (p. 30). The strength of this claim can be evidenced in a series of tributes at the time of his passing,⁶ Peeter Selg notes:

I was always fascinated by how quickly he organized things and how unfeigned his working style was. I dare say that we became friends immediately, spending long hours in the pub and actually discussing – not just presenting – different viewpoints on sociology and wider issues. ... Our debates would sometimes get quite heated, almost on the verge of shouting at each other. But that's how it is supposed to be between equals: you don't condescend; you don't dismiss the argument by quickly finding it 'interesting'; you actually take it seriously and engage in an agonistic debate with it with passion, irony and witty humour.

Jean-Sébastien Guy states something similar, adding that François remained very humble and that:

He was not interested in setting up a school of thought. He was not searching for disciples, but for colleagues or even friends – not people to boss around, but people to cooperate with as equals.

Tracey L. Adams describes François' approach at the Canadian Review of Sociology (where he was editor) as seeking 'to stimulate discussion and debate among sociologists'. These various observations are significant. The idea of François and his approach to both scholarship and being a scholar have become central to the unfolding intellectual movement of relational scholarship. My own work and identity is interwoven in the constitution and emergence of this relational intellectual movement. This vested interest and stake in any potential advancement and/or refutation of François' contribution and legacy and the wider relational movement is important. This is not about injecting myself into the narrative but rather to illuminate the relational – embedded and embodied

4. It is worth noting that Jean-Sébastien Guy also completed his doctoral studies with Carol Levasseur at Laval, although not at the same time.

5. See: <https://www.palgrave.com/us/series/15100>

6. See: <https://www.csa-scs.ca/index.php?p=news.ViewStory&story=118>

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– nature of intellectual work. My introduction to and activities within the relational sociology community are “explicitly tied” to François. In the very act of writing about François and adding to the Special Section I am further embedded and embodying of the relational scholarly community. While there is a long history of social scientific research stressing the embeddedness of the author in analysis, rarely are our complicity and orientations made explicit in our writing. This is more than a comment on the construction of knowledge; rather it speaks to me being at stake in my own argument and the construction of the focus of inquiry. My relations with François without having ever physically met him illuminates the potential of relational analysis while also highlighting how my experiences of François and his curated outputs are correlated with the accounts of others whom I know (e.g., Peeter Selg, Jean-Sébastien Guy) and know of (e.g. Tracey L. Adams).

This highlights the potential of *auctor*. Rather than an outsider looking in, I am embedded and embodying of the argument of this paper. Destabilising the ontological security of François and the relational research community that I am focused on necessitates the shift from a substantialist to a relational ontology. Seeing the world as relations and not things heightens the importance of acknowledging positionality. Relational scholarship only functions insofar as it generates a belief in the value of its work (why we need relational scholarship) and its means of analysis (both what and how we study relation). Positionality matters here; as *auctors* we are at once constitutive of and emergent from the *organising activity* of the relational research community. As Christopher Powell (2013) notes, positionality is a strength and not a weakness of scholarship. He goes so far as to suggest that this positionality as opposed to objectivity should be the standard for validity of social scientific knowledge claims. For me, François is central to my understanding of relationalism, both as an organiser of major events/outputs but also the ideal form of him built up through accounts of his way of working in building momentum for an intellectual movement.

A social epistemology

While there has been debate concerning whether there has been / is a ‘relational turn’ in the social sciences (e.g., Dépelteau, 2018b; Prandini, 2015), identifying such an event or movement is far less important than describing and explaining how working relationally plays out. Not surprisingly, the relational scholarly community is relational. François is central to this, with Frédéric Vandenberghe (2018) stating that without him relational sociology ‘would not

have been so relational, and the international network he weaved together would only have been an academic network and not a friendly society’ (p. 637). The strength of the explanatory and empirical questions as the *organising activity* of relational scholarship is that it does not require commitment to a singular version of what is (or is not) a relational approach. Nor does it centre entirely on any one person. Instead it remains focused on dialogue and debate concerning the explanation and description of the social built on a plurality that lays the foundations of a social epistemology.

This organising around fundamental questions rather than a singular coherent research programme is a challenge for orthodox ways of understanding scholarly movements. In her review of the 2013 Dépelteau and Powell edited collections, Emily Erikson (2015) highlights the apparent lack of an identifiable theory of relations – more than just a commitment to a relational approach – bringing a sense of coherence to a larger project. She also queries the periphery of relationalism in sociology, which is not entirely removed from the coherence argument, and illuminates how Mustafa Emirbayer’s manifesto is based on a coherent relational interpretation of pragmatism. However, while a sense of coherence and a singular framing may hold an appeal for developing large-scale research programmes, it is not the only way to organise research at scale. The *organising activity* of the relational research community that is the focus of this paper⁷ is concerned with dialogue and debate of the explanatory and empirical questions of relationality. This is captured for example in a published discussion in ‘Theory’, the newsletter of the research committee on sociological theory of the International Sociological Association (Dépelteau, Fuhse, et al., 2015) where community members debated fundamental ideas in the spirit of collegiality and engagement with the core issues. As *auctors* working through this *organising activity*, the relational research community does not necessarily require an overarching coherence beyond the commitment to the fundamental questions.

The enduring project of the relational research community is therefore not built on a singular version but the opportunity for ongoing relations. This is how the ideal form of François has become so central to the community. From establishing the research cluster, the edited collections, dialogues, and the handbook, his legacy is sustained courtesy of the traces of his relations throughout the community. By not imposing a single version of relationality, the community is at once constitutive of and emergent from ongoing relations. Not aligning with an orthodox Kuhnian version of paradigmatic thought built on the accumulation of knowledge production and significant ruptures, the genesis of

7. I state this as I am aware that there are other communities, such as the one primarily built around Pierpaolo Donati in Italy (see: <https://www.relationals-tudies.net/>). This is not to say there are not overlaps, as François notes Donati’s attendance at events, but my focus remains on one, not the only relational research community.

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relational thought was the rupture. While new techniques may advance scholarship (e.g., the increasing sophistication of social network analysis), and multiple variants of approaches emerge, the *organising activity* holding the community together is ongoing dialogue – unfolding activity. The relational will always be a little fuzzy and illdefined. There is arguably never going to be a major rupture of the status quo, just an ongoing project. The relational research community is generated through unfolding activity and relating that activity to other unfolding activity (including those labelled substantialist) all the while recognising the embedded and embodied nature of this understanding. Working through relations means that *auctors* (community members) generate the *spatio-temporal conditions* through which the *organising activity* is sustained.⁸ A community built on a social epistemology focused on explanation and description dissolves the artificial partitions erected around traditional fields and replaces them with dialogue.

A social epistemology is a relational space. As noted earlier, François (2018a) insists that a relational worldview concerns interdependency rather than independence. The parallel monologues that are evident in many fields, where researchers can continue throughout their careers by ignoring those with whom they disagree, do not work in relational scholarship as it requires engagement. Significantly, there are no clearly defined boundaries for relational scholarship. While sociology makes some claims to the relational, there is no single field that can lay definitive claim to being the sole proprietor of relationality. Through a focus on relations rather than substances (e.g., academic fields), boundaries between fields are blurred. The relational as an approach to knowledge production and consumption recasts orthodox field dynamics. Although François defaults to identifying sociologists, and this is understandable given his specific work around relational sociology, the larger point about the nature of relational work is important. In the Handbook of Relational Sociology (2018b) he notes ‘we find such a group of sociologists working on a broad and fundamental topic (the study of relations), who come to the discussion with so many influences and orientations’ (p. vi), adding:

This mixture of a general interest for relations and a high diversity of influences is a fertile soil for fundamental, rich and promising discussions, especially when competent specialists are willing to play the game. We have something in common and we have different ideas to bring to the table. We can compare and test various relational ideas thanks to discussions and empirical demonstrations. (p. vi)

A relational research community is held together by relations. To appropriate Pierpaolo Donati (2015), the community does not have

relations but is relations. The focus on explanatory and empirical questions means that it is an inclusive space. *Auctors* generate the community and by not focusing on a particular suite of methods and/or content area, contribute to its ongoing expansion. As the contemporary interest expands, so too do the *spatio-temporal conditions* of the community. With the *organising activity* of the community based on a commitment to relations, diversity of empirical foci generates a richness of contributions while reducing the competition of orthodox fields. These contributions exist within unfolding relations and not in a competition to offer ‘the’ best or dominate explanation of the social world.⁹ It does not mean there is not a desire to advance scholarship, but it is less about winners and losers and more about being in relation. This is challenging to the orthodoxy of individualism and substantialism that dominates much of Western social thought and analysis. However, the relational research community has demonstrated this diversity and richness through the diverse foci of contributions to the book series and across the handbook and edited collection initiated by François.

The constitution and emergence of a relational community

Shifting focus from substances to relations does not negate the value of specific empirical questions. As Dépelteau (2015) argues, relational scholarship is only useful ‘if it can propose a new solution to some fundamental issues in comparison to previous theories’ (p. 47). The value of relational scholarship is however already obvious to its advocates. Its significance comes from being able to offer not iterations of existing positions but genuine alternatives. Mustafa Emirbayer’s (1997) manifesto raises the idea that relational scholarship offers a viable alternative to substantialism for understanding the social world. Rather than seeing the world as a collective of things, relationalism seeks to not only acknowledge but capture the complexity and dynamism of the social as best it can be through relations. What is studied are relations, so whatever empirical example is chosen the relational focus means that research engages with many of the key debates in the social sciences.

In recent papers in the British Journal of Sociology, Nicholas Gane (2020) and Mike Savage (2020) engage in an exchange about the value of analysis, explanation and causality (Gane) and description (Savage). While there is a robust and rigorous argument underway, relational research offers a potential resolution to the problem by not seeing them (explanation and description) as

8. In doing so, the *relational* approach speaks to both the explanatory and empirical (causal) questions.

9. Not to mention that such a position assumes there is an external knowable reality that can be known separate to the individual – a position at odds with a relational ontology.

separate tasks. If contemporary conditions are at once constitutive of and emergent from our image of the social, then description and explanation are embedded in scholarship. The methodologies that mobilise relational theory through methods to describe the social world are at once describing and explaining. For example, it is imperative in this paper that I do not simply describe François and/or his work as this would illuminate little that was not already known. Importantly, it does little to explain why a special section is dedicated to him. However, mobilising relational thinking, and in this specific case the *relational* approach, we can show how the *organising activity* of the explanatory and empirical question generates the *spatio-temporal conditions* of a relational research community through *auctors* engaging in ongoing activity. Rather than a circular logic, it is a means of embedding constitution and emergence in description. In other words, work that analyses, explains, describes and includes causality.

It is difficult to define or name a relational research community without defaulting to a substantialist position. To avoid this, I argue that the relational research community that I am focusing on is constituted by activity – not a person (even if François is the stimulus for the paper) or structural arrangements (such as the research cluster). Shifting from a human- or structural-centric approach to activity integrates *spatio-temporal conditions* in ways that material accounts do not. The work of relational scholarship here is to describe temporary – even if patterned and durable – activities (e.g., conferences, publications, scholarly discourse) and relate those to other unfolding activities without necessarily granting ontological security to ‘the community’. Peeter Selg (2020) argues that constitution and causality is what relational sociologists aspire to in committing to relations in social research. By relating unfolding activity to other unfolding activity without granting ontological status to a community, the *relational* approach meets the requirement of constitution and causality (emergence).

The edited collections, handbook, establishing the research cluster, annual conference sessions and online meetings are the activities that constitute the relational research community, but they are not ‘the community’. The community is the relations. These relations generate ongoing activities – therefore have a reality of their own, not simply derived from something else (e.g., interactions) nor psychic or merely in the minds of the observer. François was, and remains, central to these relations, but he was not alone. The ongoing work is evidence that it is difficult, if not impossible to identify a point of genesis for a community even if significant events can be named. This takes us back to our complicity with relations as it is this commitment to relations that enables a relational research community to

exist. This means that the focal community of this paper is not solely the outcome of François’ efforts, but at the same time, it was not possible without him either. François, both the person and the ideal form, is both embedded and embodied in this community. His name has become synonymous with relationalism.

Currently, the relational sociology cluster has over 130 members, from more than 25 countries. In discussing its activities François (2018b) noted that ‘nothing was really planned. Just one interaction leading to another’ (p. ix). It is this emergence of activity that has become pivotal to the enduring project of the relational research community. François, and others, proposed ideas that he wanted discussed and improved. This serves as an invitation – one to think with, through, and where necessary against relational theorising in the interests of advancing understanding of the social world. This would deliver on the promise of relational research where real discussions would happen and a critical mass of scholars (*auctors*) would reinforce the *organising activity*. Contestation does not disappear, as relationalism is not about consensus, but as François (2018b) argues, the community opens up ‘a space of sociological deliberation where different and rigorously developed relational views are expressed to be discussed, compared and evaluated according to their capacity to improve our understanding of social processes and relations’ (p. xii). The ongoing dialogue and debate, not dependent on any particular members, is generative of *spatio-temporal conditions* and sustains a richness and diversity in the community. Not one built on competition (e.g., winners and losers) but relations.

The handbook, as a major touchstone of the community, serves a larger purpose than simply being an academic output. As François notes, it aims to ‘contribute to setting the agenda for future developments within the discipline’ (Dépelteau, 2018, p. v). The reach of the work, representative and generative of *spatio-temporal conditions*, is impressive – capturing some 32 contributors from 27 different institutions from 13 different nations.¹⁰ The production of the handbook solidifies François’ centrality within the relational research community. As noted previously, he is both embedded and embodied in relationalism, and therefore his name is both constitutive of and emergent from the community. What we study, relations, and how we go about studying them allows us to think about the organising of the community in ways not otherwise possible. Thinking relationally provides a breakthrough for understanding the relational research community and the relations that constitute it. As *auctors* working through the *organising activity* of the community it is possible to avoid hyper-differentiation.

10. Countries represented in the Handbook include Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA. This geographic spread indicates that relational scholarship is not the domain of any particular region or national border.

From hyper-differentiation to community

François drew on Jonathan Turner's (2001) notion of hyper-differentiation and the increasing atomising of scholarly fields as a cautionary tale for the relational research community. The concern being that relational research becomes just another perspective competing for attention. Significantly, the proliferation of increasingly niche areas in the social sciences means that it is more likely that researchers can carve out careers and students generate theses without engaging with alternate explanations. In Jonathan Turner's (2001) words it allows 'scholars and their students to operate without having to justify their importance vis-à-vis other theories' (p. 1). What is distinctive about relational research, and at least the focal community of this paper, is that the *organising activity* constituting and emerging is a social epistemology. Rather than an individual endeavour or seeking to homogenise members at scale, the work of community members as *auctors* requires engagement. This engagement with alternatives (including substantialist accounts) and justifying claims is achieved by relating them to unfolding activities. François consistently demonstrated this by engaging with many colleagues from diverse perspectives.

There is no single right method for the study of relations. François was clear on this. The relational community is a pluralistic social epistemology. It is not however a relativistic space either. The core explanatory and empirical questions generate the *organising activity* that gives a sense of form to the community without imposing a durable structure. Through the ongoing engagement with the *organising activity* of what is and why we need relational scholarship, *auctors* generate *organising activity* in a way which is irreducible to individual *auctors*. While it may be possible to identify various schools of thought or collectives within the broader relational research community such as the New York School (see: Mische, 2011), the critical realists around the work of Pierpaolo Donati, pragmatists building on the work of Dewey and Bentley (where I would locate François), the Manchester School currently led by Nick Crossley, among many others, these communities owe much, if not all, of their distinctive constitution to their relations with alternatives. They exist in relation.

Relationality is the counter narrative to hyper-differentiation. In arguing for the need for relational approaches (François' first question) and explaining what we study when we do (François' second question), scholarship is required to be located within broader dialogue and debate. It cannot simply ignore alternatives, as by articulating the need for and what of relationality it justifies itself against alternatives – responding directly to Jonathan Turner's concern. In constantly justifying its value for understanding the social world, relational research has an embedded safeguard against establishing niches and parallel monologues.

What makes this even more interesting is that in turning relationality on itself, it opens greater possibilities for explanation

and description. For example, while relational scholarship finds its genesis as an alternative to substantialism, the *relational* approach can explain how and why substantialism remains orthodoxy. In what may seem contradictory, the *relational* can be mobilised to explain substantialism and how it remains the hegemonic *organising activity* in social thought and analysis. In contrast, the same cannot be said in reverse. Substantialism cannot explain and/or understand relationalism as it is ontologically incompatible. Yet, for the *relational* approach, it is possible to demonstrate how substantialism is our orthodox way of understanding the social world (*organising activity*), and advanced as *auctors* legitimise and sustain it, expanding its reach and scope (*spatio-temporal conditions*). Being able to locate itself within broader discourses means through attention to the two key questions that François asked concerning why it is needed and what it studies, relational scholarship embodies a constant vigilance against its own importance.

Unfolding intellectual relations

The genesis of relational scholarship is often portrayed as a rupture from substantialism. It is promoted as an alternative that addresses the limitations and constraints of thinking about the world as a constellation of things. However, relational research is more than a critique of substantialism. It offers a generative space for 'productive discussions on fundamental principles and issues' (Dépelteau, 2018b, p. viii). Unlike radical research which seeks to sustain an existence on the periphery of scholarly fields, never achieving orthodox status, relational theorising does not necessarily seek to remain peripheral. Relational research engages with fundamental issues for the social sciences and in the words of François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell (2013), 'analysis is always "conceptual" since it involves recasting the basic terms of our perception, and always "applied" since it invites us to use different modes of perception and orientation in this world' (p. xvi).

More than just critique, relational scholarship offers many of the hallmarks of a 'turn' – an epistemological breakthrough offering a blueprint for the development of a field. However, the strength of the relational research community is also its weakness. As the account presented in this paper has shown, the intellectual movement as the community I have focused on does not have a singular suite of theoretical resources and/or methods. However, what relational research shows is that there is a need to move beyond the idea of seeing the world as static, external knowable things (substances) and embrace the dynamic unfolding of activities. Describing unfolding activity and relating that to other unfolding activity recasts our understanding of causation and, for the reasons outlined by François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell in the previous paragraph, makes a generative contribution. It is not a critique of substantialism, although that is part of it, nor is it a normative appeal for how we should do analysis. Rather, it is

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a generative space that challenges our understanding and role in the ongoing generation of society.

As *auctors*, members of the relational research community are constantly justifying the need for our analysis through our commitment to the *organising activity* of the community – meeting the requirements of François' explanatory and empirical questions and also Jonathan Turner's concern. In other words, the *organising activity* that is at once constitutive of and emergent from the relational research community generates a belief in the value of its work (why we need relational scholarship) and its means of analysis (both what and how we study relations). Through its own expansion, generating *spatio-temporal conditions*, relational research effectively writes itself into history. This does raise a significant issue, one that I believe remained central to François' work – what is the purpose of the relational project?

There is clearly an appetite for relational scholarship evidenced through the proliferation of the usual academic outputs and it is quite possible that many researchers will be able to carve out careers and be successful academics on the basis of those outputs. However, the purpose of relational research must be more than simply producing more research. For example, has the relational research community been persuasive in convincing anyone who was not already advocating for relationality (in any form)? This is an agenda made even more problematic by the appropriation of the descriptor 'relational' being applied to many approaches, including those based on substantialist ideas, further diluting the distinctions with existing orthodoxy.

The necessary resources for meeting this challenge of purpose being beyond mere production of research are found in the *organising activity* of the community. Describing and explaining the social world through relations is not an individual endeavour. It is achieved through relations. Scholarship is more than the singular relations of the observer and observed. Through what Pierpaolo Donati (2020) refers to as the 'relational gaze', research opens up to alternate points of view. Being open to the messiness of the social world, without necessarily seeking to impose a singular version, is distinctive to the relational. Here is the strength and generative nature of the relational research community. Privileging the why we need it and what we study and relating those alternatives illuminates the problems and possibilities of the social world. It does not uncritically accept a stable knowledge base and seek to proselytise. Instead, what it offers is an invitation. An invitation to join a conversation, an enduring conversation explicitly focused on the relations that constitute and emerge from the social world. In the generation of key texts, the handbook, book series, and key forums (e.g., the cluster), François' work is pivotal to the unfolding activity of the relational research community.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with a fundamental challenge for relational scholarship, how an analysis of the contribution and legacy of

François Dépelteau might be crafted relationally. Undertaking such a task requires confronting the explanatory and empirical questions of why we need relationality and what it is that we study when we do. Mobilising the *relational* approach, I have turned relational scholarship upon itself to generate my analysis. This has been no easy task as I am embedded and embodying of the community that I focus on and therefore at stake in the analysis. However, this also highlights the strength of the relational research community. Relationality is a way of seeing (ontological), knowing (epistemological) and being (empirical) in the world. It is not a conceptual framework to be applied but a methodology. It is also not an individual endeavour. The relational research community is constituted by and emergent from relations. François Dépelteau's untimely passing is tragic. Through his scholarship – not just his outputs, but his way of going about being a scholar – he embodied relationalism. In honouring his contribution and legacy I see two major courses of actions: first, we continue to see the work of the relational research community as one of an invitation – an invitation to think with, through and where necessary against relationalism in the interests of advancing our descriptions and explanations of the social world; and second, we maintain a focus on being relevant. The many tributes to François at the time of his passing are demonstrative of his contribution to the contemporary relational project. He has generated the conditions for many previously disparate researchers to come together in new relations. The challenge has now shifted to us, the relational research community, to honour François Dépelteau and continue this research agenda.

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