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# **Relational Public Administration: A synthesis and heuristic classification of relational approaches**

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# **Relational Public Administration: A synthesis and heuristic classification of relational approaches**

## **Introduction**

The main motivation for this paper is that we detect ever-growing interest in the ‘relational’ properties of exchanges between administrative actors along with a proliferation of approaches. In the New Public Governance (NPG), public administration is a more dynamic and fluid activity than ever before, marked by networks and multi-actor dependencies between public sector organizations, private companies, third sector organizations, and citizens (Kickert et al. 1997; Rhodes 1997; Kooiman 2003; Osborne 2006, 2010). The relational quality of public administration is entrenched in today’s complex polities and is central to studies of network governance, partnerships, co-production, contracting, social welfare, citizen participation, and so on. And yet, the field has not yet come to terms with the significance of relationality and its diversity of meanings. In some cases, it is simply used as a descriptive adjective for administrative activities, to indicate the involvement of multiple actors. In other cases, it entails a particular methodological approach, focusing on networks, or a normative approach to rethinking and improving public administration. And at still other times the term is not used at all, when it might well be. In fact, the literature incorporating relationality is so large that we cannot possibly do it justice in one paper.

Our basic proposition is that the relational nature of public administration is significant and its study requires an analytical framework that offers greater conceptual clarity and celebrates diversity in approaches. That is not to say that relationality has not received abundant attention in public administration. There has been a proliferation of studies of the relational properties of street-level bureaucracy (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003),

citizen participation (Roberts 2004), co-production (Bovaird 2007), collaborative governance (Mandell and Keast 2007), and contracting (Walker et al. 2013). Moreover, a multitude of named relational approaches have emerged, including the strategic-relational approach (Jessop 2001), relational power (Arts and Van Tatenhove 2004), relational contracting (Davis 2007), relationship marketing (McLaughlin et al. 2009), the state-centric relational approach (Bell et al. 2010), relational process ontology (Stout 2012b), relational coordination (Rommel and Verhoest 2014) and relational authority (Huisman 2015). Over the past years, therefore, numerous theorists and practitioners have developed relational frameworks and agendas for research and reform (Hoggett 2001; Harmon and McSwite 2011; Cooke and Muir 2012; Muir and Parker 2014; Dobson 2015; Hunter 2015; Stout and Love 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018). These contributions highlight that a framework of relational public administration requires the combination of different perspectives, principles and dimensions, and that the nature of underlying philosophical views is a central concern.

Our main aim is to develop such a framework to better understand the scope and diversity of relational approaches in public administration and assess their potential and limitations. We will explore ways to build a (more) relational public administration gravitating around three core features: 1) a relational ontology that takes networks of interaction, interdependence, and relationships as main unit of analysis; 2) the emergent properties of these interactions and their epistemological implications; and 3) methodological foregrounding of situated, dynamic and unfolding social networks. We source these features from relational sociology (Emirbayer 1997; Crossley 2011; Powell and Dépelteau 2013; Donati and Archer 2015), which arguably has developed the most advanced approach to relationality in the social sciences. Relational sociologists have introduced a relational framework that transcends longstanding conceptual dualisms in social theory by reorienting the discipline towards the analysis of dynamic, emergent interactions in networks.

Drawing on this conceptualization of relationality, we reflect upon relational approaches in public administration and identify new opportunities for empirical research and theory development. Going beyond a mere overview, we develop an original heuristic framework for categorizing relational approaches and comparing their (often implicit) competing and contested interpretations of relationality. This heuristic also reveals shared properties to the idea of relationality which open up new possibilities for cross-disciplinary research, including methodological cross-fertilization between seemingly diverse analytical approaches. Thus, we argue that relational approaches reflect a distinct and important mode of thinking about administrative practice with serious analytical power for unpicking social reality.

In the first section, we review the emergence of relationality in public administration and discuss key clusters of relational approaches, highlighting how varied usages occupy a space of overlapping and contested meanings. The second section scopes the literature on relational sociology to identify and discuss the core features of a relational approach and develop a heuristic framework for mapping and categorizing relational approaches in public administration. In this light, the third section identifies four categories of relational analysis (connected actors, co-creation networks, dynamic systems, interactive performance) and discusses the differences and similarities of several key approaches for each of these. The concluding section highlights key benefits and differences in the uses of relationality in public administration research and calls for further collaboration across sub-disciplines, methodological innovation, and setting a critical agenda for relational change.

### **Relationality in public administration**

When we examine the literature on relational public administration in depth, we can see the wide variety of uses of the concept and the presence of many conflicting meanings. Mostly,

these various conceptions of relationality are neither explicitly derived from any set of assumptions nor defined against other usages. In fact, while relationality is a recent feature in public administration scholarship, it is not at all new. Concern for relationships and interactive processes can be traced back to the classic literature on public policy, which argued that political negotiations and reciprocal adjustment are essential to policy processes. But although we can find it present in the literature, it is often tangential to or embedded within major works, without ever having been articulated clearly in its own right. For example, Lindblom (1959) implicitly included a relational dimension in explaining how policy decision making proceeds by ‘partisan mutual adjustment’ between political actors in democratic systems with distributed power. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984, xxv) showed that implementation is a relational process of ‘complex chains of reciprocal interaction’ in which officially non-political actors can influence the actions and interpretations of service delivery organizations. And a widespread appreciation of relational, interactive processes has been key to rejection of the stages model of the policy process (Barrett and Fudge 1981). Yet, none of these studies considered relationships in and of themselves but framed them as contextualizing features for individual policy actors, i.e., relationalism rather than relationality.

Explicit attention to the relational dimensions of public administration only took a leap with the upsurge of network governance (Rhodes 1997; Pierre & Peters 2000; Kooiman 2003; Osborne 2006, 2010). Even though classic contributions have not labelled their work as ‘relational’<sup>1</sup>, we argue that this large body of work constitutes a loosely coherent cluster of relational public approaches. The key claim of this literature is that public sectors are increasingly plural systems of actors with varying yet inevitable degrees of interdependencies, and engaged in repeated and frequent interactions in networks. Orthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Only Osborne (2006, 2010) explicitly flags up the relational nature of NPG.

Public Administration (OPA) and New Public Management (NPM) fall short in capturing how policy and administrative processes take shape through dynamic, contextual and self-organizing multi-stakeholder networks with high degrees of interaction, negotiation and emergence. Drawing on network theory and neo-institutionalism, NPG arguably provides a better conceptual understanding of ‘the design and evaluation of enduring inter-organizational relationships, where trust, relational capital and relational contracts act as the core governance mechanisms’ (Osborne 2006, 384).

As can we will show later, NPG studies tend to suppose an instrumental-strategic quality to such relationships. A key common denominator is that they are geared to generating indicators and evidence of how relationships and interactions explain both the outcomes and processes of network governance. Often informed by economic perspectives, they show that, for instance, because “*strategic* complexities in PPP make it difficult for actors to foresee all the possible contingencies, *reason* them out, or *calculate* them accurately ... trust can be seen as an *efficient* way to lower *transaction costs* in collaborations” (Warsen et al. 2018, 1168; emphasis added). The goal is to analyze and develop managerial skills and ‘strategic responses to the growing relational complexity of implementing public policy in the plural state’ (McLaughlin et al. 2009, 37). In addition, NPG studies conceptualize networks as unique objects of inquiry, which have a value greater than the sum of their parts because actors co-create this value through their exchanges (McGuire, 2012). As especially evident in studies taking a complexity perspective, significant managerial challenges arise because “the emergent behavior of the network as a whole may differ greatly from that aimed at by any of its constituent actors” (Koliba and Koppenjan 2016, 266; see also Kooiman 2003; Geyer and Cairney 2015).

Nonetheless, relationality has a strongly contested meaning and level of significance across and within NPG sub-fields. Variation can be found at a philosophical level, with many

studies drifting towards either a more holist or more individualist ontological position<sup>2</sup> in which interactions are not the primary units of analysis but, respectively, either network properties (as in complexity studies) or individual actors and organizations. The latter is the case, for instance, in the ‘relational-dynamic perspective’ on how the autonomy of administrative agencies is subject to regulatory coordination by multiple actors (Rommel and Verhoest 2014). Another source of variation is studies’ normative stances towards the distinct qualitative value and impact of relationships; i.e., to how actions are taken in regard to relations with others and factor in their likely responses. Whereas the ‘state-centric relational perspective’ (Bell et al. 2010) takes a strategic approach by emphasizing how states use their relationships with other actors to enhance their governing capacity<sup>3</sup>, studies of ‘interactive governance’ (Torfing et al. 2012) tend to raise critical questions of power and democracy with regards to the state’s relationships with civil society and the importance of enduring and authentic relationships. A crucial issue in this respect is whether studies adopt a substantialist interpretation of institutionalism or a relational framework focused on unpacking dynamic, emergent and contingent performances of relational processes (Gore et al. 2018).

The latter is at the heart of a second cluster of approaches, perhaps less well-known to this journal’s readership; critical-reflexive characterizations of policymaking relationships. Although lacking a paradigmatic umbrella like the NPG, there are three distinct yet highly overlapping approaches with significant potential for synergy: i) relational process ontology, ii) critical social policy, and iii) practice theory.

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<sup>2</sup> We define and discuss these philosophical terms in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> This argument is partly informed by rational choice theory, which offers important insights for the strategic dimension of relational public administration; see also relational sociology (Crossley 2011).



In contrast to approaches such as the relational-dynamic perspective, a firm rejection of the individualism-holism dualism, along with a focus on the emergent properties of network relations, can be found in efforts at establishing a *relational process ontology* for public administration based on the work of Mary Parker Follett (1924; 1934) and other relational thinkers (Stout and Staton 2011; Stout 2012a; Stout 2012b; Stout and Love 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018). Key here is the ontological assumption that the world is made of ‘modes of association’ through which actors and their environment are constantly ‘interweaving’. Governance is not a *product* of interaction between static individuals and structures existing side by side but a *process* of ‘dynamic becoming’ in which all parts ‘co-create’ the ‘situation’ through their relationships and are reflexively shaped by this emergent whole. It is from this worldview that ‘Follettian (or integrative) governance’ is developed into a comprehensive philosophical framework for fostering a ‘relational and dynamic praxis’ (Stout and Love 2016, 3) in a global governance context rife with interdependence, fragmentation and conflict.

The second approach in this cluster of relational frameworks, *critical social policy* offers a long and rich lineage of critical-reflexive relational approaches (Hoggett 2001; Clarke et al. 2015; Dobson 2015; Hunter 2015). “This body of work thinks about how human power and agency are *relationally constitutive of* and *enacted through* institutional space” (Dobson 2015, 695; emphasis in original). It takes umbrage at the relationistic approach of representing welfare actors and institutions as static entities which have autonomous power to make things happen and influence one another. Going beyond a mere critical approach to the failings of the welfare state, more fundamentally, it takes a performative approach focused on the relational positioning of policy actors and the translation of meaning across space and time (Clarke et al. 2015). For instance, psychosocial and feminist theories are used to unpack the emotional dimension of governance practice (Durnová 2013; Hunter 2015). These studies

reveal ‘the ambiguous, often conflictual, and always emotional interaction between various people, objects and ideas’ (Dobson 2015, 698) in an emergent practice; i.e., emotions are not individual properties triggered by the external context, but take shape and meaning as situations materialize in interaction with others.

Similar approaches and arguments have developed in the third member of this cluster, the body of *practice theory* in public policy studies (Wagenaar and Cook 2003; Colebatch 2006; Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Hoppe 2010; Cook and Wagenaar 2012). Practice-based studies concentrate on the practical activities and learned dispositions through which policy actors engage with concrete situations and negotiate wider webs of institutional configurations. Notwithstanding more substantialist interpretations of practice (cf. Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Wagenaar 2012), ‘policy’, ‘state’, and ‘service users’ are not static things that create a context for human agency, but come into being in the course of the everyday situated interactions of policy actors while *doing* things. Advancing a pragmatist relational epistemology, practices are not understood in terms of the (substantive) goals, characteristics or objects *of* relationships but by unpacking how a multiplicity of these are (performatively) experienced, assembled, and contested *through* diverse and unequal relations.

An important goal and challenge would be to bring the various types of relational approaches together. One way in which this might be done is by critically and systematically engaging with the proliferation of publications about relationality in the intermediary world of (mainly UK-based) policy think tanks (Pillinger 2001; Parker and Heapy 2006; Boyle and Harris 2009; Council on Social Action, 2009; Bell and Smerdon 2011; Cooke and Muir 2012; Muir and Parker 2014). A common aspect is their understanding of relationality as a qualitative improvement of public administration. For example, a 2014 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report argues that ‘bureaucracy and markets ... no longer offer convincing paths to public service improvement ... because providers have focused too much

on their performance indicators and not enough on the quality of their relationships with the public' (Muir and Parker 2014, 4). A 'relational state' would create 'more interconnected public service systems ... [with] deep relationships taking the place of shallow transactions' (ibidem, 5) to unlock potential for personal development, solving complex problems, and social innovation.

Nevertheless, there is considerable disagreement amongst its advocates as to its ideal shape (Boyle and Harris 2009; Cooke and Muir 2012). For example, some envision a state that does not deliver services *to* people but coproduces these *with* them, while others argue that the state should confine itself to creating conditions for citizens to relate better to one another in an enhanced civil society, separate from the state. It is also debated whether better, deeper relationships should be the outcome or process of public services and how fundamental should be the breakaway from the neoliberal, transactional paradigm. Thus, relationality 'provides a strong critique of existing approaches to reform, but it requires a stronger agreed understanding and evidence base in order to make a real impact in policy and in mainstream public services' (Boyle and Harris 2009, 3).

To summarize, a great variety of understandings of and approaches to 'relationality' can be found in the public administration literature. However, as yet, there is no overarching framework for classifying these approaches in regard to one another. As a first step in this direction, we have identified definite contours of relational public administration in a broad agreement around three core features: an analytical focus on networks of interactions and relationships; explanation of the emergent properties that characterize their processes and outcomes of co-creation; and methodological foregrounding of social networks and their temporal and performative qualities. We have identified two main clusters of approaches that vary according to their underlying conceptions of relationality; one in which interactions are

subsidiary to either individualist or holist frameworks, and another in which interactions are the main ontological unit.

But the significant variation that came to light within and between these clusters indicates that further understanding is needed of the scope and diversity of relational approaches in order to assess their potential and limitations. Most significantly, given that the source of these variations is found at the conceptual level, we need to examine the theory of relationality itself in order to bring some order to our review. We turn to this task in the next section, looking to a different literature – relational sociology – that has already produced theoretical frameworks for characterizing relationality and which can be put to use in solving our own problem of categorizing relational approaches to public administration.

### **The relational turn in sociology**

The focus on relationality in public administration is part of a larger relational turn in many fields, including sociology (Emirbayer 1997; Crossley 2011), business and management (Kanter 1994), leadership (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012; Crosby and Bryson 2018) community development (Ledwith and Springett 2010), public planning (Healey 2007; Khan et al. 2013), human geography (Massey 1999; Jones 2009), law (Nedelsky 2011) and bioethics (Prainsack 2018). Relationality has been articulated most extensively in sociology, and it is here that we can source the basic tenets of a relational approach to characterize the work already underway in public administration.

A large body of literature on relational sociology covers social theory and methods going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including classic works by Marx, Simmel and Mead, to Bourdieu and Elias. However, a relational account has only relatively recently been specified as a research agenda and analytical orientation in its own right. Emirbayer's (1997) 'Manifesto for relational sociology' aimed to reconstitute the discipline away from the

‘substantialist perspective’ that posits a world of static, isolated and autonomous ‘things’ or substances (be they individuals, social structures or variable factors) with autonomous power to act and interact. A relational approach entails that the primary empirical focus and theoretical explanatory force of sociology is the dynamic and emergent ‘network of social relations and interactions between actors’ (Crossley 2011, 1). Proponents of relational sociology (Archer 1995; Bourdieu 1984; Crossley 2011; Donati 2011; Donati and Archer 2015; Fuhse 2015; Powell and Dépelteau 2013; Prandini 2015) argue this to be an entire approach to social inquiry, distinctively re-envisioning its objects, concepts, and methodologies.

Although there is considerable dispute about the dimensions of relational sociology (Prandini 2015), its original features are outlined well by Crossley (2011). We rely especially, but not solely, on his interpretation because it is not as strongly guided by one specific philosophical agenda and less abstract than other seminal contributors. Crossley also uses a language of networks with obvious appeal to public administration scholars and highlights attractive opportunities for methodological innovation. We pick out three core inter-related features of relational sociology: 1) a relational ontology that overcomes the individualism-holism dichotomy; 2) a consequent theory of emergent properties, with key epistemological implications; and 3) methodologies which foreground social networks and their temporal and performative unfolding. We conclude by explaining how these features inform our heuristic.

First, the most fundamental contribution of relational sociology is its *ontological* assertion that individuals exist only *in relation* to others. Individuals are not isolated actors with fixed properties, but are ‘inter-actors’ or ‘agents-in relation’ (Crossley 2011, 2, 14) which cannot be disentangled from the dynamic network of relations in which they are embedded. The basic unit of analysis is therefore neither individuals nor social systems but

‘structures of interaction, the relations which... emerge from them, and networks of such interactions and relations’ (Crossley 2011, 14).

This relational ontology overcomes the individualism-holism dichotomy that has for so long troubled sociological debate. Holism is rejected because it offers a deterministic account of social reality in which the activities of individuals (parts) are seen as ‘functions’ of a ‘system’ (whole) (Crossley 2011, 8). Individualism is equally unsatisfactory because it explains the whole only in terms of the actions of its distinct parts, as if individuals were somehow immune to influences from the world around them. Crucially, both individualism and holism are criticized for their substantialism. To say, for example, that ‘the demands of the capitalist economy’ caused behavior is to treat the economy untenably as a substantial thing, beyond the ongoing web of interactions and relations through which it is constantly remade. Equally, the claim that the economy results from the satisfaction of the preferences and interests of individual actors rests on the flawed assumption that individuals are self-contained substances with pre-existing features, unaffected by relationships with others and their collective properties (like language, social norms, money).

Accordingly, the second core feature of relational sociology is its theory of *emergent properties*. Social relations cannot be reduced to simple transactions because the emergent properties, meaning, and value of social exchange between two contextually embedded selves (not just individuals as units) are irreducible to individuals and structures, and do not exist independently from the interaction (Crossley 2011, 17-20; Donati and Archer 2015, 13). Individual inter-actors are also partially emergent from social interactions, continuously

forming and reforming what they do and who they are through interactions with others in concrete and historical circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Several *epistemological* implications can now be identified (Emirbayer 1997, 303-307): how can we capture emergent properties and outcomes if we cannot delineate objects and subjects and observe how they do things? How can we attribute causes and effects without fixed, stable entities? And how to assess the value of contextual, temporal and performative knowledge? The epistemological stance of relational sociology is unfortunately not as well-formed and clear-cut as its ontological position (Fuhse 2015, 28-31). Without delving into this debate, we discern three epistemic strategies (Emirbayer 1997, 308-311; Crossley 2011, 28-29; Desmond 2014; Dépelteau 2015): 1) showing that relationality *does* something; i.e., webs of interaction and relational dynamics give shape to individuals, systems and their actions and outcomes; 2) critically analyzing static, substantialist concepts and categories and replacing these with dynamic and processual ones; and 3) intervening in relational practice with concepts and actions that help create more fruitful modes of associated living and problem-solving.

A related, third feature is a primary *methodological* focus on “lived trajectories of iterated interaction” (Crossley 2011, 28). The most popular method in relational sociology is social network analysis (SNA), which approaches networks not as fixed entities but as temporal flows and nodes of communication, relations and transactions. SNA aims to identify what *mechanisms* underlie its complexity and constant change rather than pinpoint individual-level or structural properties. Relational sociology also foregrounds interactions

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<sup>4</sup> This understanding is found in the institutionalism literature, but not often categorized as relational analysis. For example, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) are relational, but this quality was under-appreciated in the later development of sociological institutionalism.

through interpretive analysis of *practice*, i.e. the practical ways in which interactions are enacted and experienced by social actors, their being-in-relation with others, embedded in a situational context. By extensively engaging with relational practice, interpretive studies seek to understand interactive processes of meaning-making and becoming.

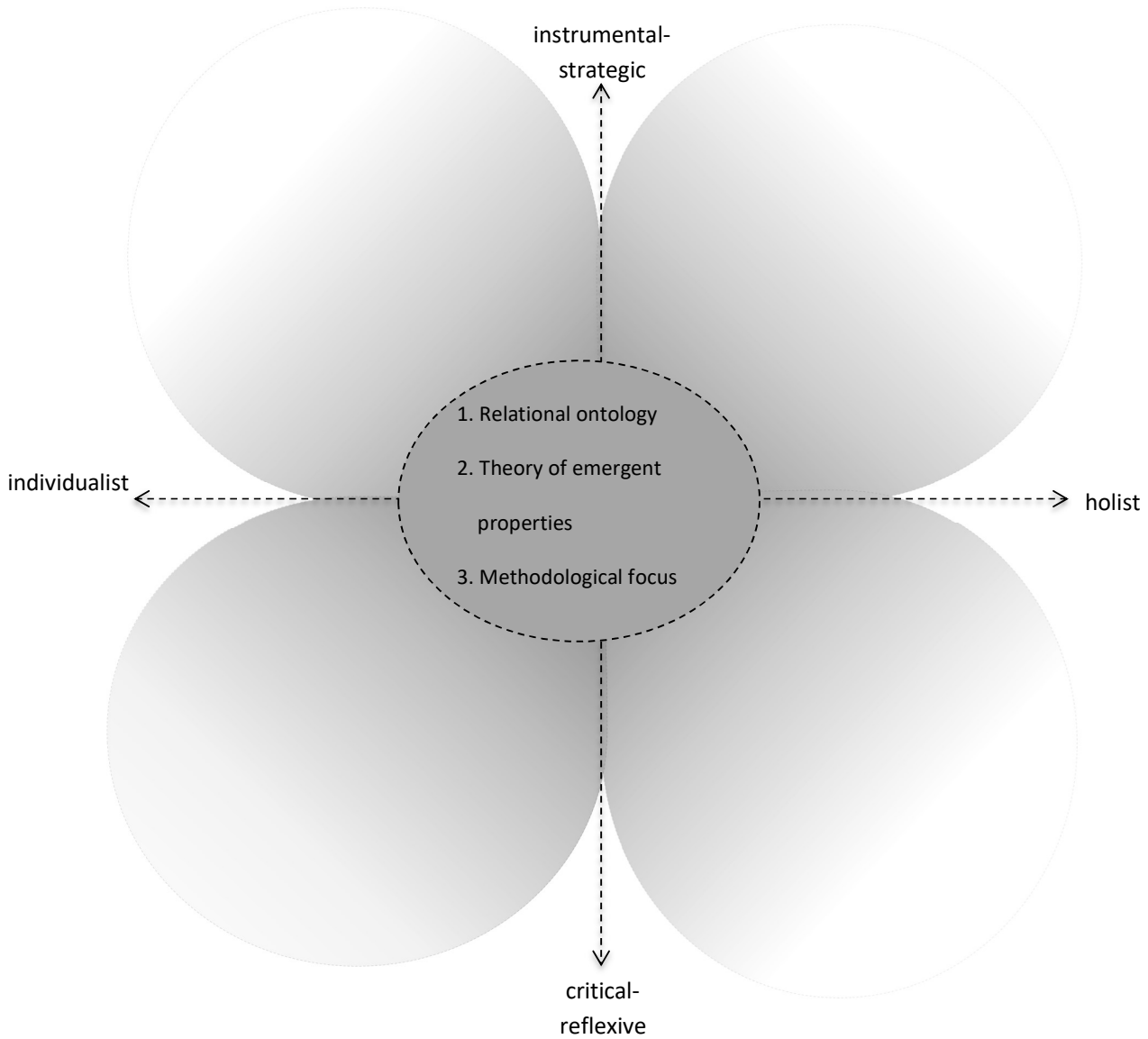
Based on these three core features we have created the heuristic depicted in Figure 1. The heuristic is derived from the relational sociology literature to express the degree of relationality found in any given approach. At its heart is a circle with the three core features of strongly ‘relational’ sociology: a relational ontology, a theory of emergent properties, and a methodological focus on dynamic, evolving and situated interactions. Despite their diversity and disagreements, relational approaches tend to gravitate towards this core. As the vectors radiate outwards, they become more weakly relational as they move towards what Donati and Archer (2015) call ‘relationistic’ approaches: these reduce the value society attains from the ‘we’ emerging from voluntary interactions and postulate relational properties as simply transactional exchanges between individuals in a social context.<sup>5</sup> Relationistic approaches accept that both individuals and systems matter and influence each other, but take a substantialist approach that shifts the focus from interaction to “fixed entities with variable attributes” (Emirbayer 1997, 286; see also Crossley 2011; Prandini 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> Prandini (2015, 6) calls this “interactionism or ‘simplified relationalism’”. But cf. Crossley (2011), who calls his own relational approach ‘relationalism’.



Figure 1: A heuristic for categorizing relational approaches



Relational approaches can be mapped in relation to this core, and each other, along two vectors. The vectors present the main conceptual variation between relational and relationistic approaches. As we noted in the preceding section, we have found similar

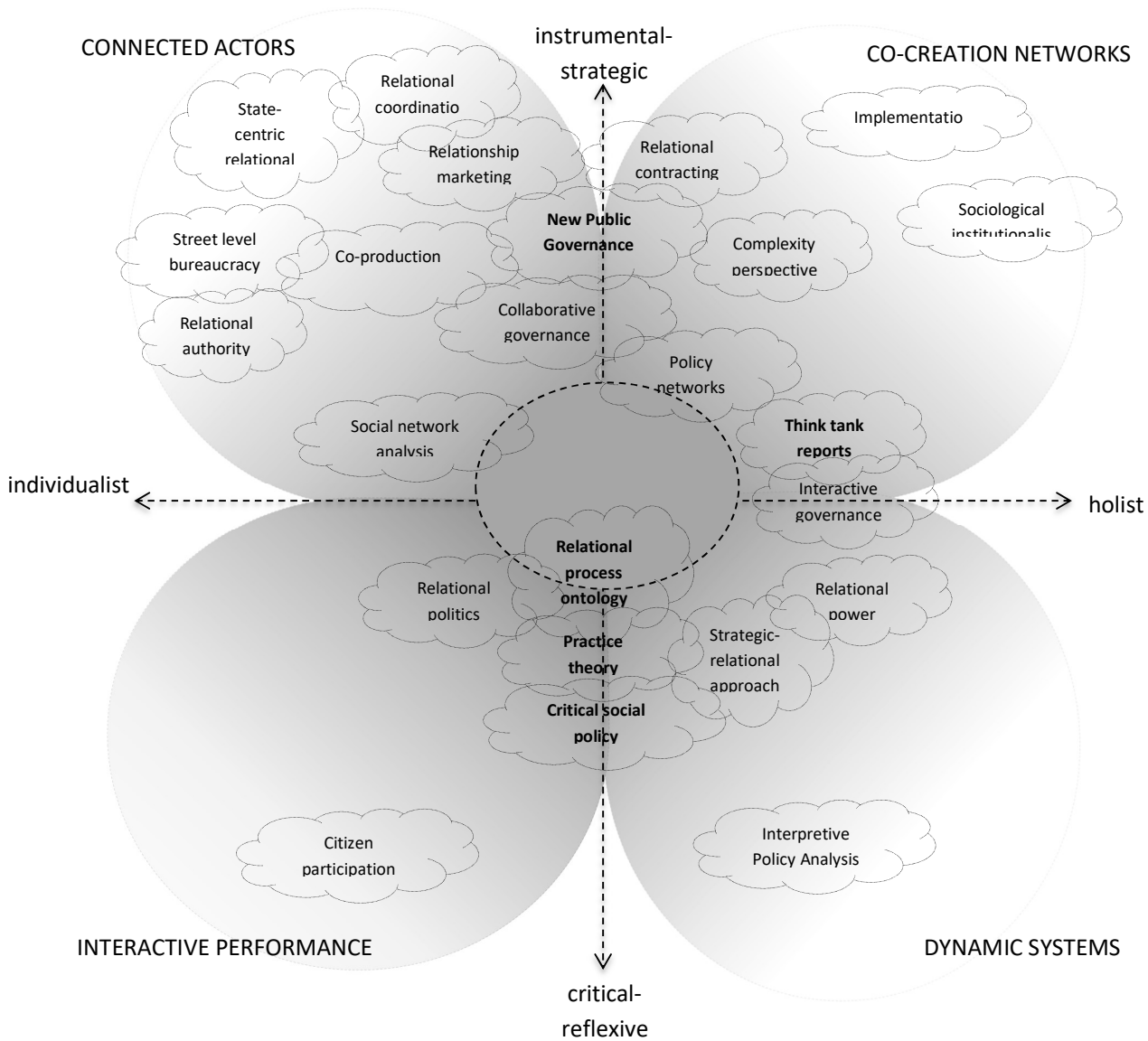
variations in uses of relationality in public administration. The horizontal vector varies along an ontological and methodological focus on individualism or holism. It is derived from the idea that relational approaches may, more or less, make interactions their key focus. For instance, the methodological individualism of rational action theory acknowledges the emergent features of exchanges between individuals, but nevertheless refers back to the individual as the locus of explanation. It is located on the left edges of the heuristic because—even in its ‘satisficing’ or ‘bounded rationality’ guises—it restricts its ontology of the social world to isolated individuals and goal-directed behavior. On the right edge of the vector, we would find an approach to relationality that is subsumed within macro-social forces that direct social relations. By contrast, strongly relational approaches that focus primarily on interactions and inter-actors are located in the center of the vector.

The vertical vector varies along an epistemological orientation towards either an instrumental-strategic or critical-reflexive knowledge of relationality. The core variation is according to conceptions of the place of fact and value in relational social science. The upper end of the vector indicates a rejection of relationality as having a normative value, instead conceiving of it as a simple fact of social interaction, especially of an instrumental-strategic nature, in which actors are motivated by interests when engaging with others. At the lower end of the vector are approaches which suppose that fact and value are intertwined, and therefore that relational social science cannot avoid offering a normative critique of existing social relations and promoting positive relational exchanges as beneficial for individuals and society. Of the three epistemic strategies we discerned earlier in this section, the first (showing that and how relationality shapes social reality) covers the top half and the second (de- and reconstructing relational process) the bottom half, with the third (pragmatic intervention in relational practice) integrating both in the middle. We now turn to our review of relational approaches in public administration and map them on this heuristic.

### **A heuristic classification of relational approaches**

This section returns to relational approaches in public administration, using the heuristic we developed to distinguish them according to the two primary vectors. Figure 2 shows how we situate these approaches *in relation to* one another (along with those already reviewed) in the heuristic framework and categorize them in four types: Connected Actors, Co-creation Networks, Interactive Performance, and Dynamic Systems. Moving clockwise, we will define and discuss each of these according to several key approaches, highlighting differences and similarities within and between them.

**Figure 2: A heuristic categorization of relational public administration**



*Connected Actors*

The ‘connected actors’ type arises from the intersection of the individualist end of the ontological vector and the instrumental-strategic rationality of the vertical vector. Studies of street-level bureaucracy have created early awareness and ongoing appreciation that administrative actors are always connected actors; i.e., they are individuals-in-relation-to-others. Lipsky (1980, xii) famously stated that public policies are ‘actually made in the ...

daily encounters of street-level workers' with their clients, such that their discretionary actions are always *interactions* in relation to citizen-clients, managers, other workers, and contingent situations (Sandfort 2000; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Wagenaar 2004; Durose 2011; Huising 2015; Bruhn and Ekström 2017; Author 2 2018). Especially in a network governance environment, administrative processes of implementing policies emerge from the 'relational dynamics' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 21) of street-level practices. Yet, theorization of these interactions as a primary unit of analysis is largely individualist, restricted to the human experiences of street-level workers rather than what emerges in relational processes (Dobson 2015, 692-694; Author 2 2015, 25-26).

Co-production research extends the idea of street-level bureaucracy to citizens and voluntary and community organizations, who can be actively involved in public service provision and policy formulation (Brandsen et al. 2018; Pestoff et al. 2012; Verschuere et al. 2012). They claim this produces better quality services and more legitimate policies by generating shared responsibility, a binding normative relationship based in a relational process. The variable quality of relationships between users and public services are found to depend on the degree to which needs and expectations are reciprocal, level of involvement of the surrounding networks of actors, presence of integrative structures and relational capital, and level of organizational flexibility (Verschuere et al. 2012 1089-1095). This suggests that relational interactions extend beyond strategic use because their normative value is a key, emergent quality (Bovaird 2007; Durose and Richardson 2016).

Empirical studies of networks form an important methodological contribution to explaining connected actors. Kapucu et al. (2017) explain that SNA in public administration research is increasing, although its methodological sophistication lags behind other fields. This is changing with recent work utilizing more sophisticated network analytical methods, such as Exponential Random Graph Modelling (ERGM), Quadratic Assignment Procedure

(QAP) and Stochastic-Oriented Actor Models (SOAMs) (see Lee et al. 2012), demonstrating a productive shift from descriptive mapping exercises to inferential analysis and theory-testing. This will provide measurable results framed in relational terms, taking relational analysis beyond the normative claims based in deliberative theory. By identifying the degrees of centrality in policy networks, the positive or negative quality of their ties, and the distances between individual actors and key network nodes, SNA will assess the political dynamics of relational exchanges and the normative claims made in the interpretive literature.

Finally, collaborative governance research illustrates how connected actors can also be public managers or organizations as a whole. Whereas one might expect studies of collaborative governance to be fully located in the ‘co-creation network’ quadrant, most of them are characterized by an individualistic tendency, premised on recognition of the significance of relationships and the need to manage them (Kickert et al. 1997; Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Agranoff 2008; Emerson et al 2012). Their point of departure usually is that individual public managers face complex problems which should be addressed through interagency networks. Some degree of coordination is beneficial to the performance of individual organizations and can generate public value. Hence, ‘boundary spanning’ (Williams 2002) and creating ‘collaborative advantage’ (Huxham and Vangen 2005) involves building and sustaining relationships of mutual trust, understanding, commitment and reciprocity. While the strength and shape of relationships varies according to network types, in more collaborative networks ‘the traditional commitment to producing goods and services must give way to a commitment to improved relationships and forming a new whole’ (Mandell and Keast 2007, 593). Some studies thus gravitate to a more holistic and also normative position in which the quality of relational processes and capacities is valuable in and of itself when managing and evaluating interagency networks (Keast et al. 2004; Mandell

and Keast, 2008; Vandenbussche et al. 2017). These latter studies are positioned across the horizontal vector in the co-creation networks category.

### *Co-creation Networks*

On the other side of the individualism-holism vector we can find accounts of co-creation networks, in which the relationship itself is more than the sum of its individual parts while a strategic rationality is still utilized by policy actors. The explicit emphasis on the emergent, relational properties of networks, can be found in studies of relational contracting (Davis 2007; Bertelli and Smith 2010; Walker et al. 2013; Dwyer et al. 2014). Examining the increasing magnitude of contracting as a governance mechanism for delivering public services, a common finding is that ‘organizations are trying to establish an ongoing relationship that can *co-create value* that otherwise could not be created by any of the organizations independently’ (Walker et al. 2013, 589; emphasis added). Building on similar research in business and management (e.g., Ring and Van de Ven 1992; Kanter 1994; Zaheer and Venkatraman 2007), factors such as inter-organizational trust, commitment and continuity are argued to reduce transaction costs and generate competitive advantage. Managers therefore need to recognize the role of interpersonal relationships and develop strategies for using and maintaining them to optimize organizational performance. Conceptually, contracts are not discrete (individualistic, utilitarian) exchanges but imply a continuing supra-individual relationship, characterized by mutual trust and obligations which extend into the wider social setting (Macneil 1985; Dwyer et al. 2014). Nonetheless, in much of this work, the study of these holistic processes is still set within an individualist ontology.

The most established body of work that places priority on relational dynamics in their own right is empirical studies of policy networks. Networks are defined in broad terms as sets of actors or nodes and their relationships, and more specifically as strategic interactions and

alliances of actors around common problems. The literature is extensive, covering theoretical and empirical research, including practices, structures, temporal development and outputs (see e.g., Isett and Provan 2005; Pappas and Wooldridge, 2007; Ingold, 2011; Kapucu and Garavyev, 2012). Conceptually, it is widely recognized that network processes and outcomes dynamically emerge from interactions between participants and network structures (Hay and Richards, 2000). Relationality is not just understood in terms of developing strategic responses to plural, multi-organizational governance settings, but by critically unpicking power as a key dynamic of emergent governance relationships. Building on classic political science theory, UK core executive research shows that power is relational: it is dependent upon interaction rather than command (Smith 1995) and sustains structural power asymmetries in networks (Marsh et al. 2003). This brings us close to relational approaches on the critical-reflexive side of the heuristic, but that relationality is not always operationalized as a key unit of analysis.

### *Dynamic Systems*

Relational approaches on the critical-reflexive side of the heuristic subscribe more fully to a holistic theory of dynamic systems of governance, intersecting with a critical-reflexive approach aimed at uncovering forces of power. Most of these approaches are methodologically driven by interpretive policy analysis (IPA), which evinces key elements of relational thinking. IPA scholars focus on the relational construction of meaning to demonstrate how policy processes and outcomes take shape through discursive, inter-subjective and argumentative interactions (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2011; Fischer et al. 2015). By examining how policy actors enact their beliefs, values, and intentions in relation to each other and to socio-political discourses and power relations, IPA reveals the dynamic nature of policy practice and critically analyses taken-for-



granted normative discourses and administrative categories. However, it is often restricted by a relationistic interpretation of meaning as “atomised, essentialised and determining entities that make things ... move or happen” (Dobson 2015, 688). It has therefore been argued that IPA needs to move away from a substantialist understanding of ‘meaning-making in a social context’ to more dynamic, performative and interventionist approaches (Wagenaar 2007b, 2012; Clarke et al. 2015).

One way of doing so is the strategic-relational approach (SRA), which recasts ‘structure-agency dialectics ... in relational terms’ (Jessop 2016, 55). Building on Poulantzas’ class-based theory of the state, the SRA conceptualizes state power as contingent and evolving struggles of forces seeking to advance their interests. Changing sets of strategic actors interact in relation to conditioning, yet not absolutely constraining, state institutions and wider political, economic and societal forces (Hay and Richards, 2000; Jessop, 2001, 2016). It should be noted that the adjective ‘strategic’ is intended in a reflexive rather than instrumental manner as actors monitoring their relations and anticipating opportunities and conflicts as part of their struggle for power.

From a different angle, frameworks of ‘relational power’ in policy analysis (Arts and Van Tatenhove 2004; Hoffman 2013; Author 2 2013) situate policy actors as mutually oriented towards one another while interacting in wider networks or fields that (dis)enable particular framings, changes and outcomes. In these relational webs of power, symbolic constructions of reality are interactively negotiated through position-taking, framing and rhetoric. A specific problematization of policy issues may be adopted not because of its superior rationality, but because of (micro-level) practical work of questioning or repressing what is normal and problematic within (macro-level) institutional domains via the rhetorical negotiation of the distance between network actors (Author 2 2013; see also Cohen 2008). Similarly, social transitions do not result simply from the authoritative power held by specific

actors, but also from the relational dynamics of meaning-making and position-taking that creatively link novel practices to long term trends (Hoffman 2013).

### *Interactive Performance*

The final, and least populated type of relational approaches place more emphasis on how governance systems are a matter of interactive performance; i.e., they are enacted in-between individual, interdependent inter-actors engaged in sustained yet evolving relational processes. And these approaches assert the normative benefits of inclusive and empowering public participation in such interactions. For instance, studies of citizen participation critically analyze how bringing public professionals and citizen-clients together in participatory settings is an inherently valuable process and generates more desirable outcomes (Author 1 2015, 24-27). Whereas such public encounters are traditionally seen as problematic for democratic implementation, it is argued they create new relationships of mutual understanding, trust and collaboration, and that the stronger such relationships are, the more open will be public professionals and citizens to listening to one another, valuing diverse knowledge and experiences, and jointly developing creative solutions (King and Stivers 1998; Fung and Wright 2003; Roberts 2004; Wagenaar 2007a). In light of extensive questioning of the possibility and value of such authentic participation, studies assess the co-creation of value based on the substantive normative criteria of participatory democracy.

Studies of ‘relational politics’ (Hunter 2015, 4) offer more dynamic and performative accounts of the exercise of power and struggle for agency in democratic systems (Griggs et al. 2014; Hunter 2015; Jessop 2016; Stout and Love 2016). These challenge strong conceptions of state power and neoliberal hegemony based on the relational ontology that the state is not a thing with power in and of itself, but is a bundle of temporally linked relations which are dynamically enacted through everyday practices of interaction, negotiation and

contestation. Their goal is to identify radical democratic alternatives that are or could be enacted within, outside and against hegemonic institutional arrangements. For example, a popular line of inquiry is to translate the philosophical foundations of pragmatism into more participatory, innovative and sustainable responses than hierarchically imposing decisions or sustaining opposition between competing interests (Ansell 2011; Forester 2014; Author 1 2015; Stout and Love 2015a; Shields and Soeters 2015).

### **Discussion and conclusion: the contours of relational public administration**

Relationality has become a central concern in an era of network governance. Interest in the relational dimensions of public administration is widespread and continues to grow.

However, the contours of this agenda have not yet been explicitly formulated nor considered in sufficient depth across the field. Doing so is a significant analytical challenge, because relationality, by its very nature, is not a static analytic category to unpick. Despite the presence of several relational frameworks and research agendas, up to now we lacked an overview of the various approaches and interpretations of relationality, and a framework for assessing their similarities and differences, strengths and limitations, emerging insights and research agendas. In the scholarly literature on public administration and in the practitioner literature we found considerable variety in the meanings and significance attributed to relationality, preventing systematic reflection on key differences and significant opportunities for synergy.

Therefore, we developed a relational framework and heuristic categorization to synthesize existing work on relational public administration as a basis for extending it in new directions. We have done so by drawing on relational sociology. This literature proposes that relationality is not just a descriptor of interactions and inter-dependencies, but an analytical framework in its own right. It is founded on three main features: rejection of the

individualism-holism dichotomy in favor of a relational ontology; a theory of emergent properties from these interactions, with fundamental epistemological implications; and methodological priority for situated, dynamic and evolving network interactions. Our heuristic depiction explores ‘how these ideal-typical approaches, on the one hand, and actual authors, texts, or research traditions, on the other, crisscross one another’ (Emirbayer 1997, 299). A key distinction is made between ‘relationistic’ approaches, which study transactional exchanges between static actors and systems with fixed properties, and relational approaches, which operate from a processual conception of social reality as itself relationally constructed, analyzed and understood. Our heuristic framework shows how relational approaches gravitate around the three core features at its heart, which radiate outwards in decreasing intensity to the edges, where relationistic approaches are positioned. Without presuming to be comprehensive, we have mapped and categorized a great diversity of approaches according to a parsimonious two-vector heuristic: individualist vs. holist ontological and methodological orientation, and instrumental-strategic vs. critical-reflexive epistemological perspective. This heuristic serves as a critical basis for a conversation on consolidating existing knowledge and extending relational public administration.

Given broad agreement about its core features, relationality can serve as a unifying construct that runs across otherwise divided ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives. It incorporates elements of network theory, interpretive policy analysis, sociological institutionalism, and rational choice theory, such that insights from each may be brought to bear upon relational public administration. One obvious opportunity for synergy lies in the cluster of approaches on the critical-reflexive side of the heuristic: relational process ontology, critical social policy, practice theory and associated approaches have strikingly similar foundations and ambitions. More could be done to develop a paradigmatic

umbrella with similar appeal and integrative capacity as the NPG on the instrumental-strategic side.

The major division across the vertical vector, between instrumental-strategic and critical-reflexive approaches, is a daunting epistemological divide. It is the source of considerable and lasting controversy in relational sociology, as well, with critics (see Donati and Archer 2015) arguing that relationistic approaches are normatively and epistemologically compromised. One opportunity for breaching it might be critical and systematic engagement with claims for relationality made by think tanks and practitioners. While such reports provide a range of examples, cases and data, these lack nuance and critical analysis. Links with extant theories and findings from public administration literatures are far from systematic; a critical academic account is due. The interdisciplinary basis of relationality, in practical policy situations, could thus be utilized as a common factor linking otherwise diverse research agendas to produce more comprehensive and potentially transformative analyses. In this respect, there is significant promise in pursuing the epistemic strategy of pragmatic intervention in relational practice, combining evidence of how relational dynamics make things happen with critical analysis of their performative nature in order to enhance governance capacities and outcomes (see e.g. Author 1 2018).

Another key issue is that ‘capturing’ and explaining relationality requires good methodology, distinct from holist and individualist approaches. This means that perspectives at the extremities of the horizontal vector in our heuristic would need to develop a stronger focus on interactions, instead of on individuals or abstract social forces. As Dobson (2015, 687) puts it, ‘relational approaches provide a starting point for the analysis of empirical practice data, by working through the relationship between the individual and the social via an ontological unpicking and revisioning of practitioners’ social worlds’. Relational approaches consider the network context of interaction and the meaning-making processes

which are embedded in and reshape networks. In addition, relationality extends to the analytical process as it dissolves the object-subject dichotomy: ‘meaning is constructed in an open-ended, reciprocal, performative conversation’ (Wagenaar 2007b, 326; 2011) in which researchers and participants confront personal beliefs, theoretical assumptions and interpretations, leading to emergent surprises and complexity. Putting relationality at the heart of methodology thus supports an abductive, empirically-grounded and engaged research agenda (see e.g. Vandebussche et al. 2018), which has the potential to improve practical outcomes—as for example demonstrated in the increasing uptake of co-production and action research (Durose and Richardson 2016; Author 1 et al. 2018).

Another methodological spearhead is the possibility of cross-fertilization between IPA and SNA to develop more generalizable understandings of exchanges of meaning in interactions. The dynamic systems supposed in IPA could benefit significantly from a more robust account of how actors are connected in policy networks. Interpretive researchers could develop more easily quantifiable and visually attractive findings by integrating their work with studies of patterns in network practices. And network studies currently lack qualitative depth and seek mixed methods analyses to extend their findings, including applying these beyond organizational relations to individual relations (Kapucu et al. 2017). Interpretive, qualitative analyses could be overlaid upon social network analyses, adding interpretive depth to the negotiation of network relations and also revealing the discretionary impact upon individuals of relationships and power dynamics in networks.

These are what we believe to be the contours of the study of relational public administration. Coming to terms with relationality can lead the field to further scope out and realize its considerable theoretical and practical promise.

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### **List of Figures**

Figure 1: A heuristic for categorizing relational approaches

Figure 2: A heuristic categorization of public administration

