

What is Relational Thinking?

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a) Definitions and the Relational Lens

'The individual is a fact of existence in so far as he steps into a living relation with other individuals. The aggregate is a fact of existence in so far as it is built up of living units of relation ... I call this sphere, which is established with the existence of man as man but which is conceptually still uncomprehended, the sphere of "between". Though being realised in very different degrees, it is a primal category of human reality. This is where the genuine third alternative must begin.'

Martin Buber, I and Thou, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1937 (first British edition)

Recognising the theoretical importance of relationships is no guarantee that the relational aspects of situations, and the relational consequences of decisions, will be recognised. We filter the data we receive from the world and which we use to make decisions and solve problems: as individuals and as organisations. Studies of how change in organisations and societies happens have highlighted the importance of being able to see problems in new ways – we need a new perspective, new interpretive categories and new predictive models. These make up a 'relational lens' to complement financial and environmental lenses, and to counterbalance the 'self lens' that is characteristic of individualistic cultures. Recognising that we often fail to see relational issues, and developing new tools to aid our perception and analysis, will therefore be essential in developing more effective leadership.

John Ashcroft et al, The Relational Lens, CUP

1. What is Relational Thinking?

- (a) Relational Thinking might be described as a social philosophy. It requires a 'Copernican revolution' in the way that people see the world. Rather than finance being the centre of our thought-universe, with relationships serving the interests of economic growth and finance, relationships are placed at the centre of our thought-universe and economic and financial concerns have to serve that priority.
- (b) At a personal level, Relational Thinking is a way of life. It helps us to understand who we are, the purpose of suffering and the possibilities of eternity. It leads us to redefine health, poverty and pensions. It provides a framework to analyse what is happening within families and communities which enables us to identify better ways forward.
- (c) Relational Thinking is an analytical framework. It provides a means of analysing the reasons for falling levels of social capital and knowing what to do about it, or assessing the strength of an organisation's stakeholder relationships (through use of the 'Relational Proximity' model).
- (d) Relational Thinking is a statement of social purpose. It provides a framework for setting the purpose or goals of organisations, and of sectors of public life, e.g. companies, education, criminal justice system, health sector. It also gives us a fresh way of setting national policy issues, and thinking about the environment and national debt as international and intergenerational relationship issues.

2. In what sense is Relational Thinking a 'Christian' approach to public life?

- (a) Although Christian reflection and biblical teaching have been the genesis of Relational Thinking, and are now its drivers, those of other religious persuasions will find many aspects of Relational Thinking attractive because humanity is made in God's image.
- (b) Christianity is Relational through and through, and is unique among world religions in its emphasis on relationships. Consider the following Relational aspects of Christianity:

- the Trinity makes the understanding of God intrinsically relational
- the story of the Bible, based around a 'covenant' between God and His people, is a Relational narrative
- biblical law as God's design for a Relational society
- the incarnation. God comes to earth to demonstrate the meaning and practice of right relationships and love
- the central event in Christian understanding of world history – the cross – has a Relational purpose (e.g. 2 Cor 5:17-21)
- Christian ethics and lifestyle are expressed in Relational terms (Matt 22:34-40)
- the hallmark of the Christian community (the church) is Relational (Jn 13:35)
- life beyond death is an on-going relationship with God (e.g. Jn 17:3), and with other believers (e.g. Rev 7:9-10)
- Christianity is Relational in its epistemology, theology, soteriology and eschatology.

3. Relational Thinking is informed by a biblical understanding of what constitutes 'right relationships' and how competing Relational claims should be resolved. These challenge contemporary Western norms in a number of ways. Three examples:

- (a) The foundations of Western constitutional thinking are the rights of the individual. However, this results too often in a myopic and self-centred approach by individuals to public life. Relational Thinking suggests that while political rights such as freedom of association remain important, perhaps the foundation of the constitution should be a covenant relationship between significant people groups to live and work together.
- (b) Individualism allows any sexual act as long as the two (or more) participating persons consent. Relational Thinking argues that families and communities matter so that the knock-on effects of a sexual act to third parties, and especially to relatives and friends, ought to be taken into account. These interested parties include future partners, children, parents, other relatives, and work colleagues. The knock-on effects include spiritual, emotional and physical hurts, the wellbeing and life chances of any child resulting from the sexual act, as well as the economic costs incurred by society as a whole. With a Relational worldview, sexual behaviour should contribute to building family and community relationships rather than being primarily a source of individual self-gratification or entertainment.
- (c) Capitalism argues that capital should be deployed on the single criterion of maximising rate of return. A Relational approach argues that to take a return on capital without involvement or responsibility is the sign of an unrelational person who 'reaps where they have not sown' (Matt 25:26, 27). This is the same reason interest is banned in the Old Testament. The principle of '**no investment without involvement, no reward without responsibility, no profit without participation**' suggests that transformation is required not just in the working of financial markets, but in the structure and operation of corporate business.

4. 'Relationism' shares with Personalism the same concerns about individualism and collectivism, but there are several key differences:

- (a) Personalists would argue there is no distinction between personal and public relationships, and hence any attempt to divide friendship and work relationships is artificial. For this reason, Personalism has no views on, for example, economic policy or organisation of the financial system and other areas of public policy, whereas these are major area of concern for Relationism.
- (b) The personalists' view that the persons rather than the relationship between them (see Buber quote) is the key to understanding a relationship is unhelpful as it causes Personalism to tend towards individualism and takes focus away from third party influences and knock-on effects of a relationship on third parties.
- (c) Personalism focuses on what it means to be an authentically human person; Relationism focuses on how social life should be ordered to give maximum benefits to relationships between individuals and across society.

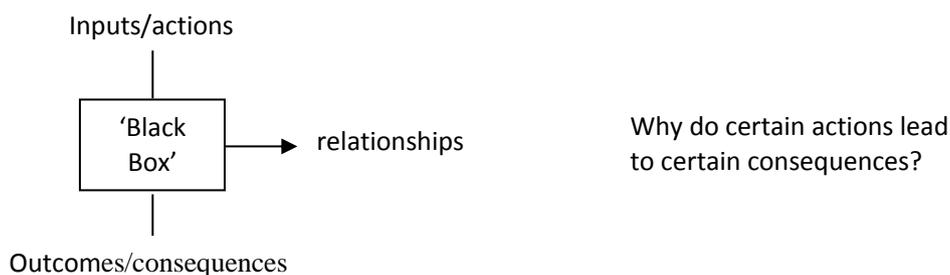
(d) Theologically, Personalism grew primarily out of Roman Catholic theology so goes straight from the Trinity to Christ, whereas Relationism grew out of Reformed theology and so wants to place significance on all Old Testament revelation, including biblical law.

(For a fuller discussion of these points, see 'From Personalism to Relationism: Commonalities and Distinctives' by Graham Cole and Michael Schluter, unpublished paper, Relationships Foundation, January 2004).

b) The Five Dimensional Framework

This was developed through writing the R Factor in order to provide a more nuanced and appropriate language for talking about relationships in public policy and organisational change.

1. The purpose of the Relational Proximity Framework is to unpack the 'black box'



2. The benefits of Relational Proximity in inter-personal, and inter-organisational relationships, a summary

DIMENSION of relational proximity	FEATURE of relationship	EXPERIENCE in relationships	OUTCOME for organisation
<i>Greater...</i>	<i>creates ...</i>	<i>encouraging ...</i>	<i>and producing ...</i>
directness	encounter	Connectedness	effective communication
continuity	storyline	Belonging	momentum in relationship
multiplexity	knowledge	mutual understanding	transparency
parity	fairness	mutual respect	participation
commonality	alignment	shared identity	synergy

Source: Michael Schluter and David Lee: The Relational Manager, Lion Hudson, 2009, p36

3. The five dimensions of Relational Proximity as biblical themes:

3.1 Directness: Communication

- God speaks (Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-4)
- God becomes a human (incarnation) (John 1:14; Matthew 1:23)
- NT writers in direct contact with Jesus (1 John 1:1-3; 2 Peter 1:16-18; cf. Luke 1:1-4)
- The significance of seeing Jesus when he is risen (John 20:10-31)
- We are encouraged to come into his presence (Hebrews 4:14-16)
- Access to God is direct in Christ - not mediated(1 Tim 2:5)
- God makes a covenant to be present with us by his Holy Spirit (John 14:15-18;16:6; Acts 2)

- We will see Christ face to face (1 Cor 13:12; Rev 22:4)

3.2 Continuity: Story

- God is faithful - his love endures for ever (Psalm 136)
- God relates to us by covenant: Noah, Abraham, Sinai, Last Supper
- God has a name - Yahweh; He is to be remembered as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from generation to generation (Exodus 3:14-15)
- Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8; Jas 1:17)
- Jesus is always with us (Matthew 28:20; John 14:18)
- We are to be continually grafted into Jesus (John 15:5-8)
- We will reign forever with Christ in eternity (Rev 22:5)

3.3 Multiplexity: Breadth of Knowledge

- God knows everything about us (Ps 139, Matt 6:25-34)
- We are encouraged to pray about everything (Phil 4:4-8)
- Our ways are not hidden from God (Isaiah 40:27-31)
- Jesus shares our humanity, and so our experiences and suffering (Heb 2:14-18)
- God will bring everything into judgement (Hebrews 4:12-13)
- Paul prays that Ephesian Christians 'may know him (God) better' (Eph 1:17)
- Job had heard of God, and then his eyes saw him (Job 42:5)

3.4 Parity: Equal Status, Fair use of Power and Mutuality/Reciprocity

a. Equal Status/worth

- Equal worth but different roles among members of the Trinity: each concerned for the glory of the other (e.g. Jn 13:31-32, Jn 17:1).
- Humans all made in the image of our Trinitarian God, with special application to gender issues (Gen 1:27)
- Equal worth of all believers (Jas 2:1-7), but obligation to obey leaders within the church (Heb 13:17)
- All sinful – no one righteous (Rom 3:23)

b. Fair use of power

- the king is not to abuse the power he has (e.g. Deut 17:14-17, 1 Sam ch 8)
- Masters are not to abuse their economic power over their slaves (e.g. Eph 6:9)
- Husbands are not to abuse their physical power in their relationship with their wives (1 Peter 3:7)

c. Mutuality and reciprocity in all key relationships E.g.

- Husband/wife (Eph 5:22-25; Col 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7)
- Parent/child (Eph 5:22-25; Col 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7)
- King/citizen: the king to uphold justice (Ps 72; Rom 13:4; the ruled to submit to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1)
- Master/slave (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-4:1)

3.5 Commonality: Shared Purpose, Shared Values, Shared Identity

- The Trinity all shared the goal, and played a part, in the salvation of humankind (e.g. Heb 9:14, 2 Cor 5:18-19)
- Jesus prays for his disciples to have complete unity, involving alignment of purpose, goals and values (e.g. Jn 17:23)
- N.B. The aim is not that God should be brought into alignment with our purpose and goals, but that as Christians we should be brought into alignment with His (Matt 6:10)
- Incarnation - Jesus is made just like his brothers - dies like one of us (see e.g. Hebrews)
- God removes the dividing walls of hostility between Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:14)
- We are one in Christ - no Jew vs Gentile, etc (Gal 3:26)