**The promise of relational modes of inquiry for entrepreneurship**

**Denise Fletcher and Paul Selden**

**University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg**

**denise.fletcher@uni.lu**

Relational forms of analysis have become increasingly widespread and significant in social theory. This is evidenced in the frequent use of terms such as ‘relational thinking’, ‘relational concerns’, ‘relational inquiry’, the ‘relational turn’, or ‘relational frameworks of analysis’ - all of which are terms used in the social sciences to emphasize **the inter-relatedness of individuals, identities, discourses, artifacts, actions, networks, structures and technologies[[1]](#footnote-1)**. All of this is evidence that ‘a broader relational perspective has been simmering for the past three decades’ (Mische’s, 2011, p.1[[2]](#footnote-2)) leading to the emergence of a ‘comprehensive family of analytical strategies[[3]](#footnote-3)’ (Emirbayer, 1997, p.298) for social science research. Given the different foci being addressed in relational research (identities, practices, discourses, objectivities, subjectivities, interactions, structures), however, a key challenge is how to distinguish various lines of inquiry in relation to the defining characteristics of relationality. This task is made more difficult by the fact that, as Mische (2011, p.2) points out, various ‘intellectual hubs’ have germinated relational perspectives (from science and technology; actor network theory; the new mobilities literature and the systemic/ configurations perspectives of Luhmann and Elias). The challenge of distinguishing various lines of relational inquiry is also exacerbated by the fact that various ‘relational’ contributions are using the relational concept to address/solve different kinds of research problems and this is often done without reference to other relational frameworks of analysis.

In this presentation, we review some of the diverse analytical strategies used to advance relational thinking in studies of management, organization and entrepreneurship. As well as reviewing the different research problems that various relational perspectives address, consideration is given to whether it is possible to distinguish some defining characteristics of relational thinking. Furthermore, the presentation examines whether relational thinking can be extended more fully into entrepreneurship inquiry to provide a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding action-contexts than is currently offered by perspectives privileging opportunity development, action-interaction, artificial science or effectuation.

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1. See for example, relational modes of inquiry in management (Hosking, 2006, 2010; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), organization (Bradbury & Lichenstein, 2000; Cooper, 2005; Osterlund and Carlile, 2005; Letiche, 2006; Mutch et al. 2006; Steyaert and Van Looy, 2010) and entrepreneurship (Fletcher, 2006; Steyaert, 2007; Fletcher & Watson, 2006a, 2006b). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mische, A. (2011). ‘Relational sociology, culture and agency’. In J. Scott and P. Carrington, Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis, CA:Sage.

3. Although he uses this term to refer to the analysis of social structure (and social networks). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)