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Comment on Andrew Abbott/1

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Comment on Andrew Abbott/1

by Delia Baldassarri

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At first, I thought I could take an ecumenical stand emphasising the aspects that the mechanism and relational approaches have in common and showing that scholars of the two traditions can profitably work together [i.e. Hedström and Bearman 2008]. In my experience, given that my initial training in sociology followed the “language of variables” tradition (as is probably the case for the majority of this journal’s readership), both the social mechanisms approach *à la* Hedström and Swedberg and the relational approach sketched in Abbott’s article played an important, emancipatory role. Despite all their differences, both approaches are centred on activities, thus moving away from sociological accounts based on the reification of abstract categories, in which “gender,” “class,” or “income” *do* things.

Both approaches, moreover, can contribute towards reducing theoretical fragmentation, an objective that I personally regard as crucial for the future of the discipline. Dismissing predictability – along with the enchantment with statistical significance – as the gold standard for social explanation, they both regard frequency, robustness and regularity as basic criteria for sturdy explanations. The main focus of both approaches is either the search for social mechanisms as “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns” [Elster 1998, 45] and “constellation of entities and activities that are organized such that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome” [Hedström 2005, 25] or, as in the relational tradition, the emergence of “permanent entities” and “social structures” as “constant by-products of repeated action” and “continuous chains of (...) actions that keep turning out the

same way.”¹ In both cases the building blocks of explanation are analytical, formal constructs – Simmelian social forms – that “may help to bring out structural similarities between seemingly disparate processes” [*ibidem*, 28].

Differences, rather than similarities, are nonetheless probably more interesting for our discussion here. From a theoretical point of view, a major difference lies in the fact that in the mechanism approach, consistently with methodological individualism, the building blocks of social explanation are purposive individual actions. In contrast, as Abbott effectively shows, a relational account makes interactions (acts and scenes) primitive, thus questioning “the very notion of an entity capable of action (the notion of agent)” in itself. In this view, individual human action becomes the *explanandum*. The meaning of an action is derived from its temporal and structural relation with other actions; action is “inherently open to redefinition.” Relational accounts thus necessary place an emphasis on the “scene,” situating action in a temporal and contextual perspective that includes the many agents that “participate in the ‘I’ who acts”.

Most scholars adhering to the social mechanism approach adopt a “weak” version of methodological individualism, which is more sensitive to contextual elements and relational dynamics than its “strong” version: explanatory models take into account not only individuals’ interests and beliefs, but also actors’ interdependence, norm orientations, imitation and interpersonal influence. Nonetheless, even in its “weak” version, generative mechanisms are still to be found exclusively at the micro level of motivated individual actors: “There exist no such things as ‘macro-level mechanisms’ (...). [All] social institutions in principle can be explained by only the intended and unintended consequences of individuals’ action” [Hedström and Swedberg 1998, 24]. As a consequence, this approach has been quite successful in explaining “macro-phenomena that are emergent effects of the interdependent but uncoordinated actions of many individuals” [Mayntz 2004, 250]. The same approach has been less effective, however, in accounting for dynamics of identity construction, interest formation, boundary definition and institutional change and, in general, for social processes where macro-level states cannot be considered as given. Some scholars, remaining within the Coleman’s macro-micro-macro explanatory schema, have tried to broaden the category of generative mechanisms, in order to include also relational and institutional aspects. Mayntz, for instance, argued that:

(...) micro-macro mechanisms do not only involve motivated individual action. Relational constellations that may, but need not, be institutionally based are integral parts of the process generating social macro-phenomena. The identification of “mi-

¹ If not specified differently, quotes in the text refer to Abbott’s article.

cro” with the actions of individuals eliminates structural features conceptually from the core of the mechanism directly responsible for a macro-phenomenon, while structural and institutional factors are in fact decisive parts of micro-macro mechanisms [*ibidem*, 250-251].

Abbott’s attempt is qualitatively different. He wants us to set off from acts and scenes to get to (and explain) individuals, their purposes and actions. The payoff is promisingly high: a focus on interaction will allow for an account of the self, instead of assuming the self as a given entity. This will also permit us to “deal with change in social actors” as well as in other social structures, and thus properly assess the boundaries of freedom and self-determination. To do so, we start from “an act, usually a thing that was done, and a scene, usually a set of connections in social time and social space that create the concentric and crosscutting loci for action.”

The challenge is how to get there *empirically*. To what extent can we realistically set individual entities aside and turn acts and scenes into the basic units of analysis? I shall next introduce a number of considerations that are relevant mainly as regards quantitative research.

First, a relational approach requires “rich” data: ideally we would require an exhaustive sample of actor-action units, their temporal and structural relationships to all the other relevant actor-action units and information for each of these units, with respect to both the actor’s attributes, preferences, group affiliations as well as the action’s characteristics and dependence on other actions. Empirically, of course, it is impossible to study all this complexity at once and I suspect that some of the “reductionism” that Abbott imputes to the mechanism approach is inevitably embedded in every research approach.

Much can be done, however, to improve our data collection strategies and analytical techniques in the direction of a relational approach. Following Abbott’s recruitment example, for instance, in order to properly test the hypothesis that the process through which “a student becomes a person who matriculates at the University of Chicago” has to do with the “set of identity choices in his or her immediate present” enabling him/her “to create a functioning self in his(/her) current environment” we need to look at the simultaneous evolution of individual aspirations and preferences and the relational patterns and group affiliations in which high school students are embedded. Far from being impossible, this study would require one to follow the complete population of one or more schools over time [for a model, see Bearman, Moody and Stovel 2004].

Of course, this does not come without a cost. Given budget constraints, there is often a trade-off between a research design aimed at collecting rich contextual data in specific loci of observation (i.e. a school) and the potential for generalisation of a

representative sample. In a relational perspective, one may simply regard the standard *generalisation* – which is based on abstract categories – as uninteresting. The issue of evaluating the robustness of the results, nonetheless, remains.

Finally, a relational approach requires a different way of conceiving experimental design, as well as policy interventions. In fact, the experimental *treatment* or political *intervention* have to be oriented towards the scene, thus modifying the social setting in which individuals operate and construe their identities. Abbott tells us that he applied to Harvard in order to persuade himself to be part of the intellectual élite of his high school (since a large majority of the intellectual élite of his school went to Harvard.) Accordingly, the University of Chicago has to gain a consistent part of the intellectual élite of some schools in order to get the best of these schools' students. This requires an action that is not oriented towards modifying the preferences of atomic individuals on a global scale, but towards changing the local contexts in which identities and preferences are shaped.

In his note to the reader Abbott asserts: "I and others have said often enough what we ought to do. The task is to do it." Asking ourselves *how to do it empirically* is a necessary step in order to practice what we preach.

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Mechanisms and Relations

Abstract: Reacting to the original papers outlining the importance of “social mechanisms,” this paper contrasts two views of the social process, the mechanistic and the relational. In the sources here analyzed, the mechanistic perspective is largely based on methodological individualism and generally presupposes rational, or at least intentional, action. A fundamental assumption of this approach is that the meaning of an action is given in itself. The relational view by contrast holds that the meaning of an action arises only from its relation to other actions, both temporally and structurally. The relational view takes not actors but interaction as primitive and focuses on the scene (context) of action rather than the intentions of actors. The paper investigates these differences by examining the Elsterian mechanisms of “endowment” and “contrast,” both theoretically and through the example of application of students to institutions of higher education in America.

Keywords: relational approach, methodological individualism, actor-action units, social networks, contextual data.

Delia Baldassarri is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Princeton University. Her work focuses on the cognitive, relational and structural bases of political integration and division, addressing topics in collective action, social networks and public opinion. Among her most recent publications, “Dynamics of Political Polarization” in *American Sociological Review* (with Peter Bearman) and “The Integrative Power of Civic Networks” in *American Journal of Sociology* (with Mario Diani).