Beyond Dichotomies: Embracing an Integrated Approach to Social Relationships

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Lucia C. Neco

School of Humanities, University of Western Australia

E-mail: luciacneco@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4965-609X

Abstract

This paper challenges a false dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity in understanding the nature of human social relationships. I argue that social relationships are composed of both subjective and objective components, which are inherently interdependent. They are influenced by biological properties and subject to evolutionary processes, yet they cannot be reduced to them. I use emerging research on kinship as an example that showcases the appeal of this integrated approach. This paper takes a step in the direction of a unified account of sociality, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of human social behavior.

1. Introduction

Relationships are what make social phenomena truly special. Unsurprisingly, social scientists across diverse approaches widely agree on their centrality to social systems. For instance, social anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1940) portrays social relations as foundational to social structures and, consequently, social phenomena. Similarly, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2020, 4) asserts that "the specific capacity of persons to relate to one another is […] a fundamental truth of human existence. Social life is what goes on between them." Therefore, if there is any hope to build a unified account of sociality that is able to describe the fundamental components of social systems—whether involving humans, non-human entities, or a combination thereof, as suggested by the recent work on multispecies interactions—we need a clear concept of social relationships.

Nonetheless, for many social scientists and philosophers, social relationships are essentially mind-dependent, subjective, and restricted to human beings. They are part of a realm that is not relevantly dependent on or constrained by physical or biological properties; they are not part of the "fabric of the world." As a consequence, they cannot be compared to the interactions of "objectively defined individuals" (Ingold [1986] 2016, 206) that are inflexible, programmed, and completely constrained by these properties.

In this paper, I describe (section 2) and challenge (section 3) this false dichotomy that contrasts subjectivity and objectivity, humans and nonhuman entities, and the sciences that study them—namely, the social sciences and natural sciences. I defend the claim that social relationships are constituted by interdependent objective and subjective components.

My approach avoids extreme positions recognizing that while social relationships are facilitated and constrained by biological properties, they cannot be reduced to these properties as they require an active individual, an agent, who is able not only to interact but to track and respond flexibly to their interactions. I finish (section 4) using the emerging research on kinship as an example of this dichotomy and the possibility of overcoming it.

2. A false dichotomy

The concept of social relationships has a long history in the social sciences and was used to describe the realm of human experience long before it was applied to social behavior in animals (Sahlins 1976, 6–7). Within the realm of human sociality, discussions around the ontological status of relationships have often led to a misleading dichotomy between the social and natural sciences, asserting that social relationships are inherently subjective and/or dependent on the human mind (falling outside of the scope of the natural sciences).

In the introduction of her recent ethnographic account of relations, Strathern (2020) claims that there is an active effort in the social sciences to not strictly define the concept of a relationship, even if this concept is fundamental not only to the characterization of social systems but to social sciences in general. By maintaining the generality of the concept, social scientists allow it to be a powerful tool in the field that adds quality to analyses and makes possible comparisons among different cultures:

> The word is an attractor: a term that engages other terms, a concept in a field of concepts, an idea that draws in values and disseminates feelings, a substantive from which adjectives (relational) and abstractions (relationality) can be made exactly as though everyone knew what was meant. (Strathern 2020, 2)

However, the generality of the term does not prevent social scientists and philosophers from discussing the ontological standing of social relationships delineated through specific criteria. Strathern herself is an example. In *Relations: An Anthropological Account* (2020), she argues that the term "relations", used to describe interpersonal connections derives from epistemic relations, which are rooted in our ideas about the world. As a derivative concept, social relations share similar characteristics; they are made of our ideas about the social world.

As already outlined in *The Relation* (1995), Strathern delineates two key properties of relations: they are complex and holographic. Relations are complex, inherently involving entities beyond themselves, be they the persons that are being related, or other relations. More importantly, relations are holographic as they emerge from activities such as classification, analysis, and comparisons, encapsulating information about the connections (of any order or scale) they represent—akin to holograms. And they can only be "produced through the very activity of understanding when that understanding has to be produced from within" (Strathern 1995, 18). So, although the individuals involved in relations are part of the world, relations themselves, as Holbraad and Pederson (2017, 154) assert in their discussion of Strathern's work, are not; instead, "'relations' […] are rather something

that ‘we’ cannot help doing as anthropologists using the English language when conducting our analyses of ‘them’”.

This description of relations does not exclude interpersonal connections with beings other than humans (“unhumans”) and acknowledges their interconnectedness, a point Strathern mentions frequently in her discussions. However, rather surprisingly, she suggests that the human person is the only one who has the skills to enact those relating practices, stating that “the specific capacity of persons to relate to one another is […] a fundamental truth of human existence. Social life is what goes on between them” (2020, 4).

A more extreme view can be found in the social anthropologist Tim Ingold’s constitutive sense of relationships. Ingold is adamant in asserting that the intersubjective nature of human relationships cannot be compared to the interactions of objectively defined individuals such as non-human animals, as these individuals have no capacity for intentional or flexible behavior:

> The origins of sociality […] must be sought in the evolution of consciousness, not in the associational characteristics of organisms such as insects or even corals whose behaviour, as everyone seems to agree, is entirely pre-programmed and reflexive, and is not governed by conscious intent (Ingold [1986] 2016, 207).

There are various ways to interpret the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity. However, according to Ingold’s view, what seems to be important for the study of sociality and social relationships is an *active engagement in social life*, a form of agency that is not purely reflexive and pre-programmed but subjective. According to Ingold, consciousness, plus

representation and intentionality, enable this engagement to happen in humans, and only humans. Further, this active engagement in social life means that relationships are a constitutive part of *social* individuals; part of who they are depends on their social experience. This contrasts with the idea of "objectively defined individuals" (Ingold [1986] 2016, 206), whose interactions are purely reflexive and external, and whose individuality does not rely on the social sphere.

Descriptions of human social relationships like these frequently rely on what Wilson (2016; in press) calls a subjectivist or anti-realist view of relations. This view denies that relations are part of a mind-independent reality. They are only ideas, representations—products of our mental activity, and from there projected into the world. Consequently, social relations are regarded through the same lens, perceived as subjective interpretations that transcend any physical, natural structure—any mind-independent, objective fact.

Wilson contrasts this view of relations as subjective ideas with an alternative position, which he refers to as the 'face-value' or Naïve realist view of relations. In contrast to the subjectivist viewpoint, this perspective asserts that relations are real parts of the world as much as physical substances are. Accordingly, statements concerning relations are objectively true, as these relations can be observed and identified within the real world. As a result, social relations are not only identifiable entities but can also serve as objects of explanation.

As a consequence, the nature of social relationships directly determines their mode of explanation. If relations are considered part of the objective fabric of the world, they can

be described, compared, generalized, and potentially reduced to other entities independently of the individuals involved. These relations can be explored through the lens of the natural sciences. However, if social relationships are not part of the objective fabric of the world, then they cannot be studied in the same way. In this case, we need to rely on the social sciences, which are better equipped to understand—rather than to generalize over or reduce—the subjective nature of social relationships. Strathern (2016) highlights an insightful quote from John Heil that captures what Strathern terms the "objection to the pursuit of mind-independent objectivity," which revolves around the risk of relationships being, in extreme cases, excluded or eliminated from explanations of social phenomena. Heil states: "If you start with language... you will want to find a place for relations in your ontology. If you start with ontology, you will want to explain relations away" (Heil 2009, 319).

This separation between an objective and a subjective social reality and the sciences that can explore each of them is characteristic of hermeneutic approaches in the social sciences, which are openly anti-naturalistic. Within anthropology, these include approaches like interpretationism, symbolic anthropology, and the philosophical movement called “the linguistic turn”. These perspectives advocate shifting the focus from physical and material phenomena to the understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they assign to social actions, including the study of language and discourse. They argue that human social life is considered essentially symbolic, and language is taken as constitutive of historical events and human consciousness. Two prominent examples of approaches in cultural anthropology that follow this paradigm are the new kinship studies

pioneered by David Schneider (1972; 1984) and Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretationist view of the human sciences. As Geertz says,

> The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1973, 5).

Such views align with a long-standing tradition within the social sciences that assumes an inherent divide between the natural and social sciences (Roth 2003). In this tradition, the natural sciences seek to *explain* the natural world by uncovering general and universal laws that dictate its regularities, whereas the goal of the social sciences is to *understand* the meaning of human action by grasping the lived experience that lies beneath it. The social sciences can thereby make sense of the unique world occupied by human actions.

We are then left with a dichotomy concerning the nature of social relations, the different sciences allegedly suited to study them, and the entities that can be social. On the one side, social relations are considered subjective mind-dependent constructs, they are objects of the social sciences alone, and humans are taken to be the only entities that are truly social. On the other side, social relations are considered objective and part of a mind-independent reality, can legitimately be studied by the natural sciences, and characterize animal interactions. In Ingold's words,

> [e]vidently the contrast between the material and the social corresponds to that between the interactive and the constitutive, and to a whole series of derived contrasts: between individuality and personhood, objectivity and subjectivity, co-operation and consciousness, instrument and purpose ([1986] 2016, 208).

This dichotomy is rooted in several misconceptions, including a fictitious division between the two groups of sciences and their methodologies, an argument effectively countered by Paul Roth (2003). Here, I will challenge another flawed separation: the notion that there exists a clear distinction between objective (physical, material) and subjective (mind-dependent) dimensions of social reality. As a consequence, the concept of social relationships overcomes the simplicity of the separation between subjective or objective aspects of relations. While I believe we have strong reasons to claim that this is true not only for humans but also for many other living entities, I will focus on supporting the first part of this claim—concerning humans—in this paper.

3. Human non-reductive objectivity

As we have seen above, assigning human social relationships a special status presupposes a separation between human subjective or mind-dependent social relationships and nonhuman objective or physical interactions. Nonetheless, considering that humans are material, objective entities—they have a physical body responsible for these relationships that is part of the natural fabric of the world—their relationships would then seem to be bizarrely detached from this objectivity.

The challenge here lies in the fact that incorporating objectivity (in this sense) into the study of human social behavior has failed on various occasions. Early efforts to establish sociology and psychology as rigorous sciences led to many attempts at describing human behavior using methods from the natural sciences (Burge 1992). In the 20th century, this approach resulted in behaviorism emerging as a dominant paradigm within the human sciences, followed by the rise of sociobiology later in the same century. These approaches often omitted any discussion of mental states in behavior descriptions, including those concerning humans, tended to be overly deterministic, and adhered to adaptationist frameworks that overprioritize explanations based on fitness. Ultimately, they failed to provide comprehensive explanations for human behavior, exactly because they try to "explain social relationships away."

However, adopting a reductionist view of relationships is not the only option to try to make sense of interactions that are inherently linked to a physical body (or multiple), sometimes constrained but also made possible by it. We can avoid the extremes that have permeated the study of human social behavior, especially in anthropology since the second half of the 20th century (Kuper 2019), and look for approaches that acknowledge the role of both objective factors and subjective experiences in understanding human behavior.

The first step is acknowledging that social relationships are not solely composed of abstract concepts or ideas but necessarily involve actions and agents who enact them. Human intersubjectivity requires individuals who can interact, communicate, and respond to one another—all that requires some form of materiality and objectivity in the world. Consequently, studying social relationships means studying the patterns that emerge from

human social action—patterns of interactions that vary in type, frequency, and timing, and are sensitive to the identities and behavior of the individuals involved (Neco 2023).

This contrasts with Strathern's conception, which appears to separate the actual interactions (connections) individuals perform—with their bodies in the world—from the relationships anthropologists describe. In fact, this materiality distinguishes social relationships, such as kinship, friendship, or work relations, from other types of relationships, such as knowing that unicorns have horns or understanding that the word "bachelor" denotes an unmarried man.

Moreover, reducing social relationships to ideas detached from the world undermines the concept's utility in understanding the very phenomena it addresses. This reduction, rooted in a tradition that separates social from natural sciences methodologically, limits valuable contributions and risks falling into ethnocentrism or pure relativism, as Wilson and Neco (2023) have argued in the context of ethnobiology. Neglecting insights from other sciences overlooks the natural dimensions of human relationships, which are as integral to social relations and social persons as their subjective dimensions.

This realization is beautifully exposed in the preface of the 2016 edition of *Evolution and Social Life*, where Tim Ingold describes a change in his understanding of ontogenesis—"the growth and becoming of persons":

> Once we acknowledge, however, that to grow a person is to produce not an unworldly consciousness but a whole being in a world, then it is necessary to admit, also, that in this growth also lies the production of everything that enables the

> person to carry on their life: their skills of perception and action, their language, their dwellings and tools, their institutions, and so forth. […] by the same token, any division between the respective domains of subjectivity and objectivity becomes untenable (Ingold [1986] 2016, xv).

The notion of a person as a "whole being in the world" supports the idea that the social relationships that they are part of also transcend the separation between subjectivity and objectivity. So, the second step in building a non-reductive approach to social relationships involves recognizing their mind-dependency; but in a way that cannot disregard the physical body and the environment that makes them possible.

What is missing from Ingold's proposal, which still hinges on the special status of human social relationships, is a commitment to the claim that agency is embodied (and extended). Embodied cognition emphasizes the close relationship between the physical body, the environment, and cognitive processes (Shapiro and Spaulding 2021) and, because of that, it avoids the extremes we have been discussing. Unlike traditional cognitive science, which relies heavily on computationalism—a perspective also mentioned in arguments against using natural sciences to explain human behavior (e.g., Taylor 1985)—, embodied cognition posits that individuals' bodies, and their properties, along with external elements of the environment, not only causally contribute to cognitive processes but also play a constitutive role in cognition itself.

This framework emphasizes how the physical body shapes individuals' perception and understanding of the world around them. But beyond this, it incorporates external

resources—reliably accessed or controlled—as part of individuals' cognitive systems; their minds. And that includes not only other interacting individuals (e.g. in collective memory, Sutton et al. 2010) but also cultural elements like symbols and physical tools (Menary and Gillett 2022). So, since social relationships are mind-dependent and our minds are constituted by these elements, their subjective component is an equal part of the natural fabric of the world.

However, this does not mean that they do not have the high-level features that we ascribe to them, e.g., that they feel a certain way, have a certain meaning, etc. This interdependence does not reduce relationships to lifeless, inflexible interactions—as is frequently argued in the case of social animals. On the contrary, it retains a role for psychology and representations in the study of dynamic relationships while recognizing their essential materiality.

To better understand these representations, and the relationships associated with them, an interdisciplinary approach is crucial. Such an approach should encompass human experience, flexibility, and creativity (subjective component) while also recognizing the effect of our modes of perception and action (objective component) in allowing this subjectivity to take place as well as the ultimate and proximate causal mechanisms that they partake in. Such an approach not only bridges the subjective and objective dimensions of social relationships but also overcomes the divide between the natural and the social sciences in understanding human social behavior.

Developing this idea further, and focusing specifically on the study of folkbiology, the anthropologist Scott Atran and the psychologist Douglas Medin (2008) claim that anthropology and cognitive psychology need each other to understand human action in the world (which includes their relationships). They describe, for example, how cognitive psychology can be important in the development of models and theories that foster inferences about human cognition and how anthropology contributes by offering methodological tools that highlight cultural differences and provide the right connection between human concepts and their referents. Atran and Medin (2008) conceive of human relations as part of the natural world but do not reduce them to inclinations or chemical responses. Instead, they bridge seemingly conflicting approaches and thereby gain an improved understanding of the social phenomenon.

As we can see, an interdisciplinary approach that acknowledges the interdependence of subjective and objective components shows that the objective aspects of human beings, such as their chemical-physical processes and perception modes, have a non-trivial influence on social relationships. However, it is not because they can be studied and described by naturalistic methodologies that they always have the front seat in the explanations of social phenomena. Social relationships that are heavily shaped by institutions like work relations may be more readily explained through highly mind-dependent conventions. However, they do not encompass the entirety of human social relationships.

A more comprehensive view of social relationships should focus on the actual connections individuals forge within social contexts, along with the processes that affect their

development and maintenance. Defining social relationships by the different patterns of interactions that take place among cognitive individuals within a social system over time also highlights their dynamicity. Just as social systems develop and change, so too do the relationships that underlie their structures. This temporal aspect guarantees that relationships cannot be reduced to isolated interactions, physical processes, or emotions, even though these elements are integral to them. The separation between objective and subjective components is, in fact, artificial.

4. An example: Kinship relations

A prime example of the dichotomy discussed here and the benefits of applying an interdisciplinary approach in enhancing our understanding of social relationships lies in the study of kinship relations. Throughout much of twentieth-century anthropology, kinship occupied a prominent position in ethnographic studies and was central to the methodological debates I previously mentioned. A pivotal challenge to the conventional notion of kinship—thought to be distinctly biological, and reproductive—came from the anthropologist David Schneider, particularly in his work *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (1984). Schneider rejected the genealogical perspective of kinship, questioning the centrality of procreation in defining kinship ties. His contributions gave rise to what is now known as "new kinship studies," a paradigm in cultural anthropology that highlights the interpretive or performative aspects of kinship relations and the role of conscious human

effort while diminishing the significance of biological properties in generating these bonds (e.g., Bamford 2019).

Many authors have argued that this dichotomous characterization of kinship fails to capture its development and maintenance in human societies effectively and overlooks decades of literature (e.g., Read and El Guindi 2022), including nonreductive naturalistic approaches that bridge the natural and social sciences. For instance, recent scholarship on the evolution of kinship such as Bernard Chapais' *Primeval Kinship* (2008) and the discussion of bioessentialism in kinship by Robert Wilson (2016; 2022; in press), acknowledge a biological component to kin relations—whether in their origins or development—without disregarding historical and cultural factors that maintain their diversity.

Chapais (2008) claims that the study of behavioral regularities in our closest primate relatives can inform the study of human kinship. The structure of reciprocal exogamy (which includes institutionalization and normativity) that we see in human societies remains unique, but it does not exist in "an evolutionary vacuum" (Chapais 2008, 13). It draws from features already present in nonhuman societies, such as mechanisms of incest avoidance and kin recognition.

Wilson (2016; 2022) draws on similar evidence from primate evolution but goes further and integrates recent innovations in the philosophy of science, cognitive psychology, and cognitive science in understanding kinship. Wilson argues that kinship has an undeniable cultural aspect. However, we cannot understand this aspect without considering its

biological dimension, which can "play more or less a role, depending on the context, in explaining and understanding it" (Wilson 2016, 344).

The biological dimension of kinship includes the role of cognitive processes in binding people together and the reliance of those processes on progenerative facts that are available for recognition in every human culture. Progenerative facts include, for example, the fact that "females are pregnant prior to giving birth" and the fact that "the newly-born and young are not self-sufficient and are relatively vulnerable and so require nurturance and protection for an extended period of time" (Wilson 2022, 10):

> Our sensitivity to such progenerative facts establishes the intra and intergenerational filiation that distinguishes kinship, ultimately endowing us with basic concepts of (respectively) pregnancy, care-provision, development, generations, and siblings. It does so in concert with the cognitive capacity to recognize both the relevant individual kin and the corresponding progenerative relations between them (Wilson 2022, 10).

The works of Chapais and Wilson are only two very recent examples of scholarship that show great potential for overcoming the false subjectivity/objectivity social/natural sciences dichotomy that seems to overshadow the study of human social relationships (and kinship, especially). They highlight a third way to understand relationships, especially social relationships, that aligns with the discussions we have explored in this paper. This view does not reduce relationships to more fundamental entities and instead asserts that

they are an integral part of the natural reality. Instead, it recognizes relations as explanatorily legitimate sources in our efforts to understand social systems.

The approach I am advocating also broadens the scope of studies on social relationships. While kinship has traditionally been the central focus of anthropological research, other types of relationships, such as friendships, also play a crucial role in human societies yet have often been overlooked or seen as peripheral (Beer and Gardner 2015). By identifying the unique components of relationships within an interdisciplinary framework—such as the generational ties that distinguish kinship from other forms of relations—we can gain more productive insights into their roles across different cultural contexts. This includes enhancing our ability to identify and explain empirical differences in these relations and the interactions between them.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have emphasized the significance of social relationships in understanding human social behavior, asserting that they need to feature in any framework aiming to comprehend the complexity of social phenomena. However, a false dichotomy permeates discussions in the social sciences, suggesting that an integrated approach to human social behavior is unproductive. This dichotomy portrays social relationships as subjective and uniquely human, targeted by the social sciences, in contrast to interactions among objectively defined nonhuman entities that can be studied by the natural sciences. I criticized this dichotomy, arguing that there is no clear separation between the objective

and subjective dimensions of human existence. Consequently, social relationships are better viewed as composed of objective and subjective components, which are inherently interdependent. And they are better identified by patterns of interactions that vary in type, frequency, and timing, and are sensitive to the identities and behavior of the individuals involved. Embracing an embodied cognition perspective, I acknowledge the close relationship between the physical body, the environment, and cognitive processes in shaping social relationships while avoiding reductionist views that overlook their richness and dynamism. I use the emerging research on kinship as an example that showcases the appeal of this integrated approach. Building upon this understanding, a subsequent question arises: Can we extend this integrated concept of social relationships to other living entities? By embracing an interdisciplinary and nonreductive approach, we pave the way for a unified account of sociality that has the potential to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of human social behavior.

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