



Gratitude and the Relational Theory of Society

Emiliana Mangone¹ 

Received: 11 July 2018 / Revised: 4 September 2018 / Accepted: 10 September 2018 /

Published online: 21 September 2018

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2018

Abstract

The social sciences and the humanities—especially sociology and psychology—have adopted a “negativistic” approach since their inception, i.e., a modus operandi that tends to bring out only negative or pathological phenomena without ever highlighting positive and healthy ones. Moreover, they were characteristically oriented towards societal contrasts often ignoring the meaningful interactions between all the elements that constitute and give life to socio-cultural phenomena (personality, society, and culture). Researchers usually refer to conditions that affect the individual, but further analysis shows that in everyday life these conditions are in fact closely related to social and cultural aspects. The latter feature has often been neglected in studies on positive aspects of daily life such as gratitude, altruism, solidarity, cooperation, etc., since these are not considered a problematic (negative) aspect of society but rather a regular aspect of human and social events. From here, starting from Archer’s morphogenetic cycle and reaching out to Luccarelli’s *The Asymmetry in Gratitude*, we will examine through the perspective of the relational theory of society gratitude as a symbolic-cultural reality and therefore a key to read daily life.

Keywords Relational theory · Morphogenetic cycle · Gratitude · Relational knowledge · Positive action

Gratitude as Symbolic Cultural Reality

The social sciences and the humanities—especially sociology and psychology—have adopted a “negativistic” approach since their inception, i.e., a modus operandi that tends to bring out only negative or pathological phenomena without ever highlighting positive and healthy ones (Sorokin 1966). Moreover, they were characteristically oriented towards societal contrasts—normal/pathological, north/south, friend/enemy, center/periphery, rich/poor, selfishness/

✉ Emiliana Mangone
emangone@unisa.it

¹ Department of Human, Philosophic and Education Sciences (DISUFF), University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, 84084 Fisciano, SA, Italy

altruism, and so on and so forth—often ignoring the meaningful interactions between all the elements that constitute and give life to socio-cultural phenomena (personality, society, and culture). Researchers usually refer to conditions that affect the individual, but further analysis shows that in everyday life, these conditions are in fact closely related to social and cultural aspects. The latter feature has often been neglected in studies on positive aspects of daily life such as gratitude, altruism, solidarity, cooperation, etc., since these are not considered a problematic (negative) aspect of society but rather a regular aspect of human and social events.

It is a common idea that globalization did not promote the *humanitarian ethos* aimed at that communicative interaction tending towards an “understanding” between two subjects involved in an action (relationship) that refer to each other and act taking into account their mutual intentions, motivations, and expectations. It follows that the attitudes and actions of individuals related to the expression of some form of emotion are influenced on the one hand, by culture, and on the other, by the indissoluble link with everyday life and context. “In doing so, we pay attention to the ‘person’ not only as an entity performing an action, but as a ‘subject’ and active part of social processes. Consequently, it is possible to transition from an approach to social phenomena aimed at searching for a cause (causality) to one focusing on the overall interaction between individual, social, and environmental variables (relationality)” (Mangone 2017, p. 265). This passage sketches the reciprocal relationship between lifeworld and social system and represents the pivotal moment in which attention is paid not only to the individual as the recipient of decisions, but to the individual as the “subject” and active part in relational processes (Donati and Archer 2015). We thus shift from an approach that tends to reduce the actions of individuals only to mere exchange (*do ut des*) to an approach that pays attention to the overall interactions between the exchange and all other relevant social and cultural variables.

In such a complex scenario as contemporary society, in which relations (at different levels) have a paramount role in social phenomena and therefore in the processes of *social construal* (Douglas 1997), where the latter is defined as the way in which individuals perceive, understand, and interpret the surrounding world through the selection of certain social facts—to which particular emphasis is given—and the exclusion of others. This condition draws a complex scenario, in which the world and the people in it constitute an endless web of relationships based on events that intersect, overlap, and influence each other—and that can also often be discordant (Festinger 1962). The everyday sequence of events, through definition and elaboration, allows for the reproduction of “meaning” through “symbolic mediation,” which favors the interpretation and, more importantly, the very construction of reality. Symbolic and cultural systems are therefore a source of inexhaustible wealth for the acquisition and construction of knowledge that allows us to construct a space for interpreting the meanings of reality that we experience with others. The dynamics connected to communication processes are crucial because through them, knowledge is transformed into models of reality, understood as symbolic mediation between the intimate aspects of private life and aspects of the public life of human beings in their daily lives. Social reality springs not only from the social meanings attributed to a certain phenomenon (cultural object) but also from the products of the subjective world of individuals.

From here, starting from Archer’s morphogenetic cycle (1995) and reaching out to Luccarelli’s *The Asymmetry in Gratitude* (2018), we will examine through the perspective of the relational theory of society (Donati 2011a) gratitude as a symbolic cultural reality and therefore a key to read daily life. We chose to commence a reflection starting from morphogenesis cycle because it is justified by the fact that it was attempted to overcome some

dichotomies existing through the history of sociology and further developed in relational sociology (individualism/holism, structure/agency, micro/macro). Archer affirmed the simultaneous presence of several factors and levels in the process of defining the aims and characteristics of the social systems that implement them: she argues that “the crucial linkage to make and to maintain is not between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, conceived of as the small and impersonal in contrast to the large and impersonal, but rather between the ‘social’ and the ‘systemic’. In other words, systemic proprieties are always the (‘micro’) *context* confronted by (‘macro’) social interaction, whilst social activities between people (‘micro’) represent the *environment* in which the (‘macro’) features of systems are either reproduced or transformed [...] Two implications follow from this. Firstly, that the central theoretical task is one of linking two *qualitatively* different aspects of society (the ‘social’ and the ‘systemic’, or if preferred ‘action’ and its ‘environment’) rather than two quantitatively *different* features, the big and the small or macro and micro. [...] The second implication is that if the misleading preoccupation with *size* is abandoned, then the linkages which need forging to account for the vexatious fact of society are those between the ‘people’ and the ‘parts’ of social reality” (Archer 1995, pp. 11–12). In this way, the relationship between individual and society assumes a multidimensional connotation, marked by an analysis falling under the morphogenetic cycle (social conditioning, socio-cultural interaction, and structural and reproduction elaboration) where *macro* stems from *micro*, and conditions it by retro-acting on it. This shows that the results of a process can lead to expected or unexpected outcomes, and that the interaction processes, going in several directions, similarly produce emerging effects in several directions. Applying this multidimensional approach to the symbolic cultural reality of gratitude means observing both institutions and people, but above all the relations between them, overcoming the traditional views that separated these levels as well as the various elements involved in the processes of *social construal*.

Can we Consider Gratitude as a “Power Game”?

Gratitude studies should therefore combine systems (objective dimension) and individuals (subjective dimension). In other words, they should be able to combine objective aspects with subjective ones, taking into account all the dimensions, levels, and factors involved in the expression of gratitude. Therefore, its analysis should consider its characteristics: multidimensionality and multifactoriality. In this way, we pay more attention to the spaces of social relations within the processes that develop in society. Those regarding gratitude are included in this trend, since all social phenomena, attitudes, behaviors, and actions concerning them are built in an area that has its own places, times, and symbols, which are fundamental for the cognitive processes of self-active signification implemented by individuals for the construction of social reality in their daily life experience.

For this reason, we here propose the relational perspective as the key to interpreting the concept of gratitude (Donati 2011a): social relationships are not a constraint for individuals, rather they are what favors the subject’s self-determination on the basis of reflexivity (Donati 2011b). Taking social relations into account allows us to consider both lifeworld and social system. The relation should be intended as an emergent phenomenon (generative semantics) of a mutual act (*rela[c]tion*) with an autonomous connotation that goes beyond those who implement it, but that at the same time is due to referential

semantics (*refero*). It is embodied within a framework of symbolic meanings (culture) as well as the structural semantics (*religo*), given that it is at the same time both resource and constraint for the social system.

In fact, the ground on which a person concretely manifests “who s/he is” and “who are the others” is the relationship with others. In this regard, Dubar (2003) distinguishes a biographical identity process (identity for itself, “who the person would like to be”—belonging) and a relational one (identity for others, “who the individual is for others”—attribution). This dualism must flow into an identity negotiation (complex communicative process) between those who request identity and those who offer identity. Hence, we disagree with Luccarelli (2018) when he states that “we can consider gratitude as an asymmetric sentiment that emerges in power relationship” (p. 10) because the dynamic in the relationship between those who express gratitude and those who receive it no longer rests on the conviction that the relationship is based on the exercise of power and knowledge by those who receive gratitude, but that it can produce actions benefiting both parties.

However, this requires individuals to re-compose their identity in a context with its own places, times, and symbols (social relationship), which are fundamental in the processes of self-recognition and hetero-recognition. In this way, the spaces of relationships become an important factor for the recognition of identity through and within the relational investments of each individual (within a relationship that is based on gratitude or on its expression). This process involves an “objective transaction” between the identities attributed (communicational identity) and the identities assumed, which can be conflictual between the individuals who have a desire for identification and recognition, and the institutions that offer statuses, categories, and different forms of recognition. It brings into play key *identification spaces*—places where “Goffman’s main status” (1981) is recognized—within which individuals consider themselves sufficiently recognized and valued. Being able to “play” with different spaces and thus “negotiate” one’s own investments and “manage” one’s own affiliations is a fundamental element of the objective transition. In fact, with regard to the give-receive relationship, which would hypothetically have inherent in itself a subsequent expression of gratitude, it is possible to argue that the exercise of negotiation eliminates the supremacies that arise within the relationship: negotiation is seen, therefore, as a form of regulation of the social relationship and ensures that the goal to be achieved is not preordained, but is built during the process and, even when it is fixed, is never final, but subject to further modification and discussion.

The key point is that “giver” and “receiver” are in a very complex relationship, which is located in a relational network characterized by increasing changes in all its elements; moreover, it is too often believed that any asymmetry in this type of relationship is due to the communicative behavior of the “giver,” who highlights his dominance. Actually, the differences are more due to cultural factors and identity construction than to factors intrinsic to the relationship: the distance between “giver” and “receiver” forms a model of rational organization, which codifies and finalizes the relationship and that could be defined as Taylorist-utilitarian.

The negotiation described above is therefore not comparable to Luccarelli’s *mediation triangle* (2018, p. 11) because there is no “triadic relationship”: there is just a “relationship” and it certainly does not convey the author’s idea that “we can explain both the asymmetry and the dynamicity of gratitude” (p. 11) because it does not consider which element gives rise to the expression of gratitude or when and how the asymmetry is configured.

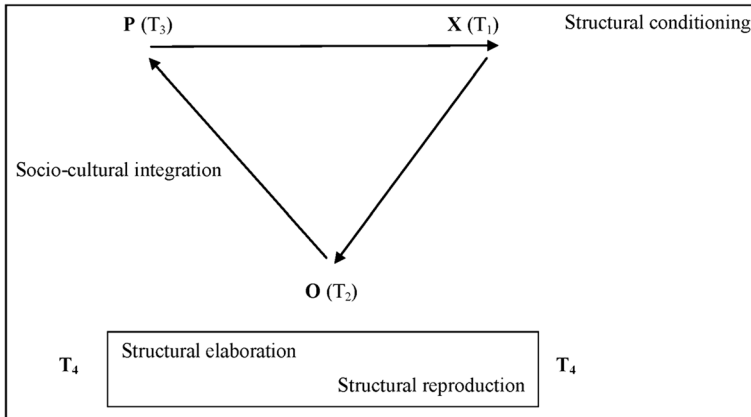


Fig. 1 The mediation triangle according to the morphogenetic cycle perspective

If we try to redraw (Fig. 1) the *mediation triangle* considering the above reflections and in particular referring to the morphogenetic cycle, we can hypothesize that the starting point is the subject (X) that acts causing the subject (P) to be able to use an object or enjoy a service (O). This is what is defined as structural conditioning and represents the first moment (T_1). The object (O) is the second moment of the cycle (T_2) that is destined to the subject (P) – third moment of the cycle (T_3) – and it is precisely in this passage from T_2 to T_3 that the socio-cultural interaction is evident. All interacting elements reach time T_4 , which represents the moment in which the three elements structurally elaborate and reproduce the significant interactions linked to a condition that gives rise to – or can potentially give rise to – the expression of gratitude.

A Model Based on Relational Knowledge

To point out once again that we disagree with mentioning asymmetry in conjunction with gratitude, we will try to build a model (personal elaboration) based on the cornerstones of the relational theory of society (Donati 2011a). This attempt at deconstruction, or rather at breaking down the relationship between “giver” and “receiver,” is paramount, since it is impossible to study positive actions on the basis of mere personality. Indeed, social and cultural aspects should also be considered together with the personality, since the expression of gratitude is nothing more than a form of interaction—and therefore of social relationship—between two or more parties. Each society sets limits, through legal and/or cultural norms, to the satisfaction of the individual and collective aspirations, also establishing the legitimate means that can be used to satisfy them. These limits are perceived as necessary in a stably structured society, but in a society in continuous evolution, there are oscillations of these limits that create dissonance, a condition that often determines attitudes whose outcomes are not always predictable in their consequences nor are always positive. The relational theory of society suggests a key to interpreting phenomena, focusing attention on the pattern of social relations that individuals interweave in their daily lives, starting from the primary group they belong to.

The first synthesis that can be reached is undoubtedly that gratitude in contemporary society, unrelated to the exclusively utilitarian-economic aspects—as Luccarelli says “There are reasons to believe that experiences of gratitude might be associated with happiness and well-being” (2018, p. 4)—has assumed a central role in the daily life of individuals and their subjectivity. Despite this

centrality, however, neither individuals nor organizations are always able to trigger capacities for active responses (reflection) to situations that can produce unpredictable results—since there is no automatic of expression of gratitude in response to an altruistic action. If the term activation indicates a series of processes that underline the active role of the subject in determining the causes or the premises upstream of events and effects that affect his behavior, talking of pro-action does not exclude adaptation, i.e., the fact that individuals seek a balance between their needs and the possibilities of action offered by the context in which they act.

Therefore, in proposing a key for reading gratitude, we should refer to a model derived from the relational approach, but which also contains elements that characterize the symbolic cultural approach. We propose a graphic representation of this model (Fig. 2) which will explain the existing connections between the various conceptual categories that allow for the construction of positive actions (including gratitude) that, in turn, allow individuals to improve their own and others’ well-being and happiness.

The theoretical framework of reference, as already mentioned, is the relational theory and, therefore, the compass that will guide the representation is Parsons’ AGIL scheme (1951) that

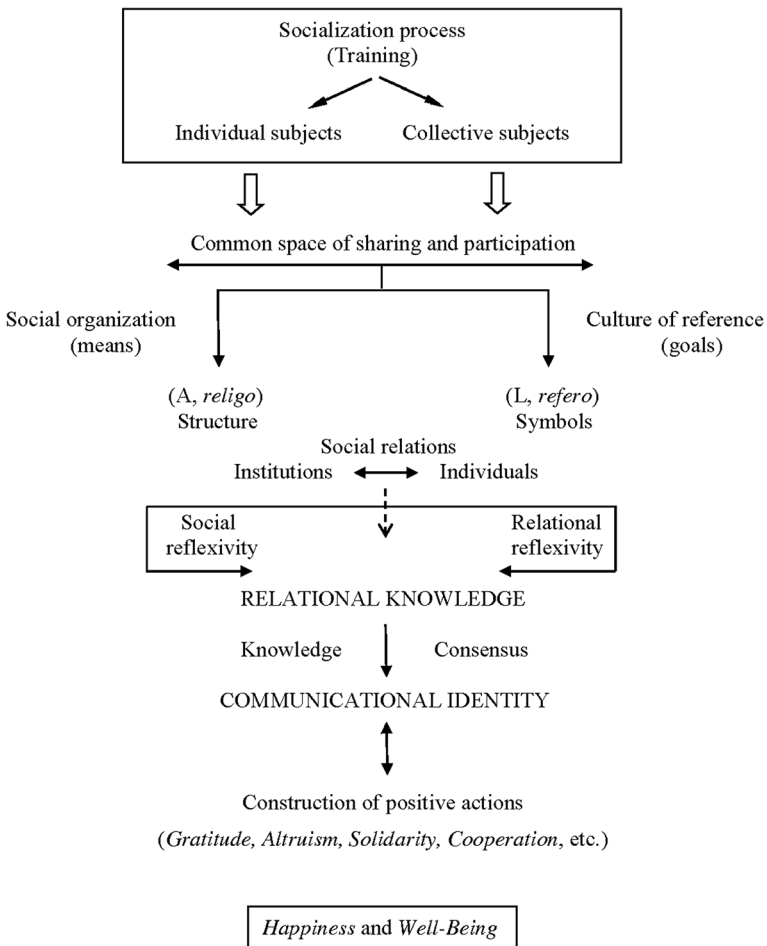


Fig. 2 Connections of conceptual categories referring to the construction of positive actions

allows us to observe the relationality of society and the structure of the social relationship as a whole. The starting point of the synthesis is undoubtedly the process of socialization that takes place within reference cultures: on the one hand, the culture of social organization, and on the other, the culture of society. When these different cultures give rise to a space for sharing and participation, which guarantees forms of regulation of the relationship, new ways of “being” and “doing” of individuals become explicit.

For positive actions, the “being” corresponds to the structure—A in the AGIL scheme (functional dimension, *re-ligo*) and energy (needs and motivations) in the social relation structure—while the “doing” corresponds to the symbols—L in the AGIL scheme (sense dimension, *re-fero*) and the meaning in the social relation structure. From the social relationship between “giver” and “receiver,” which constitutes their orientation and reciprocal action, develops the order of reality of the relationship that requires an activity of mediation between human subjectivity and social systems—social reflexivity (Donati 2011b). This reflection is specific to the relationship, that is, it is that reflection (neither subjective nor structural) correlated to the order of reality of the social relationship. Social reflexivity, however, is not in itself sufficient to produce that “relational knowledge”—knowledge on what one does, thinks, and experiences in a relational context, an emerging effect of the interaction between specific forms of doing and being of individuals, in this case concerning gratitude—that allows the consolidation of knowledge and consensus to achieve the reconstruction of the relationship between those who are grateful and those who receive gratitude in a perspective of exchange and participation. However, in order for “relational knowledge” to be the “emerging effect” of the interactions between the parties called into question (grateful and gratified subject), social reflexivity needs to be articulated into relational reflexivity (Donati 2011a, b). Relational reflexivity implies that subjects orient themselves towards the reality emerging from their interactions, taking into consideration how this reality (by virtue of its own powers) can affect the subjects themselves (agents/actors), since it exceeds their personal and aggregate powers. The reflexivity processes (both social and relational) allow for the emergence of a specific “relational knowledge,” i.e., of that knowledge—regarding what is done, thought and experienced in a social relationship—which directs the identification processes towards the “communicational identity” of the subjects. This leads to the activation of positive actions (in a general sense) which, in turn, will allow the improvement of the living conditions of the subjects.

In order to make this model more easily understandable, instead of treating it as a mere graphic and descriptive exercise, as well as to argument in favor of the necessity of de-structuring gratitude—it being a complex phenomenon that takes place within a social relationship and that cannot be read it only as a power asymmetry—we shall now propose an illustrative example.

The example—which for obvious reasons will repeat many of the elements described above—refers to non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) volunteers operating in various contexts (emergencies following disasters, reception of migrants, etc.). The gratitude expressed by single individuals to whom help is given, or by the whole of their population, is not perceived as a duty or a *do ut des* on either side, because the exercise of power as understood in the classical sense—power as the capacity of a subject A to make a subject B do something that otherwise she would not have done—is absent.

If the search for well-being starts from the structuring of the roles of individuals, the model proposed here had to have the socialization process as its starting point, and socialization is necessarily carried out within reference cultures. In the case in example, we find on the one hand, the culture of the NGOs within which the volunteers carry out their activities and, on the other, the culture of the society within which the volunteer goes to provide help. When these different cultures give rise to a common space of sharing that guarantees forms of regulation of

the relationship between the parties, new ways of “being” and “doing” become explicit. For the social condition within which gratitude is expressed, “being” corresponds to A in the AGIL scheme (functionality dimension, *re-ligo*) and therefore to the structure of the social relation, while “doing” corresponds to L in the AGIL scheme (meaning dimension, *re-fero*) and to the symbols in the social relation.

From the social relationship between the volunteers and the helped, which constitutes their orientation and reciprocal action, the order of the reality of the relationship develops. This requires an activity of mediation between human subjectivity and the social systems (social reflexivity): that “relational knowledge” that represents the “emergent effect” of the interaction between specific forms of “being and doing” (relational reflexivity). The processes of reflexivity (social and relational) allow for the emergence of a specific “relational knowledge,” that is of that knowledge—regarding what is done, thought and experienced in a social relationship—that directs the processes of identification towards the “communicational identity.” This, also in the light of what said so far, allows us to configure gratitude no longer only as a result of a power asymmetry, but as a positive action in the normal flow of the process of *adjustment of the conception of self*, reducing the dualism between “doing” and “being” and therefore of the discordances that often stem from social relations. When this process of adjustment is carried out, there is no form of subordination between rescue worker and rescuee. This type of dynamic, read from the perspective of relational theory, can obviously be applied to many other types and forms of interaction (such as teacher/student, parents/children, etc.).

Finally, we emphasize that what we proposed here was a model to try and interpret the dynamics of *social construal* or *collective construct* of gratitude (intended as positive action), overcoming the economic and probabilistic approaches that have always characterized the study of this phenomenon. In other words, in order to avoid an excessively rigid interpretation model, there must be a structure that guarantees accountability, evidence-based practice, and a long-term action achieving the balance between “goals” and “means.” These are fundamental issues as the “relational knowledge” of individuals that is generated through social relations is fundamentally based on trust and consensus that the community.

Future Research

In light of the above, it is therefore necessary to revitalize research on positive actions (gratitude, altruism, solidarity, cooperation, etc.). However, this orientation should not be read as “humanism” but rather tend towards the establishment of a new way of doing research that looks at positive aspects: studies that do not analyze social phenomena only in their conditioning or negative effects, but a science—positive sociology or positive psychology (Nichols 2012; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000)—that with its specificity contributes to the analysis and study of the most human part of the individual and society (positive actions or proactive behavior). The aim is to contribute to the discovery of human beings as interacting beings.

In this direction, for example, stands out the line of studies born in the USA within the American Sociological Association, which in 2012 established a section called “Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity” considering these three aspects a single field of disciplinary specialization because they are significantly interdependent in the socio-cultural reality (Jeffrey 2014).

As is well known, there is no shared definition between disciplines on what should be understood by gratitude, as Luccarelli points out on the first page of her article (2018). This is also because two important aspects are not always accorded the right value of meaning: trust,

which can be defined as the actor's expectation of a positive experience (Mutti 2007) and knowledge, understood as the construction and search for meanings and interpretations attributed to situations and contexts of daily life.

This new perspective therefore posits as necessary a process of acquisition of knowledge that makes individuals and their organizations able to identify their interests and evaluate options (relational knowledge). In fact, social relations, by triggering symbolic mediation (reflexivity) between human subjectivity and social systems, prompt the development of that "relational knowledge" which leads to the promotion of the definition of needs, rights, and duties. And, perhaps, from this standpoint, we can read the types of gratitude proposed by Luccarelli (2018, p. 10) quoting the example of the workers: gratitude of duty, gratitude of acquiescence, and gratitude of convenience. However, these types should also take into account three factors that can characterize a social relationship: (1) the involvement of individuals in the surrounding environment; (2) the orientation to their own interests and those of others; and, finally, (3) the possibility of creating relationships for a strong and lasting collaboration in the future.

In this way, it is obvious that, since roles are no longer clear (who is grateful and who is gratified), there is the risk of falling into the logic of appropriation (of spaces and positions) creating asymmetry, rather than solidarity and awareness towards the other. This is further supported by the scarce development of intangible resources such as trust and knowledge, which also hinders the construction of networks for the implementation of social capital based on fiduciary relations promoting the capacity to recognize oneself, to exchange information, to help one another and to cooperate for common purposes.

Reflexivity processes (both social and relational) thus promote the creation of a "relational knowledge" which determines the increase of these factors by directing the processes of construction, identification, and selection of social phenomena by basing them on the Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance system developed by Willke (1987) and then also applied by Donati—ODG system (Donati 2011c). This system can produce: (a) an observation that acknowledges the interaction between the "creators" and the "receivers" (Griswold 1994) of cultural objects, (b) a diagnosis that distinguishes a social problem from its possible resolution, and (c) a method of intervention *on* and *in* the context where social problem is generated before spreading to the entire system.

In short, the identity process of individuals creates a personal path that brings into play above all their self-image, their abilities, the realization of their desires by building, in the first place, a "personal identity" that can be sometimes challenged (as in the case of technological innovations, organizations, etc.) and by relationships with others that contribute to undermining the stability of that identity. As illustrated above, this requires individuals to re-compose their identity in a specifically characterized context of social relations whose features (specific places, times, and symbols) are fundamental in recognition processes (both self- and hetero-recognition). This process leads to the above-described "objective transaction" between the identities attributed (communicational identity) and the identities assumed.

Human action, in its entirety, must be understood as the most appropriate way to behave—apart from cases of attested insanity—with respect to different situations and it mirrors the relevant aspects found within the context in which the situations take place. The vision of the future, contextually to the conception of the present, is very tied to the *adaptation of one's self-conception*, which consists in the resolution of the dualism between "doing" and "being" (which also permeates situations where gratitude appears to be the basic factor affecting actions) and therefore of the discord that often results from social relations. The obvious

contrast between doing and being necessarily determines dissonant aspects, which generate pressure and conflict in individuals, both towards themselves and towards the surrounding world. If this tension does not find the right channel within the complex network of relationships that individuals experience in their daily activities, in the sense that it must be oriented to the search for new elements of knowledge (as an emerging factor of social and relational reflexivity), it can become a determining factor of negative actions rather than positive ones.

Gratitude is to be considered as an action that is part of a specific social context in which many factors influence the “construction” and “formation” of people’s selves as well as that of their “defenses” against situations of hardship that may arise at different times of life both with aspects of individuality and with aspects of a social character. The relationality expressed in the role-playing between the individual and the system is fundamental in defending against the implementation of negative actions. Social relations, by triggering symbolic mediation (social and relational reflexivity) between human subjectivity and social systems, develop “knowledge” that promotes the definition of needs, rights, and duties in a logic based on the ethics of responsibility (Jonas 1984) able to trigger positive changes in people’s behavior and attitudes that direct them towards life rather than death, reducing or eliminating the disharmonies in social relations.

And in this context sociology, and in particular relational sociology, together with the other human and social sciences, can take on a leading role in redefining not only the paradigms of study, because it connects lifeworld (subjectivity and intersubjectivity) and social system (organizational and subjective structure), but also fostering the individual-social system relationship oriented to the definition of needs, rights and duties having the ethics of responsibility as a basis.

The new researches on gratitude should therefore be configured as a laboratory for methodological experimentation. Research activities may not only contribute to scientific research on the subjects at issue but may also be a mechanism to facilitate and support the processes of social innovation. We acknowledge that social science methods do not merely reproduce the phenomena they study but contribute to a greater or lesser extent to their construction. Following this logic, research activities are developed through methodologies that collect and analyze qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews, narrations, focus groups, ethnographic observation (Dumez 2016), and quantitative data, such as database collection and survey (Maxim 1999) trying to produce “relational knowledge” for the support, activation, reflection, and consolidation of innovation processes.

For what concerns gratitude, quantitative methods must be left out, due to the very nature of the object of study (relationships cannot be reduced to numbers or tests) because we need to be able to identify what gratitude represents for individuals in terms of behaviors, lifestyles, and cultural models. On the matter of techniques or tools, the identification of these representations could include, for example, ethnographic studies aimed at observing the social relations of parts of populations within different cultures or subcultures within the same social system on other parts of populations, as the idea of gratitude differs not only culturally but also temporally and therefore different generations understand gratitude differently; or, to a lesser extent, studying a restricted social context (e.g., a factory department, a classroom, a department, a group of friends, etc.). In both dimensions (macro and micro), the researchers can investigate positive actions with a participating observation or through life stories (both through interviews and through the analysis of documents such as diaries, letters, and other documentary sources); furthermore, there is no lack of attempts to measure positive actions through scales or tests such as those developed by the Positive Psychology Centre (see McCullough et al. 2002). However, it should be remembered that among the various survey tools used there the questionnaire holds a special place, because when we want to investigate a

certain social phenomenon, be it individual or collective, researchers basically have two systems to collect information: observation and interrogation. And if observation is the most direct and immediate way to study manifest behaviors, interrogation is the obligatory way to explore motivations, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, perceptions, and expectations. Therefore, if one wants to analyze these latter aspects in relation to gratitude, s/he must choose the questionnaire due to the inherent need to “question.” The questionnaire can be a standardized tool both in the questions and in the answers, so as to allow the study of any existing relationships between the variables. Through it, it could also be ascertained whether there is a possible correlation between individual world view (past, present, and future) and the manifestation of conduct attributable to positive actions.

The choice of tools and techniques to carry out surveys that focus on positive actions depends on the researchers’ discipline, on their conception of gratitude and social relationship, and unfortunately also on the available funds, but all these conditions ignore the fact that some objects of study can only be studied through a qualitative methodology.

References

- Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: University Press Cambridge.
- Donati, P. (2011a). *Relational sociology: A new paradigm for the social sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Donati, P. (2011b). Modernization and relational reflexivity. *International Review of Sociology – Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 21(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.544178>.
- Donati, P. (2011c). Cultural change, family transitions and reflexivity in a morphogenetic society. *Memorandum*, 21, 39–55.
- Donati, P., & Archer, M. (2015). *The relational subject*. Cambridge: University Press Cambridge.
- Douglas, M. (1997). The depoliticisation of risk. In R. J. Ellis & M. Thompson (Eds.), *Culture matters: Essays in honour of Aaron Wildavsky* (pp. 121–132). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Dubar, C. (2003). *La socialisation. Construction des identités sociales et professionnelles*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Dumez, H. (2016). *Méthodologie recherche qualitative. Les questions clés de la démarche compréhensive*. Paris: Vuibert.
- Festinger, L. (1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Griswold, W. (1994). *Cultures and societies in a changing world*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Jeffrey, V. (2014). *The Palgrave handbook of altruism, morality, and social solidarity: Formulating a field of study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jonas, H. (1984). The imperative of responsibility. In *Search of an ethics for the technological age*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Luccarelli, V. (2018). The asymmetry in gratitude. *Hu Arenas*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-018-0016-8>.
- Mangone, E. (2017). Risk according to the relational theory of society. *Stan Rzeczy*, 12, 261–276.
- Maxim, P. S. (1999). *Quantitative research methods in the social sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, J. (2002). The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 112–127.
- Mutti, A. (2007). Distrust. In Italian Sociological Association (Ed.), *Annual Review of Italian Sociology 2007* (47–63). Naples : Scriptaweb.It.
- Nichols, L. T. (2012). North central sociological association presidential address. Renewing sociology: Integral science, solidarity, and loving kindness. *Sociological Focus*, 45(4), 261–273.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.5>.
- Sorokin, P. A. (1966). *Sociological theories of today*. New York and London: Harper e Row.
- Willke, H. (1987). Observation, diagnosis, guidance. A system of theoretical view of intervention. In K. Hurrelmann & F.-Z. Kaufmann (Eds.), *Social interventions: Potential and constraints* (pp. 21–35). Berlin: de Gruyter.