**What is Relational Thinking: A Way of Thinking about**

**Personal Lifestyle and Public Policy**

**John Ashcroft and Michael Schluter, July 2023**

1. **Relational Thinking can be thought of in two different ways:**
	1. relational thinking as a perspective or approach that prioritises the relational dimension of issues.
	2. Relational Thinking as a secular understanding of what is in essence a Christian social ethic, ultimately rooted in the philosophical and ethical foundations of Christian faith, but with extensive common ground with other faiths and philosophies
2. **Relationships and personal/group identity**

The identity of a person or group is derived from their relations with other people and with God, and cannot be derived by their view of themselves. If individuals define their identity without reference to other people, they too easily become disconnected and society fragments into as many people as they are society. It compels each person take into account of the history, experience, and feelings of other people rather than becoming self-absorbed.

How people view themselves influences their relationships – e.g. seeing yourself as not-white can shape relationships with others, particularly when framed by theories about race. If groups are associative and not given factors derived by birth or geography then perceptions of self may influence the groups we chose to associate with (or are able to associate with) and thus reinforce that self-identity. A more fundamental question is whether identity is something that we own and assert (for example as an existential process of storytelling) or something that is also ascribed. So, for example, am I bound by another person’s pronoun preferences because identity is their property? A relational approach would require a more dialectical emergence of identity between self and others.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **Relationships for a sense of fulfilment, meaning and purpose in life**

Wealth seldom provides a person with any sense of ultimate fulfilment; this may be in part due to the fact that a person loses all their wealth at the point of death, and death may come at any time. Relationships of trust and love, on the other hand, may provide some sense of meaning and purpose because there is at least some hope for most people that they transcend death in some form.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, abusive relationships clearly do not do so. People may also seek status, which is a relational phenomenon, and wealth is a means to maximising choice about relationships (reducing dependency, enabling consumption relationships). The legacy of achievement or success is also dependent upon their recognition by others. So the point here is that all things are ultimately relational in some way, but particular relational values and practices aid meaning and purpose.

1. **Relationships, connectedness and well-being**

Personal and collective well-being in any society is derived from the **nature and depth** of connectedness between individuals, stakeholder groups, ethnic groups, racial groups and nations. A good society is defined not by abstract ideas but by how it connects its members. The nature of the connectedness depends on whether relations are characterised primarily by love or hate. The depth of the positive connectedness/trust/ love can be understood, developed, and measured by the level of proximity between the parties.

1. **Defining closeness of relationships**

Relational proximity is a description of closeness between the parties to the relationship. There are 5 dimensions of relational proximity:

* 1. Directness of communication, and especially whether the parties are able to meet face-to-face.
	2. Continuity of the relationships over time
	3. Multiplexity (breadth), closeness of mutual understanding of the background and context which each party has of the other’s situation.
	4. Parity, a different concept than equality, which refers to the level of perceived mutual respect and fairness in the relationship.
	5. Commonality, which refers primarily to the alignment of values and goals of the parties in the relationship.[[3]](#footnote-3)
1. **Relationships as ends and means**

In a Relational Thinking worldview, the quality and the depth of the relationship is the end goal of personal and community existence, as well as the means by which that goal is achieved.

1. **Any limits on closeness of relationship?**

There is no limit or finality, other than death, as to how deep a relationship of love, trust and mutual understanding between two people can go, as testified by those who have a long-term, close and deep relationship with another person. A relationship is like a bottomless well.

However, there are limits in terms of capacity – we cannot have limitless depth with all people, and we may not be psychologically or relationally capable of achieving the full potential of any relationship. There may also be external constraints such as geographic separation. In addition, there are time constraints. It has been said that time is the currency of relationships. Each relationship requires time. The number of relationships a person can engage in, and the number of close relationships in particular, is constrained by the length of the day and the length of a person’s life.

1. **Relational thinking and reform of society**

Relational Thinking is both critical of other social philosophies, and constructive in terms of the organisation of society. In terms of being constructive, it provides an enormous potential range of practical proposals for organisational transformation and every area of public life. These have to be worked through afresh in the context of every nation’s context and culture, and in every period of history, in the light of the core principles of Relational Thinking, and in the light of previous experience of their application.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **Relational thinking and human rights**

This also has implications for how human rights are understood and applied.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rights should not be defined by what a person believes they are entitled to in terms of respect, speech, sexual behaviour, education or healthcare, based only on their self-perception and self-definition. Rather, such rights can only be determined in the context of the relationship between the parties where both parties are recognised as having rights and obligations towards one another. This principle applies not just between two individuals, but also between groups, communities and nations.

Rights are not currently only based on self-perception but also on law which defines a set of obligations to others (I am legally bound to respect the rights of others). Relational thinking informs how those rights should be claimed and exercised, particularly when rights may conflict or compete and should guide (and constrain) the expansive judicial interpretation of rights.

1. **Time as the currency of relationships**

Relational Thinking recognises that time rather than capital is the scarcest of all resources available for person, family or community. So rather than prioritising economics as the discipline which focuses on allocation, saving, investment and spending of **money**, relational thinking proposes that ‘Chronomics’ should be used instead to prioritise the allocation, saving, and investment of **time**. To study Chronomics, it is necessary to understand how relationships are formed, developed, and deepened over time.[[6]](#footnote-6)

At a minimum economics should be better at accounting for all resources especially time. It is also the relational implications of changing time allocation that are most important. Time is only stored for the future when it becomes a claim on someone else’s time – it only has meaning and value in the context of relationships.

1. **Relational analytics**

Psychometric tools have been developed for measuring relationships between individuals and groups in an organisational context. Questions have been tested and shown to be rigorous, based on the framework of relational proximity.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **Measurement of national progress**

National progress can be assessed on the basis of quality of a range of inter-group and inter-stakeholder relationships across the society.[[8]](#footnote-8) This differs from economic measures of national progress such as GDP, or socio-economic measures such as the UN HDI (Human Development Index), although the latter comes closer to the RPI (Relational Progress Index).

1. **A reform agenda for schools and universities**

Relational Thinking provides a reform agenda for schools and universities. This includes issues of curriculum to include subjects like ‘relational literacy’, which teach students how to relate to people of different age, gender, professional role, ethnic or racial group etc and a relational perspective on history, geography and literature etc. In addition, it enables schools to review how they build relations of trust between students, and between teachers and students, through such things as pedagogy, long-term small group interactions between students and a staff member outside the curriculum, importance of sport and extra curriculum activities etc.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. **A reform agenda for companies**

Relational thinking also provides a reform agenda for companies. For example, it proposes that the purpose of companies should be defined as follows:

‘The purpose of a company is to serve society by maximising long-term value creation in the interests of its employees, shareholders, customers and suppliers, while ensuring the sustainability of the business and honouring its wider responsibilities to local communities and the environment.’ The book also contains a wider reform agenda.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. **Relational poverty**

Relational Thinking redefines a nation’s as well as person’s understanding of poverty. Poverty is a condition to be avoided and prevented, but it is now primarily although not exclusively in relational terms. Relational poverty refers to emotional pain and suffering which people experience as result of social exclusion and loneliness, whether these are result of age, physical abnormality or disability, or racial or ethnic identity. A society which has high levels of financial wealth generally will at the same time show evidence of high levels of relational poverty because, strangely, people often use their wealth to buy greater privacy through larger homes more distant from neighbours, holidays separated from others, travel by car rather than public transport etc. It is possible to be rich and lonely, for example, but from a relational point of view, in terms of well-being, it is ‘better’ for both the individual and wider society, that people are loved and accepted in a community even if they are financially poor, than materially rich but isolated and/or excluded.

1. **Relationships and place**

Places in the form of land and houses are not simply forms of capital assets in a relational worldview. Their primary importance lies in providing a physical context in which relationships take place, and thus often play a critical role in creating the history, recollections and memories that people have about one another. This means that the rules that applied to trading and purchase of land and property should not merely take into account their financial value and that there should be a family or community collective agreement before ownership of land can be transferred from one individual or group to another.

1. **Relationships and mobility of individuals or households**

When a person or household moves from one location to another, depending on the distance between the previous and new home, relationships are profoundly affected. For example, there will almost always be new neighbours. Children are likely to change their schools and therefore be forced to lose friends and seek to make new friends, which is not always quick or easy. Husbands and wives, or long-term partners, may not always find it easy to stay in touch with former friends and find themselves relatively isolated from the support of family and friends, which may put pressure on the marriage or partnership. Grandparents may lose regular contact with their grandchildren. Once a household moves some distance away from their relatives, the adults may find it more difficult to take care of elderly relatives when the time comes so that older people become lonely, and the cost of their care has to be borne by wider society through the tax system. Economic models which assume costless mobility of labour fail to take account of the relational consequences. They fail to consider the full impact on the well-being of those involved, as well as the long-term costs in both relational and financial terms to wider society.

1. **Ownership of capital and responsibility for its use**

In a relational worldview, ownership of resources involves not only the rights of ownership but also the responsibilities of ownership – whether that is a large bull, a gun or large financial assets. On the principle that a person should only reap where they have sown the crop, there should be no reward without responsibility, no investment without involvement and no profit without participation. This has implications for the organisation of financial and business institutions, as well as for the way pensions are structured and organised.

1. See for example Emily Ho et al, Relational Rights: A world-inclusive and relationships-affirming understanding of the rights of every human person, Relational Research, Cambridge 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Christians, it is this deep relationship of love and friendship as the key to human fulfilment and meaning which they believe derives from a relationship with God as found in the person of Jesus Christ. It has no finality because relations with Christ, and others who are in Christ, transcend death to endless life beyond death. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Schluter and David John Lee (1993), The R Factor, Hodder & Stoughton; John Ashcroft et al. (2017), The Relational Lens: Understanding, managing and measuring stakeholder relationships, Cambridge University Press [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the context of the Korean peninsula, the norms and potential policy proposals relevant for many areas of polity to help bring about reunification of North Korea and South Korea have been explored in Michael Schluter (2022), No Other Way to Peace in Korea? A practical path to reunification, Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Emily Ho et al. (2021), Relational Rights: An alternative world-inclusive and relationship-affirming understanding of human rights. Relational Research [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Ashcroft and Michael Schluter (2005), Time and Relationships: is there a case for developing ‘Chronomics’?, Relational Research [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Further information can be obtained by contacting Relationships Foundation, https://relationshipsfoundation.org/assessing-relationships/relational-analytics-etc/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An example of what metrics could be used for an annual relational assessment of national progress can be found in Michael Schluter (2006), ‘What charter for humanity? Defining the destination of development’ in Paul Mills and Michael Schluter, After Capitalism (2012): Rethinking economic relationships, Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. www.relationalschools.org [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Michael Schluter (2022), ‘Is Corporate Capitalism the best we’ve got to offer?’, Relational Research [↑](#footnote-ref-10)