




Organizational Social Relations and Social Embedding: A Pluralistic Review

Audrey-Anne Cyr
Isabelle Le Breton-Miller 
Danny Miller
HEC Montréal

To date there has been little systematic organization of the extensive literature on the processes and mechanisms shaping social relationships in and around organizations. In an analysis of 372 studies from this literature, we identified a broad spectrum of assumptions, priorities, and relational issues emerging from multiple disciplines and theoretical lenses. Three dominant perspectives surfaced in our study: economic, organizational, and interactionist. Each manifests distinctive ontologies of social relations, actors, relational processes, and modes of social embedding. The rich variety of relationships and causal patterns discovered characterizes more fully these perspectives, suggesting opportunities for further research within each, and a wider range of conceptual options to target relational paradigms toward different types of organizations, problems, and levels of analysis. It also brings to light the pluralistic nature of social relations in organizational contexts and the processes by which they become embedded.

Keywords: *organizational relationships; interorganizational relationships; social embeddedness; social ties; organizational relational perspectives*

Introduction

According to John Pepper, former CEO of P&G, “Business is a social act. The relationships among a network of stakeholders define an organization and account for a great deal of [its] success or failure” (Pepper, 2014). Social relations permeate all aspects of

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Corresponding author: Isabelle Le Breton-Miller, HEC Montréal, 3000 Côte-Sainte-Catherine Rd, Montréal, QC, Canada, H3T 2A7.

E-mail: isabelle.lebreton@hec.ca

organizations—interorganizational transactions, governance, resource access, and human resource management. For more than 20 years, social relations, in all their forms, have received much attention from organizational and management scholars. For example, some research examines transactional exchanges and their impact on governance mechanisms (Handley & Angst, 2015; Howard, Roehrich, Lewis, & Squire, 2019), associated agency costs (Herrero, 2011; Kostova, Nell, & Hoenen, 2018), and the resulting efficacy of interorganizational relationships (Davis & Hyndman, 2018; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Other work focuses on strategic inputs into social interactions and their impact on outcomes such as value creation (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Levin & Walter, 2019), knowledge development (Lowik, van Rossum, Kraaijenbrink, & Groen, 2012; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004), and firm performance (Tiwana, 2008; Vlaisavljevic, Cabello-Medina, & Perez-Luno, 2016). Finally, some literature examines the influence of interpersonal interactions on job satisfaction (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998), job performance (Casciaro, Gino, & Kouchaki, 2014; Golden & Veiga, 2018), and again firm performance (Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010; Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011).

All these works have examined different forms of social interaction and levels of analysis, employing diverse lenses with distinctive sets of assumptions while inevitably neglecting alternative possibilities and driving forces. In part because of the broad spectrum of research interests, there are today a vast array of conceptualizations applied to a wide variety of relationships, contexts, and applications highlighting their heterogeneous character. It has therefore become less clear which theories and models of relational behavior apply to different kinds of relationships in organizational settings. This review systematically highlights the many facets of this complex phenomenon, identifying the rich variety and complementarity of distinctive causal patterns and mechanisms intrinsic to such relations and the social processes by which they become embedded in these contexts.

To date there have been no comprehensive and systematic reviews of works examining the various key elements shaping the nature of social relationships and their embeddedness in organizational contexts. Certainly, excellent reviews have focused on specific relational issues—the dark side of interorganizational relationships (Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2011), social capital (Payne, Moore, Griffis, & Autry, 2011), and trust (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). However, by concentrating on specific factors, levels of analysis, and distinctive ways of conceptualizing social relations, these reviews do not capture or fully characterize the range of interactions. By adopting a broader, more inclusive, and multifaceted approach, we surface the various ways in which social relations have been represented in the literature and capture the many facets of this complex, dynamic phenomenon.

Our analysis of the 372 articles of our sample reveals that this literature incorporates a great many studies from multiple disciplines encompassing a highly diverse set of assumptions, mechanisms, and causal patterns reflecting the nature of social interactions in and around organizations. However, because social relations in non-Western economies vary greatly due to cultural and institutional differences, and to manage scope and relevance, we focus only on studies of the Occidental world (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

One of the main contributions of this review is to discover from the burgeoning array of literature on social relations in organizations three dominant “schools of thought” or

perspectives that we label economic, organizational, and interactionist. In adopting distinctive ontological orientations, researchers focus on specific types of social relations operating in materially different ways and involving parties with very different assumptions and approaches. Our analysis identifies extant conditions—settings, actors, and relational impetuses—as well as mechanisms. The breadth and variety of causal patterns discovered contributes to a more nuanced understanding of social embeddedness—a core concept in this literature.

The contributions of our review are threefold. First, as noted, it offers a fuller characterization of the dominant perspectives used to study social relations in organizational contexts. Second, its parallel comparisons across perspectives help to situate specific types of organizational relationships (e.g., in governance, supply chain, marketing, or mergers) within resonant perspectives. Third, it proposes an encompassing framework to study relationships in and around organizations, bringing to bear multiple lenses to do justice to their nature and thereby affording a richer, more multifaceted understanding. In short, we provide a basis for matching theorization with application and a framework for studying the pluralistic nature of social relations in organizational contexts and the process by which they become embedded.

We proceed by describing the method used to define and analyze a targeted body of 372 research articles in the Western context. Three perspectives are then presented from this research, along with how each conceptualizes social relations in organizational contexts. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications and a proposed research agenda.

Review Method

To conduct our review, we undertook a systematic search through an exhaustive set of articles on organizational relationships published from 1998 to 2019. Dyer and Singh's (1998) classic study (cited over 15,000 times) served as our starting point as it has generated an influential stream of research on organizational social relationships (Dyer, Singh, & Hesterly, 2018).¹ In embracing an evidence-based approach (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003), our review includes all articles on social relations in organizational contexts.

The development of our sample began with the definition of the term *relational* (from Dyer & Singh, 1998). According to Merriam-Webster (2019), relational is defined as “characterized or constituted by relations,” whereas *relation* is “the attitude or stance which two or more persons or groups assume towards one another.” We based our selection on three keywords: “relational,” “relationship,” and “relation.” To ensure comprehensiveness, we added the term “tie” as it is central to network theory (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Granovetter, 1983; Jack, 2005), a core perspective on social relationships in organizations. Our initial search of Web of Science was limited to these four keywords in article titles.² Searches were also limited to the management category in Web of Science, which includes research on a wide variety of topics (e.g., governance, strategy, management, organizational behavior, and marketing) and perspectives from diverse disciplines (e.g., economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy).

Our review was further limited to A-rated, peer-reviewed management journals,³ an established practice for most management reviews (Short, 2009; Steigenberger, 2017) and a means of ensuring higher-quality contributions. Articles were selected from academic journals in the

general management, strategy, and entrepreneurship categories on Harzing's July 2019 Journal Quality List ranked 1 or 2 by both FNEGE and CNRS (we also added *Organization Science*, *Human Relations*, and *Organization Studies* despite their classification by Harzing under organization behavior).

As noted, because social relations take on different forms in different cultures (Handley & Angst, 2015; Huff & Kelley, 2003; Ma, Huang, & Shenkar, 2011), we limited our sample to Western studies of firms in North America,⁴ Western Europe,⁵ Australia, and New Zealand. Cultural norms and institutional settings can differ greatly between Western and other contexts, and such properties can have a profound effect on the nature of relationships within and across organizations (Acquaah, 2012). We wished to limit the scope of our inquiry to studies where there was some similarity in cultures to ensure a more controlled contextualization of the findings. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the scope of our review limits any application to research beyond its context.

Finally, our protocol systematically identified 564⁶ articles in Web of Science (for a detailed protocol description please see the Online Supplement to this review). An analysis of the abstracts of these articles enabled us to exclude 117 that did not focus on relationships (e.g., were unrelated to social interaction) or 66 that concerned geographies outside our scope. A more thorough reading of the articles subsequently excluded 119 additional articles that were not focused on social relations. This decreased the sample to 262 articles included for systematic review. To ensure comprehensiveness, we performed an additional search for the same four keywords as above in Google Scholar. We found 93 additional articles matching our criteria for inclusion in our sample. Lastly, we employed snowball sampling based on the references in the articles from previous rounds to identify still another 17 articles. The final sample thus includes 372 articles (please see the Online Supplement for further information on each of the papers classified and additional summary statistics). All articles were read and coded, extracting definitions of social relationships, theoretical lenses, causal patterns, and contexts. Special attention was given to relationship antecedents, processes, and outcomes; levels of analysis; and assumptions about social relations and embeddedness. An iterative abductive approach identified key patterns and topics, finding revealing connections and commonalities among research assumptions, theoretical backgrounds, relationship definitions, and levels of analysis, collectively yielding three major perspectives.

Sometimes, an article embraced more than one perspective. In that case we classified it according to its primary emphasis or theme and the nature of the relational benefits or challenges being addressed. For example, in Bal, Kooij, and De Jong (2013) and Blatt (2009), reference is made to formal contracts, an uncertainty reduction mechanism common to scholars embracing an economic perspective. However, in these articles the emphasis is on the utility of contracts as facilitators or *channels* that create relationships that serve as assets for an organization—channeling being a causal mechanism of the organizational perspective.

Results

As mentioned, our review identified three major schools of thought or perspectives, each encompassing studies from multiple disciplines and manifesting distinctive assumptions and mechanisms that define the nature of social interactions in and around organizations. Below, for each perspective, we discuss exemplary articles from our sample.

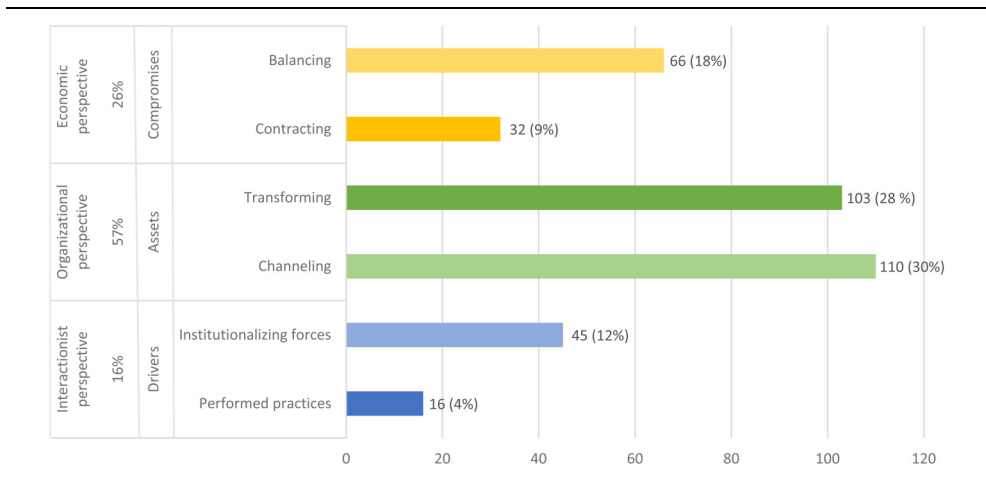
In all, we found that 26% of our sample (98 articles) could be assigned to an **economic perspective on social relations** aligned with Smith’s (1937) neoclassical economic model; that 57% of our sample (213 articles) adopted more of an **organizational perspective on social relations**, frequently tied to Granovetter’s (1985) notion of social embeddedness; and that 17% of our sample (61 articles) embraced an **interactionist perspective** reflecting Polanyi (1944) and Zelizer’s (2012) intimate melding of social and economic spheres. Figure 1 presents the focus of each perspective, the mechanisms, and the number of associated articles.

The Economic Perspective on Social Relations

The first stream of research discovered in our sample is rooted in classical and neoclassical economic models. In assuming that actors are motivated by economically oriented behaviors, scholars from this perspective focus on how organizations and their members negotiate outcomes resulting from their engagement with others. Social relations from this perspective are viewed as economically conditioned *compromises* that are negotiated via two mechanisms we label as *balancing of costs and benefits* and *formal and informal contracting* to fulfill an engagement.

Assumptions: Relationships Involve Uncertainty. In mobilizing *transaction cost theory* (Williamson, 1989), *social exchange theory* (Blau, 1964), *resource dependence theory* (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), or *agency theory* (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), articles focus on the inherent tensions between costs and benefits resulting from social relations. Consistent with Adam Smith in his *Wealth of the Nations* (1937), researchers assume that individuals are prone to self-interest and opportunistic behavior when acting in economic contexts.

Figure 1
Occurrence of Each School’s Focus and Mechanisms in the Literature



This is believed to condition their relationships in those contexts, whereby each party is assumed to try to take advantage of the other while pursuing their own objectives.

Many studies from our sample attribute these economically driven behaviors to organizations, focusing on interorganizational or principal-agent relationships. They assume that strategic alliances, buyer-supplier and franchisee-franchisor relationships, and those between principal and agent are subject to transaction hazards (Mellewigt, Hoetker, & Lutkewitte, 2018). Because they depend on others to create value or access resources (Jap & Anderson, 2007; Westphal, Boivie, & Chng, 2006), and because social relationships and outcomes are uncertain (Mellewigt et al., 2018; Poppo & Zenger, 2002), organizations are assumed to be subject to opportunism (Carson, Madhock, & Wu, 2006). Therefore, even for parties with good intentions, opportunism is thought to be unavoidable: “although both sides need to rely on maintaining close relationships . . . , inevitably they are open to opportunistic behavior” (Humphries & Wilding, 2003, p. 325). This position is shared by Lee (2012), who demonstrates the “indeterminacy of the efficacy of repeat transactions as a solution to the problem of opportunism in market exchange” (p. 1238). Consequently, these researchers assume opportunism in social relations, arguing that interorganizational relations, or principal-agent relationships, should be managed by addressing their potentially bivalent (positive vs. negative) outcomes to minimize agency, transaction, or social exchange costs, and to maximize economic outcomes.

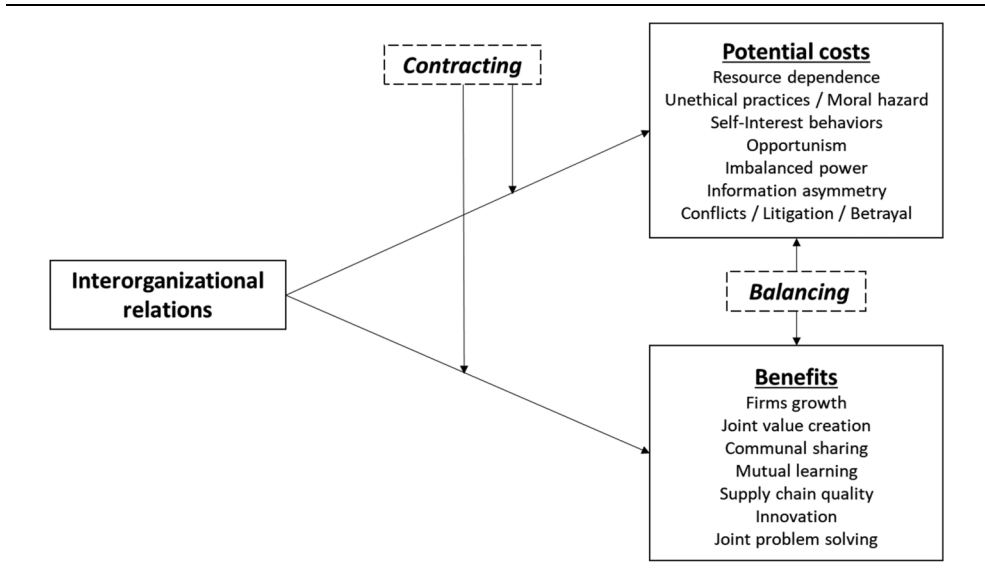
Social Relations As Compromises. Researchers from an economic perspective often conceptualize social relationships as *compromises*. Conditioned by economic considerations, these compromises are products of negotiations between actors over the benefits and potential drawbacks of their exchanges or transactions. Figure 2 proposes a causal model summarizing how scholars from this perspective conceptualize such relations.

This literature maintains that benefits such as firm growth (Huang & Knight, 2017; Jap & Anderson, 2007), joint value creation (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2016; Elfenbein & Zenger, 2017), mutual learning (Gambeta, Koka, & Hoskisson, 2019; Ryall & Sampson, 2009), innovation (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011), and joint problem solving (Meuleman, Jaaskelainen, Maula, & Wright, 2017) may derive from interorganizational relationships and constitute potential sources of competitive advantage (Jap & Anderson, 2007). However, these relations also may involve drawbacks such as uncertainty and dependency.

One party is dependent when the other offers valued benefits that are difficult to obtain elsewhere (Emerson 1962). Organizations build relationships to obtain benefits that they cannot readily create themselves. However, dependence creates exposure to opportunism (Williamson 1996), but much of interorganizational relationship theory converges in the idea that accepting, even deepening, dependence is necessary to achieve a competitive advantage. (Jap & Anderson, 2007, p. 263)

Moreover, the literature demonstrates that dependency causes power imbalances (Lopez-Bayon & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016) and information asymmetry (Kostova et al., 2018; Shane & Cable, 2002), enabling some parties to take advantage of others via unethical practices and causing moral hazard (Lee, 2012) and opportunism (Kostova et al., 2018).

Figure 2
Relationships as Compromise



Within this literature, two mechanisms can be identified for negotiating the bivalent outcomes of interorganizational relations: *balancing costs and benefits* (Davis & Hyndman, 2018; Kale, Singh, & Perlmutter, 2000; Kostova et al., 2018) and *formal and relational contracting* (Carson et al., 2006; Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

Balancing of costs and benefits: Of the 98 articles adopting the economic perspective, 66 reflect attempts to *balance costs and benefits* in interorganizational and principal-agent relationships. Although these relationships can help firms cope with unpredictable environments (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011), sustain mutually beneficial decisions, and exchange complementary resources (Barden & Mitchell, 2007), they are subject to opportunism, costs from information asymmetry, and dependence (Barden & Mitchell, 2007; Hallen, Katila, & Rosenberger, 2014; Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019). Thus, Madhok and Tallman (1998) and Hallen et al. (2014) suggest that this tension between collaboration and competition in interorganizational exchanges underlies key benefits and costs.

The literature reveals several paths organizations take to assess and trade-off positive and negative relational outcomes. For example, Westphal et al. (2006) demonstrate that a CEO's friendship ties with executives at other organizations can minimize relational drawbacks:

...findings indicate how corporate leaders may use informal social ties to managers of other organizations as a strategic mechanism for managing resource dependence. . . . the maintenance of friendship ties between corporate leaders may have advantages that are comparable to the supposed benefits from board co-optation, but without the losses to organizational autonomy and

the institutional constraints that may limit the use of board interlock ties as a strategic mechanism for managing dependencies. (Westphal et al., 2006, pp. 441–442)

Such informal ties between executives are therefore a means by which organizations can maximize benefits from interorganizational relations and minimize the negatives of dependency. Some research has focused on the effect of repeated exchanges and long-term relationships on performance (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Elfenbein & Zenger, 2017). It finds that because repeated exchanges and long-term relationships can foster trust and mutual commitment, they reduce associated transaction costs (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Elfenbein & Zenger, 2017; Holm, Eriksson, & Johanson, 1999).

The *balancing of costs and benefits* mechanism also is reflected in articles focusing on agent-principal and investor-entrepreneur relationships (Bammens & Collewaert, 2014; Collewaert, 2012; Khanin & Turel, 2015), and franchisor-franchisee and headquarters-subsidiary relationships (Kostova et al., 2018; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Lopez-Bayon & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). In studying principal-agent relationships, some researchers demonstrate that owner commitment and certain governance structures reduce agency costs (Herrero, 2011; Uhlaner, Floren, & Geerlings, 2007). Others have examined compounding factors that exacerbate relational agency and transaction costs. For example, Lopez-Bayon and Lopez-Fernandez (2016) demonstrate that franchisor-franchisee relationships must balance standardization and autonomy—that excessive decision power among franchisees causes conflict.

In conclusion, a core mechanism in articles aligned with the economic perspective involves a *balancing of costs and benefits*. Many of the concerns, processes, and paths identified relate to maximizing economic and relational benefits while minimizing drawbacks and costs, thereby trading off the bivalent attributes of *compromise* relationships.

Formal and informal contracting: Additional mechanisms of the economic perspective we label as *formal and informal contracting* (32 of the 98 works). The associated articles define contracts as formal or informal agreements to fulfill social obligations (Harmon, Kim, & Mayer, 2015). Interorganizational and principal-agent relations are said to be subject to moral hazard caused by contextual ambiguity and volatility that can provide scope for opportunism, which must be managed via formal or informal (relational) contracting:

The two approaches to handling uncertainty in interorganizational relationships suggest that the parties to a contract choose the exact degree to which they rely on formal and relational mechanisms. A clear input to this calculus is the effectiveness of each governance option in constraining opportunism. (Carson et al., 2006, p. 1060)

Much of this literature focuses on the complementarity between formal and informal contracting (Howard et al., 2019; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Both suggest strengths that can also be weaknesses. Whereas formal contracts enable organizations or individuals to establish formal rules on which to base relationships, they are subject to bounded rationality and incomplete information that defy perfect safeguards (Carson et al., 2006; Harmon et al., 2015). Moreover, the complexity of formal contracting can discourage organizations from investing in such relations (Poppo & Zenger, 2002), which can also be seen as a sign of distrust (Lumineau,

2017; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). On the other hand, relational contracting based on trust, solidarity, and continuity supports a relationship-based governance structure—one that covers unpredictable contingencies not envisaged in formal contracting (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). However, although relational contracts are more flexible, they too are subject to moral hazard and opportunistic behavior (Mellewigt et al., 2018; Mudambi & Helper, 1998). Ryall and Sampson (2009) and Subramani and Venkatraman (2003) argue that *formal and informal contracting* can be complementary in limiting opportunism. By crafting contracts combining formal and relational mechanisms, organizations are said to develop efficient safeguards that limit the drawbacks from ambiguity, uncertainty, and volatility.

Critiques and Gaps in the Economic Perspective. The economic perspective has been criticized by those who believe economic reward to be only one of many motives underlying human behavior within and across organizations, as can be seen from studies critical of agency and transaction cost perspectives. For example, Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson (1997) argue that institutional stewardship is an important driver of relationship behavior within organizations—a desire to serve stakeholders to preserve organizational resilience. Schulze, Lubatkin, and Dino (2002) discuss altruism toward others close to them as another relational motive, especially for family firm owners. In fact, it is said that there is an inherent paradoxical aspect to the agency literature: because relationships are seen to be subject to opportunistic behavior, monitoring and reward systems are put into place that may in fact induce distrust and thus normalize and even provoke opportunism (Davis et al., 1997). Transaction cost views of relationships also have received criticism. For example, Kogut and Zander (1996) and Conner and Prahalad (1996) propose knowledge-based rationales as superior explanations to transaction cost drivers for the existence of organizations.

Another limitation of this perspective is the circumscribed context within which most relationships are examined—namely, those of commercial exchange. Motives of economic self-interest and concerns about opportunism exist as well in relationships involving families, friendships, and social groups, all of which can shape behavior within organizations. Indeed, issues of jealousy, conflict, mistrust, and “spoiled children” are common in some family firms; these often induce calculative trade-offs in relationships that are resolved via informal and even formal contracting arrangements that warrant more study (Chrisman, Chua, Le Breton-Miller, Miller, & Steier, 2018). Excessive self-interest of opportunistic or “fair-weather friends” or colleagues may threaten potentially beneficial relationships in an organization and thus may profit from a clear-headed consideration of mechanisms for balancing costs and benefits. Finally, even mistrust and suspicion between class-based groups can be addressed via intelligent trade-offs realized via informal contracts.

The Organizational Perspective on Social Relations

A second stream of research disclosed by our sample is rooted in Granovetter’s (1973, 1983, 1985) work. Representing 57% of our sample, these 213 articles adopt an organizational perspective on social relations—the most prevalent of recent years. Economic actors, be they organizations, groups, or individuals, are assumed to be embedded in systems of social relations that afford opportunities. Accordingly, authors embrace a mostly positive

view of social relations in organizations, focusing on their utility for performance. Consequently, they view social relations as *assets* that are leveraged in organizational contexts via two mechanisms. At the organizational level, relations are *transformed into useful resources*. At group and individual levels, relations *channel goods or information* for actors to use to achieve organizational objectives.

Assumptions: Relationships Can Be Beneficial. Network and social capital perspectives (Burt, 2009; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1983, 1985; Putnam, 1995, 2000) are two of the most common lenses for researchers adopting the organizational perspective, whether for addressing social relations at the organizational, group, or individual level. Often associating their work with Granovetter (1973), Coleman (1988), Putnam (1995), or Burt (2009), these researchers assume individuals to be embedded in social networks. Consequently, the structure of those networks and the ties people develop within them can impact organizational and individual performance (Gittell et al., 2010; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012).

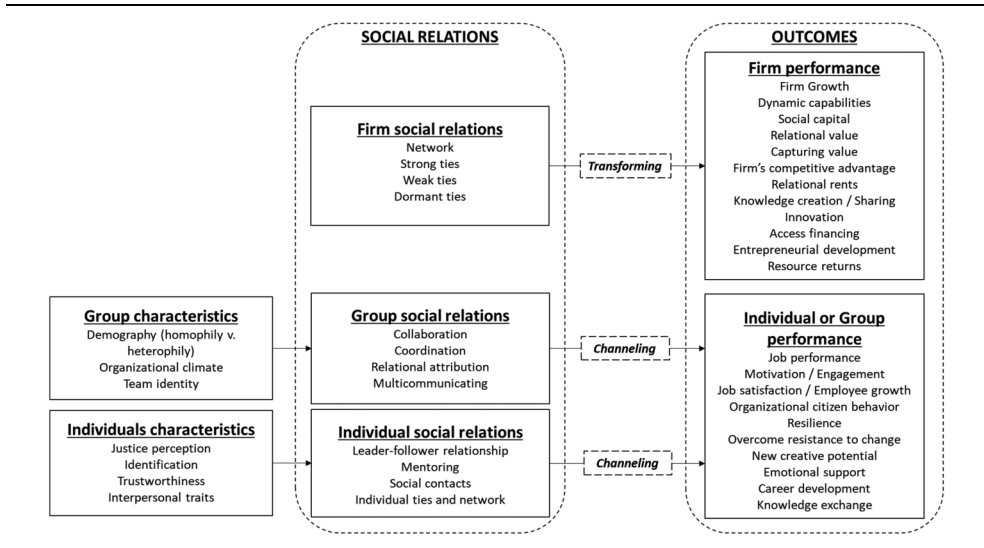
Most of these researchers assume that social relations within networks can be leveraged to become valuable resources for organizations. This transformation of interpersonal aptitudes and behaviors into organizational capital and capabilities is an important theme in these studies. Grigoriou and Rothaermel (2014), for example, note that individuals' "collaborative behavior . . . provide[s] them with opportunities for firm-level impact" (p. 607). Although some scholars examine relational micro-foundations, many assume relations to foster *organizational* capabilities (Chirico & Salvato, 2016). Consequently, they analyze their effect on firm performance and unit or employee productivity. In short, researchers assume that social relations developed by individuals in formal and informal settings can serve as useful and valuable resources for organizations and their members.

Social Relations As Assets. Research from the organizational perspective conceptualizes social relationships as *assets*. Converted by organizations and their members into valuable resources, social relations are said to improve both firm and individual performance. Individuals develop social relations in informal and formal settings that they mobilize as assets to access new business opportunities (Giudici, Reinmoeller, & Ravasi, 2018), transfer and create knowledge (McFadyen, Semadeni, & Cannella, 2009; Uzzi & Lancaster, 2003), generate innovation (Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010; Vlaisavljevic et al., 2016), or improve group functioning, collaboration, and job satisfaction (Methot, Rosado-Solomon, & Allen, 2018). Articles emphasize the positive impact of social relations on firm performance (Akhtar, Khan, Frynas, Tse, & Rao-Nicholson, 2018; Dyer & Singh, 1998) and, at the individual level, upon job performance (Casciaro et al., 2014; Freeney & Fellenz, 2013).

Figure 3 models the organizational perspective by revealing its three levels of analysis. At the organizational level, social relations affect different aspects of firm performance; they also concern group and individual relationships and their effectiveness in organizations.

We identified two mechanisms for converting social relationships into *assets* in the form of resources or opportunities. The first represents the *transformation* of social relations of top managers or directors into *useful organizational resources* (Antcliff, Saundry, & Stuart, 2007; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012; McEvily & Zaheer, 1999; Uzzi & Lancaster, 2003). The second, *channeling of goods or information*, occurs as relations are mobilized by groups or individuals to achieve organizational objectives and enhance

Figure 3
Relationships as Assets



performance (Bolinger, Klotz, & Leavitt, 2018; Colbert et al., 2016; Freeney & Fellenz, 2013; Gittel et al., 2010; Schulte, Cohen, & Klein, 2012). Under transformation, the relationships themselves become assets such as social capital; in channeling, the relationships convey information or goods that create new opportunities. Thus, transformation takes relations to be resources, whereas channeling views relations as way of generating opportunities and positive outcomes.

Resource transformation: Under *resource transformation*, social relations are converted into organizational capital. Among the 213 articles adopting this perspective, 103 relate to this mechanism. Scholars focus on the effect of social relations on diverse outcomes, such as the transformation of executive social relations into social capital, relational capital, and other organizational resources. For example, social relations may produce relational capital that “fosters mutual trust between individuals and results in superior access to resources held by others and enhanced revenue generation” (Byun, Frake, & Agarwal, 2018). Relationships developed by top managers and directors are said to contribute to firm competitive advantage by sustaining value creation, knowledge transfer, innovation, and economic performance (Broschak & Block, 2014; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014). The challenge for firms then is to develop relational capabilities to leverage executives’ personal networks by integrating and transforming them into organizational social and relational capital (Capaldo, 2007; Fu, 2015; Levin & Walter, 2019; Lorenzoni & Lipparini, 1999; Lowik et al., 2012). In that respect, social relations are viewed as resources from which organizations create and capture value (Arregle et al., 2015; Chatain, 2011; Dyer et al., 2018).

A lesser portion of the literature associated with this mechanism focuses on the position of organizations in a social network and the structure of those networks. Building on Granovetter (1973, 1983) and Burt (2009), Baum, McEvily, and Rowley (2012) define structural network positions and structure as “the relational character of the ties comprising the position, and any advantages firms gain (or do not) from these positions are likely to depend on the character of those ties” (p. 529). These researchers adopt a more nuanced stance on organizational outcomes from social relations. Whereas they recognize the instrumental value of such relations, they also demonstrate that this value varies according to the types of ties developed by organizations (McEvily, Jaffee, & Tortoriello, 2012; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010; Tortoriello, Reagans, & McEvily, 2012). For example, Gomez-Solorzano, Tortoriello, and Soda (2019) show that affective relationships paired with instrumental ones enhance inventor performance in R&D departments, but ties based on knowledge sharing and friendship tend to decrease such performance. Li, Veliyath, and Tan (2013) reveal the beneficial influence of informal and structural network arrangements on the performance of clusters of firms.

Channeling goods and information: The second mechanism from the organizational perspective we label as *channeling* of goods and information. Of the 213 articles, 110 reflect this mechanism. Researchers focus on how social relations are mobilized by groups and individuals in organizations as *channels* to convey goods and information. These relations act as mediators between group or individual characteristics and their performance in organizations.

The literature addressing social relations from a *group level* develops models to capture how the relationship between group characteristics and performance is mediated by social relations (Barton & Kahn, 2019; Gittell, 2001, 2002; Goldberg, Riordan, & Schaffer, 2010). For example, building on social identity theory, Gundlach, Zivnuska, and Stoner (2006) find that team functioning based on collectivism leads to team identification and identity that, in turn, improve group performance. Similarly, Lee, Bachrach, and Lewis (2014) show that team member closure (i.e., reciprocal ties and network density) develops transitive triads in groups that improve information processing and performance. Other researchers demonstrate the effect of group demography on group relational and affective functioning, which again aids team performance (Goldberg et al., 2010; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2014). Some scholars also emphasize the role of managers in creating arrangements that shape social relations and group performance (Methot et al., 2018; Rosenkranz & Wulf, 2019; Yakubovich & Burg, 2019).

Finally, research focusing on social relations at an *individual level* develops complex models showing social relations to act as mediators between individual characteristics and job performance. For example, important relationships are found between individual ties, social relations at work, job performance (Cross & Cummings, 2004; McFadyen et al., 2009; Perry-Smith, 2006) and job satisfaction (Colbert et al., 2016). By mobilizing leader-member exchange theory (LMX), others show how an individual’s perception of relations with a superior impact their behavior at work (Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden, & Rousseau, 2010; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Stea, Pedersen, & Foss, 2017) and work engagement (Freeney & Fellenz, 2013). In short, social relations are mobilized as *channels* by organizational members who direct them to aid in task achievement and job

performance. Although mobilized as *channels*, again, social relations are seen largely to be firm *assets*.

Critiques and Gaps in the Organizational Perspective. Critiques of the organizational perspective have been visited upon both theories within the perspective as well as the failure to bridge these theories. For example, the network perspective is criticized as being ambiguous as to the role of agency and temporality, and its lack of precision in the conceptualization of social ties (Borgatti, Brass, & Halgin, 2014; Kirschbaum, 2019). The resource-based view too has been questioned regarding its supposed tautological and static nature and because relationships are too often accorded positive normative status. Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2021), for example, argue that there are penalties associated with resource-based relationships that can bring about complacency and organizational rigidity. There also has been little attempt to reconcile different theories within the organizational perspective. Thus, Burt & Soda (2021) signal a disconnect between studies of networks and resources and the failure to unify these key pillars of the perspective, for example, by showing how different network configurations can engender dynamic capabilities.

Scholars adopting an organizational perspective appear on balance to pay more attention than their economic counterparts to group and individual relations, often involving employees, departments, and individual actors. Nonetheless there remains a paucity of studies demonstrating the influence of friendship, kinship, or commonalities of religion, class, and education upon relationships at work and their organizational consequences. For example, positive emotions and loyalty among family members owning and operating a business can facilitate effective and economical modes of governance and business growth, an asset and comparative advantage of some firms (Chrisman et al., 2018). Similarly, relationships of trust between family CEOs of family-owned companies with executives at other family firms can often be passed on to kin because such ties, based on trust and reputation, can extend to close relatives (Amore, Bennesen, Le Breton-Miller, & Miller, 2021; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). Of course, family relationships in organizations can also lead to dysfunctional behaviors such as cronyism and favoritism that alienate nonfamily employees and owners. Finally, friendship and social relationships also can play out in business and entrepreneurial ventures, again producing a variety of positive and negative outcomes (Francis & Sandberg, 2000; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Thevenard-Puthod, 2022).

The Interactionist Perspective on Organizations

The third stream of research in our sample builds on Polanyi's (1944) and Zelizer's (2000, 2017) work on embeddedness. Accounting for only 17% of our sample, these 61 studies adopt what we term an *interactionist perspective*. They view social relations and economic or organizational actions as indissociable parts of the same processes. They hope to understand how social relations are shaped by organizations and vice versa. Social relations here can be broadly characterized as underlying *drivers* actuated in organizational contexts via two mechanisms. First, such relations can be seen as products of *institutionalizing forces*. Simultaneously, because they are inherent to *practices performed* by agents through ongoing interaction, social relations also shape fundamental organizational processes.

Assumptions: Social Relations Are Constitutive. The interactionist perspective resonates with Karl Polanyi's (1944) pioneering version of social embeddedness and Zelizer's (2000, 2017) work on the social meaning of economy. Both propose an unusually fundamental and holistic approach to social relations and economic activities that echoes throughout this perspective. Although relatively few articles from our sample build explicitly on these scholars, the latter lay bare the assumptions shared by the others within this perspective.

In his seminal *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (1944) develops a holistic approach to social life deeply rooted in cultural processes by adopting an anthropological view. By deconstructing history, he argues that market-based societies are not an inevitable result of a natural progression from barter to monetary economy to market-based society. Instead, they result from historical contingencies embedded in cultural and social circumstances. Social relations and economic or organizational actions are said to be *indissociable parts of the processes that constitute social life*. Economic action is viewed as behavior by humans to preserve social position and advantages in a community. In other words, social relations and economic decisions are indivisible from social life. This resonates with the concept of relational work defined by Zelizer as “the creative effort people make establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations” (Zelizer, 2000, p. 149).

Like Polanyi, Zelizer (2000) defines economic activities as intrinsic to social relations (Steiner, 2007). And like Granovetter (1973), she recognizes the importance of social relations in today's market-based societies. However, for her the notion of embeddedness fails to capture what individuals really do when engaged in economic activities. Instead, she focuses on the cultural, moral, and social meaning of economy and money (Zelizer, 2017), capturing, for example, how actors negotiate meaningful social relationships while engaged in currency exchange (Zelizer, 2000, 2017).

This holistic approach provides an evocative framework for the assumptions shared by authors from the interactionist perspective. Whether through lenses of institutional logics, the new institutionalism, boundary theory, or power and gender studies, scholars view organizations and social relations to be rooted in cultural processes. Those processes, be they conceptualized as institutional or historical contexts, market structures, or workplace designs, are assumed to influence the nature of organizational social relationships (Spedale, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2007; Theodorakopoulos, Ram, & Kakabadse, 2015). Bachmann and Inkpen (2011) note “[t]he characteristics of the institutional environment in which interactions are embedded are viewed as constitutive elements in trust development processes in inter-organizational relationships” (p. 283). Trust, power, reciprocity, and relational formality between parties are assumed to underlie the very forms taken on by social relations in organizational contexts (Svärd, 2016; Weaven, Baker, & Dant, 2017).

Other researchers from the interactionist perspective have taken a practice-oriented approach (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009) that echoes Zelizer (2000, 2012, 2017). Practice theory focuses on everyday actions and interactions that shape—and are shaped by—organizational and economic processes (Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018). As Thomas, Sargent, and Hardy (2011) explain:

...the social life [is] enacted in the microcontext of communicative interactions among individuals through which meaning is negotiated. According to this view, organizational change is endemic,

natural, and ongoing; it occurs in everyday interactions as actors engage in the process of establishing new meanings for organizational activities. (p. 22)

Consequently, organizational structures and processes are assumed to be enacted and shaped by ongoing interactions in organizational contexts (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009). Scholars view social relations and organizations as indivisible, such that relations are assumed to shape organizations fundamentally and, in turn, are shaped by them.

Social relations as drivers: Studies conceptualize social relations as fundamental underlying *drivers*. They provide organizations with necessary impetus to launch and convey collective actions. Thus,

...relationships are, metaphorically, the nervous system of the organization - the source of complex social interactions, rapid coordination of systems, and integrated processing of concurrent signals. Formal and informal work relationships can be thought of as underlying relational systems that stretch beneath units and shape what occurs within them (Kahn, 1998). (Kahn, Barton, & Fellows, 2013, p. 378)

In other words, by means of ongoing actions and interactions, social relations represent *drivers* injecting impetus and energy into organizational processes.

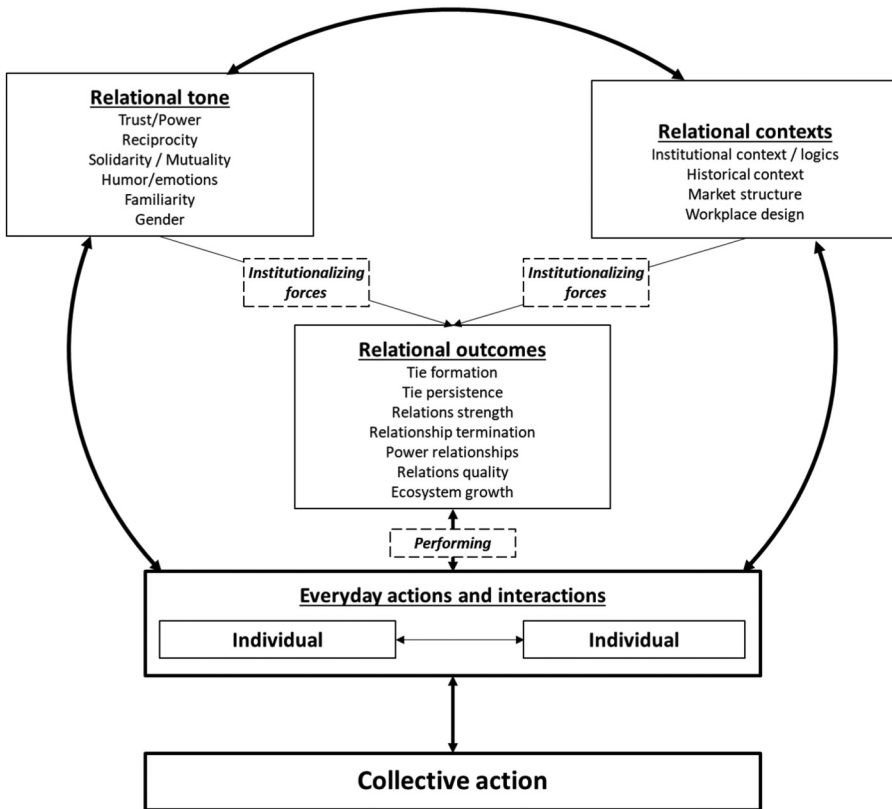
Figure 4 summarizes this interactionist perspective. It incorporates circular and bidirectional influences between social relations and collective action, suggesting mutual influence and embeddedness. Relational outcomes at the center of the model acts as *drivers* that provoke actions and reactions. They are governed by *institutionalizing forces* at play in and around organizations (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Dahlander & McFarland, 2013; Gajewska-De Mattos, Chapman, & Clegg, 2004) and, in turn, constitute a foundation for day-to-day practices that are *performed* in ongoing interaction (Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; Levina & Orlikowski, 2009; Thomas et al., 2011). Hence, *institutionalizing forces* and *performing practices* leverage social relations as *drivers* in organizations.

Institutionalizing forces: Among the 61 articles from this perspective, 45 evoke the mechanism of *institutionalizing forces* occurring in and around organizations that shape social relations. Some studies focus on institutional contexts and logics (Bachmann, 2001; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Spedale et al., 2007; Theodorakopoulos et al., 2015). Bachmann and Inkpen (2011), for example, argue:

The characteristics of the institutional environment in which interactions are embedded are viewed as constitutive elements in trust development processes in inter-organizational relationships. (p. 283)

Thus, legal context, community norms, and reputation are seen to foster trust building. Other studies show the influence of national cultures. Skarmeas and Robson (2008) and Kostova and Roth (2002) find that national cultures affect trust, conflict, and commitment, with consequences for the quality of relationships in Western firms operating across borders.

Figure 4
Relationships as Drivers



Other works still focus on institutional differences relating to gender (Saparito, Elam, & Brush, 2013), power (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2014), emotion (Methot, Melwani, & Rothman, 2017), humor (Cooper, 2008; Mallett & Wapshott, 2014), or interpersonal familiarity (Hinds & Cramton, 2014), and how they affect organizational relationships. Buzzanell and D'Enbeau (2014), for example, reveal how power shapes mentoring relationships:

Mentoring can uncover semi- or unconscious forces that drive particular mentoring arrangements and expose taken-for-granted [institutional] power relations. These forces may be deeply embedded in the parties' psyches. (p. 696)

Similarly, Cooper (2008) shows how at work, "humor dynamics can facilitate or detract from the formation of new relationships, as well as strengthen or destroy existing relationships" (Cooper, 2008, p. 1088). Finally, Methot et al. (2017) and Weaven et al. (2017)

find expression of emotion to shape communication in the workplace. They show how relationship quality between franchisers and franchisees benefit from norms of solidarity, flexibility, and mutuality, each yielding greater trust, commitment, and satisfaction. These *institutionalizing forces* prescribe relational norms that influence the nature and quality of social relations in organizational contexts.

Performed practices: A second mechanism associated with the interactionist perspective we label as *performed practices* (16 among the 61 articles). This literature mobilizes practice-based theory to focus on “relations that are routinely reproduced in mundane practices of organizing” (Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010, p. 527), and how these ongoing interactions actuate and enact organizational processes (Vincent & Pagan, 2019). For example, by adopting a discursive approach to practice, Levina and Orlikowski (2009) show how agents renegotiate power relations via discursive resources and how that transforms such relations in and between organizations. Thomas et al. (2011) demonstrate how organizational resistance to change is influenced by meanings negotiated between senior and middle managers in everyday interaction. Finally, Myers (2018) suggests that learning in organizations is socially constructed as it is rooted in relational processes enabling individuals to mutually process new experiences. Conceptualized as ongoing interaction, this approach views social relations as central features of *performing practices* that shape collective action.

Critiques and Gaps in the Interactionist Perspective. The focus of an interactionist perspective on organizations is twofold. First, unlike work from other perspectives focusing on business contexts, the interactionist perspective centers on the broader institutional and cultural context forging relational norms and social relationships in organizations. Second, the interactionist perspective avoids an objectified conceptualization of relationships. The focus is instead on the dynamic nature of relationships, often portrayed as ongoing interactions between colleagues. Perhaps because of this focus, there have been challenges of aggregation to more macro levels of analysis and therefore fewer studies relating to outcomes such as economic performance or strategic advantage. Some social exchanges are far more directed by objective constraints and clear financial goals than others, and it is wise to consider that in avoiding socially overdetermined interpretations (Granovetter, 1985). Thus, in emphasizing socially conditioned and intersubjective elements, there is some danger of interactionists neglecting more objective economic and organizational concerns. In addition, the attention to fine-grained detail in many of the studies can make generalization difficult. Finally, there is great diversity in the foci of the studies and less orchestration around core paradigms than for our other two perspectives.

Discussion

Our review provides rather a broad yet detailed landscape to offer investigators a richer set of research options and opportunities, and a framework for positioning and shaping their contributions. It delineates a vast expanse of literature on social relationships in organizations to reveal a varied set of underlying assumptions and mechanisms to inform future research. As summarized in Table 1, we identified three perspectives based on three distinct sets of

Table 1
Summary of Findings

Schools of Thought	Assumptions	School Focus	Relational Mechanisms	Representative Models	Common Level of Analysis	Research Subfield	Theoretical Foundations	Examples of Articles
ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONS	Relationships involve uncertainty and opportunism	Compromises: Situation in which one balances opposing situations or qualities.	Balancing: To negotiate social relations by minimizing their costs and maximizing their benefits.	<pre> graph TD SR[Social relations] --> C[Costs] SR --> B[Benefits] </pre>	Interorganizational or Principal-agent	Supply chain	Agency theory Transaction cost theory Social exchange theory Resource-dependence theory	Adams, Khoja, & Kaufman, 2012; Barden & Mitchell, 2007; Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Hallen et al., 2014; Holm et al., 1999; Kostova et al., 2018; Lee, 2012; Pahnke, McDonald, Wang, & Hallen, 2015; Westphal et al., 2006.
ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONS	Relationships can be beneficial. Different social ties can be mobilized as resources for different purposes.	Assets: Useful or valuable quality or skill.	Contracting: To negotiate social relation with formal or informal agreement to fulfill an obligation.	<pre> graph TD SR[Social relations] --> C[Costs] SR --> B[Benefits] SR --> FP[Firm performance] </pre>	Interorganizational or Principal-agent	Governance	Economic contracting theory Agency theory	Carson et al., 2006; Dawson, Karahanna, & Buchholtz, 2014; Evanschitzky, Caemmerer, & Backhaus, 2016; Harmon et al., 2015; Mellewigt et al., 2018; Mudambi & Helper, 1998; Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Ryall & Sampson, 2009;
ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONS	Relationships can be beneficial. Different social ties can be mobilized as resources for different purposes.	Assets: Useful or valuable quality or skill.	Transforming: To leverage individual social relations into organizational resources.	<pre> graph LR SR[Social relations] --> FP[Firm performance] </pre>	Organizational	Strategy	Resource-based view Social network theory Social capital Relational view of competitive advantage Dynamic capability	Anciliff et al., 2007; Bird & Zellweger, 2018; Briscoe & Tsai, 2011; Broschak & Block, 2014; Chatam, 2011; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Dyer et al., 2018; Engelen, Kautfersch, & Schmidt, 2016; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012; Levin & Waller, 2019; McEvilly & Zaher, 1999; Reagans, Singh, & Krishnan, 2015; Uzzi & Lancaster, 2003;

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Schools of Thought	Assumptions	School Focus	Relational Mechanisms	Representative Models	Common Level of Analysis	Research Subfield	Theoretical Foundations	Examples of Articles
			<p>Channeling: To leverage social relations into ways of sending or receiving information, goods, etc.</p>		Group or Individual	Management or Organizational behavior	Social identity theory Cognition theories Behavioral theories Leader-Member-Exchange theory (LMX)	Anand et al., 2010; Bolinger et al., 2018; Colbert et al., 2016; Creany, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; Erhardt & Ragins, 2019; Freney & Fellenz, 2013; Gitell et al., 2010; Lmkau & Scandura, 2002; Lee et al., 2014; McFadyen et al., 2009; Perry-Smith, 2006; Pollack, Coy, Green, & Davis, 2015; Schulte et al., 2012; Stuart, 2017; Umphress, Labianca, Brass, Kass, & Scholten, 2003; Wellman, 2017
INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANIZATIONS	<p>Social relations are constitutive. Collective action is constructed via relations with others.</p>	<p>Drivers: Motivations that induce collective actions involved in or responsible for an action or reaction in an organization.</p>	<p>Institutionalizing forces: External forces that govern and regulate the way people interact with each other (institutions, logics, contexts, etc.).</p>		Individual	Social anthropology or Sociology	Gender studies Boundary theory Institutional logics New institutionalism	Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Buzzanell & D'Erbeau, 2014; Dahlander & McFarland, 2013; Gajewska-De Mattos et al., 2004; McKnight, Chummings, & Chervany, 1998; Swärd, 2016; van Iterson & Clegg, 2008; Weaven et al., 2017;
			<p>Performing: To shape organizational process via ongoing social interactions.</p>		Interactional	Organizational studies	Practice theory Social constructionism	Barrett, Oborn, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2012; Brown et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; Keevers & Sykes, 2016; Levina & Orlikowski, 2009; Myers, 2018; Thomas et al., 2011; Trefalt, 2013.

assumptions about social relations in and around organizations. We associated each perspective with specific types of relationships via core underlying mechanisms and proposed representative models to aid in theorizing on issues like social embeddedness, behavior in and of organizations, strategy making, alliances, and networks.

For example, *compromise relationships*, an economic conception, are engendered under asymmetric information and authority conditions. Facing a threat of opportunism, firms must manage uncertainty and negotiate contracts to safeguard interests. These mechanisms constrain the scope of relationships as well as their terms and conditions. Organizations also deploy *asset relationships* for targeted purposes. Executives and employees are embedded in networks of relationships to enhance performance. Individuals leverage these by transforming and channeling them into relational capabilities and assets, thereby creating value. In our last category of *driver relationships*, organizations can be seen as clans united by shared values and culture. Interactions here are governed by institutional norms originating in cultural, historical, and market contexts. Regularly interacting parties co-construct meaningful practices that shape organizational processes, in turn leading to relations with a wide range of non-specific purposes. Collectively, the three perspectives provide insight into the scope and functioning of social relations in and around organizations, demonstrating their roles as products of economic compromise, strategic assets, and fundamental drivers of process.

Table 2 then compares the three perspectives according to ontological position, typical relations, parties implicated, impetus, mechanisms, and focus. Specifically, those studying social relations from an economic perspective frequently adopt a *probabilistic* position; they assume uncertainty in economic relationships and a potential for bivalent outcomes.

Table 2
The Perspectives Compared

	Economic Perspective	Organizational Perspective	Interactionist Perspective
HOW RESEARCH CONCEPTUALIZES RELATIONS			
Ontological position	Probabilism	Instrumentalism	Interactionism
HOW RELATIONS ARE DEPLOYED IN ORGANIZATIONS			
Typical relations	Transactions	Connections/ties/contacts	Personal interactions
Typical parties implicated	TMT members or directors and outsiders (other firms TMT members and directors)	TMT members, directors, employees, and their network ties	Individuals working together
Relational impetus	Distrust of others	Achievement	Social forces and collective action
Purpose of mechanisms	To negotiate <i>(manage uncertainty: To safeguard organizational interests against external threats)</i>	To leverage <i>(create value: To leverage individual capital and rearrange it into organizational assets)</i>	To construct <i>(shape meaning: To shape collective action via ongoing interactions that are defined by external forces/norms)</i>
Relations focused on	Risks	Capabilities	Practices

By contrast, those embracing an organizational perspective adopt an *instrumentalist* conception portraying relationships as tools or assets used purposefully by organizational members to enhance organizational performance. Finally, researchers from an interactionist perspective adopt an *interactionist* view of organizations, the latter constituting a nexus of interactions among actors and their institutional contexts—a setting for building shared understandings and processes.

The Concept of Embeddedness: A Progression and a Process

The breadth and variety of relational patterns identified in this review engender a more nuanced understanding of the concept of embeddedness of social relations in organizations—that is, the conditioning of relationships by their social context. The different perspectives identified highlight how embeddedness can vary considerably, shaping relational processes and outcomes.

Uzzi (1996), Dacin, Beal, and Ventresca (1999) and Barden and Mitchell (2007) reveal that embeddedness can be analyzed at multiple levels. Similarly, our framework identifies the conditions and mechanisms affecting embeddedness, revealing gradations from arms-length compromises to more socially embedded relations, to pervasive underlying drivers—each representing different framing possibilities for researchers.

According to Granovetter (1985), most work from an economic perspective is “undersocialized”; specifically, it represents more atomistic accounts of human behavior that views individuals as acting in self-interest with little concern for or conditioning by social relations. Hence agency and transaction cost explanations assume that individuals will behave to maximize personal benefits, and monitoring and incentive systems as well as organization and market structures must be set up to prevent socially costly opportunistic behavior. Social embeddedness is seen as minimal or as a challenge to monitor.

At the other extreme, human behavior is seen to be highly constrained by the social context—to be so thoroughly shaped by social institutions and ongoing relationships that the latitude for action is deemed by Granovetter (1985) to be limited or “oversocialized.” Polanyi (1944) and hence several other proponents of the interactionist perspective are argued to be subject to this higher degree of social embeddedness. Today, however, many interactionists view embeddedness as a process that evolves naturally as individuals interact with one another and with their institutional and social contexts. In other words, it develops from process and is not a condition or stable state.

In between, we find the organizational perspective, whereby distinctions are made by authors such as Burt (2009) according to different levels or degrees of embeddedness, for example, in bridging versus bonding ties, or high versus low levels of trust in intra and inter-organizational interactions. Here, embeddedness becomes a variable that takes on valence and dimension as a function of the social context. Again, explicit consideration of these multiple varieties of embeddedness in studying organizational processes can surface novel insights.

Our framework also sheds light on *how* social relations become embedded in organizations. Embeddedness has been broadly defined by economic sociologists as “the process by which social relations shape economic actions” (Uzzi, 1996, p. 674). Although the notion has received much attention (Echols & Tsai, 2005; Le Breton-Miller, Miller, & Lester, 2011; Moran, 2005; Westphal & Zajac, 2013; Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990), in fact,

few researchers have viewed *embeddedness as a process*. Instead, most have conceptualized and operationalized it as an independent variable to explain the effects of social phenomena on organizations (Dacin et al., 1999; Uzzi, 1996). Zukin and DiMaggio (1990) use the concept to demonstrate the limits of economic rationales and explain how rationality among economic actors is shaped by cognitive, cultural, structural, and political institutions. Other researchers mobilize it to demonstrate its effects on governance preferences and firm behavior (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2011; Westphal & Zajac, 2013). Finally, others link it to social capital to demonstrate the impact of social relations on firm performance (Echols & Tsai, 2005; Grewal, Lilien, & Mallapragada, 2006; Moran, 2005). Hence, most researchers have used concept to explain strategic tendencies and economic performance. Our framework, however, begins to direct attention to how social relations become embedded within organizations. The mechanisms identified in each of the perspectives may serve as starting points for disclosing the dynamics of social embedding. Because they involve distinct ways of embedding, governed by different mechanisms, social relations can take on very different forms and influence economic activities in a wide variety of ways.

Pluralism as a Way Forward

Our review surfaces a richness of perspectives of organizational social relations, suggesting a path to what may be termed relational pluralism. According to Shipilov, Gulati, Kilduff, Li, and Tsai (2014, p. 449), “pluralism exists when actors maintain multiple kinds of relationship with one another.” Thus a given individual can have different relationships, “multiplex ties,” with others in *different social contexts* (e.g., Raffaelli & Glynn, 2014). Moreover, the *same two parties* may manifest different types of relationships with one another, “multifaceted ties,” depending on the context or issue at hand—for example, economic when negotiating salary, organizational and asset based when leveraging contacts, and interactional when collaborating on a project together (Shipilov et al., 2014).

Our typology characterizes the nature, processes, and outcomes of these multiplex and multifaceted connections in and around organizations. It also offers a new framework that provides latitude for several types of relational pluralism researchers to bring to their work. First, the sources and outcomes of *relational qualities* such as trust can be studied from economic, organizational, and interactionist perspectives. For example, trust can be seen as a product of prior economic exchanges and a source of economic benefit, or as an organizational asset fostered by close interaction and in turn leading to better firm performance, and alternatively as a key moderator of interactions and practices and the trajectories by which they develop.

Second, different perspectives may be brought to bear to study a range of relational factors around *a given issue*—for example, a board appointment can be viewed from an agency (economic) perspective, as an asset (organizational), and as an interaction process facilitator. Agency theory, an economic lens, may be used to evaluate the knowledge and financial independence of potential board members as it affects their monitoring relationship with a CEO. Board appointments can also be viewed from an organizational perspective, viewing potential board members as sources of information or prestige and reputation for the company. Finally, from an interactionist perspective, board recruitments can be evaluated as a way of bringing in those with complementary identities and work practices to facilitate strategic decision making

in a politically contentious board environment. Each of these perspectives elicits important considerations in making appointments to the board. And viewing a decision from complementary perspectives by assessing dimensions from each can provide a richer appreciation of drivers of relationships and their outcomes.

A third implementation of relational pluralism falls in line with our discussion of embeddedness above. Specifically, a relationship can be viewed dynamically, as following *developmental progression*, say from economic, arms-length status to functional cooperation to personal, trust-based engagement. Thus, initially, a relationship between an organization and a key stakeholder such as a major client or supplier can be seen as simply an economically based association, where formal contracts serve as key mechanisms; then over time, as trust and mutual dependency grow, the relationship may develop into an asset to be nurtured and protected, one where terms are more open-ended. Finally, over time, parties may work together closely to merge operations, forming common beliefs and purposes, as well as joint practices through close interactions.

A fourth variety of pluralism is based on the potential complementarity among the three relational perspectives at different levels of analysis—interorganizational, organizational, and interpersonal (e.g., Allison, 1971; Nightingale & Toulouse, 1977). For example, acquisition decisions involve *interorganizational* considerations regarding the valuation and monitoring of a target, issues of bargaining and negotiation, economic compromise, and financial control. At the *organizational* level, these types of decisions also may benefit from an understanding of relationships that may engender synergy in resources, capabilities, or network ties. Finally, at the *interpersonal* level, issues of identity, values, and practice become central in envisaging relational challenges and opportunities in candidate evaluation and the postmerger integration process. Again, these different lenses may also vary over time in a *developmental progression*, for example, from the preliminary evaluation phase to a later negotiation or postmerger phase. Research into such decisions is likely to benefit from considering relevant factors contributed by each perspective and might miss critical factors were only a single perspective brought to bear.

Like Allison's (1971) analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, relational issues take on greater depth and produce more insight when addressed from multiple perspectives. Awareness of the multifaceted nature of social relationships not only provides a broader conceptual toolkit for studying theoretical perspectives, but it also enables better matching and comparing theoretical perspectives to the issues at hand.

Research Agenda

The relational patterns identified in this review can help researchers position their research more strategically; leverage a wider range of conceptual options; and better tailor their research to the organizations, problems, and levels of analysis they seek to address. Our review also provides a foundation for studying relational pluralism, intersperspective comparisons, and cross-perspective integration. It shows which perspectives have emerged more robustly to address specific issues, and which have been relatively neglected but have potential to inform a variety of managerial questions. For example, the organizational perspective on social relations has demonstrated the strategic value of social relations as key drivers of firm, team, and individual performance. Unfortunately, we still know too little about the

interactionist perspective of organizations, its dynamics and outcomes, and its relationship with our other two perspectives.

Developing the Interactionist Perspective on Organizations

Although much research adopts economic and organizational perspectives on social relations, the interactionist perspective has been less explored and represents an interesting avenue for further research. For example, to shed light on social relations as underlying drivers of interactions and outcomes in organizations, researchers could trace the socioeconomic implications of their evolution from high levels of embeddedness in developing economies or premarket societies (Polanyi, 1944), to looser forms and levels in mature market societies (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016; Ocasio, Mauskopf, & Steele, 2016). Similarly, one might research why different degrees of social cohesion evolve in different interactionist contexts—departments, divisions, or levels of hierarchy, or with different stakeholders—perhaps depending on the nature and frequency of interaction. Finally, researchers might investigate how the nature, harmony, and effectiveness of day-to-day interactions are shaped by institutional pressures within geographic, cultural, and industry contexts. For example, embeddedness in a small, close-knit company town may favor harmonious interaction and collective action. Studies of some family firms in such communities have found that homophily and interdependency can foster strong social norms, collaborative attitudes, and conformity, providing both socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages (Baù, Chirico, Pittino, Backman, & Klaesson, 2019).

Relational Approaches and Types of Contexts

Because the nature and value of social relations can vary across different types of organizations, some perspectives and how they conceptualize relationships may be more suited to some contexts than others. For example, the strategies and operations of family business, non-profit organizations, and social entrepreneurship ventures are often driven by social values and personal relations. Many family firms, for example, are benevolent toward stakeholders (Chua, Chrisman, De Massis, & Wang, 2018; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Miller, Lee, Chang, & Le Breton-Miller, 2009; Zellweger & Nason, 2008). Given their goals to maintain sustainable relationships (Cennamo, Berrone, Cruz, & Gomez-Mejia, 2012; Zellweger, Nason, Nordqvist, & Brush, 2013) and build informal alliances (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003) based on trust and generosity (Pearson & Carr, 2011; Sundaramurthy, 2008), the interactionist perspective may provide special insight into the microprocesses generating or thwarting trust and reciprocity. Family firms would also be interesting venues to examine sources of bonding ties from the organizational perspective and their bivalent outcomes from an economic perspective. And because social entrepreneurship combines social and economic value creation (Bacq, Hartog, & Hoogendoorn, 2016; Janssen, Bacq, & Brouard, 2012; Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019), it too is a promising setting for leveraging the interactionist perspective to uncover the institutional forces and microprocesses that reconcile tensions between economic and social objectives.

Research in entrepreneurship and public firm contexts also may profitably compare organizational and economic perspectives. For example, consistent with the former, some studies

reveal the importance to entrepreneurs of leveraging their social resources to strengthen their ventures (Cope, Jack, & Rose, 2007; De Carolis & Saporito, 2006; De Carolis, Litzky, & Eddleston, 2009; Grossman, Yli-Renko, & Janakiraman, 2012; Kacperczyk, 2013; Shane & Cable, 2002). And in line with the latter, researchers have suggested problematic outcomes of social relations in ventures where trust invites opportunism (Zahra, Yavuz, & Ucbasaran, 2006) or conflict between investors and entrepreneurs (Collewaert, 2012). Researchers might examine under what conditions—types of firms, governance arrangements, types of competitive actions, processes, and outcomes—these organizational and economic perspectives are complementary, and at what point they conflict (Chen & Miller, 2015).

Avenues for Future Research Through Comparison and Cross-Fertilization

We have partitioned the literature into three perspectives. In combination, these perspectives can be leveraged to develop new insights. Multiple types of social relations may exist within the same organization at different levels and departments, and with different stakeholders (see our discussion of pluralism). Thus, cross-fertilizing the three perspectives creates opportunities for multilevel studies examining the interplay between different types of social relations in the same organizations—for example, comparing our different mechanisms as applied to team building, interdepartmental collaboration, and communications with stakeholders.


There are several paths researchers can take to build on our review. First, our identification of three perspectives enables researchers to juxtapose these to *challenge the relative merits* of each in addressing any given research context or question. For example, under what conditions would innovative behavior be more encouraged by trust-based networks versus economic incentives? Comparisons across perspectives can also be structured according to research contexts. For example, which of the three perspectives—their ontological stance, mechanisms, and foci (e.g., see Table 2)—might be most insightful or predictive regarding the nature of relationships and outcomes from innovation, strategic alliances, or executive compensation in different types of organizations? In other words, would the relevance of the three perspectives vary according to issues and types of organizations—for example, in small entrepreneurial organizations, older bureaucracies, or conglomerates? Moreover, although much of the literature associates our perspectives with a given level of analysis—interpersonal, interdepartmental, interorganizational—this too can be questioned.

Second, researchers may further explore different varieties of relational pluralism to demonstrate *synergies or complementarities* among perspectives. These may aid in addressing a given research question: for example, how would the interactionist perspective on identities and practices provide insight into intra- and extra-organizational network formation and outcomes. In family firms, for example, would founder values and modes of interaction drive organizational networking and resource creation as well as the nature of economic trade-offs with partner organizations? More generally, how might the three perspectives inform one another? For example, how could economic and organizational strictures or inducements interact to jointly shape managerial identities, values, interpretive schemes, or practices. This application of multiple perspectives of relationships can provide new life to important research questions.

Limitations

We have chosen only to include studies from A-level management journals, excluding those in specialized journals (e.g., those in marketing or operations). This could affect the proportion of studies we found in each research stream. Nonetheless, our three streams of research do signal significant heterogeneity in theorizing social relations in organizations. Also, as noted, our review encompasses only research conducted in Western settings. Anthropological findings, however, suggest that research in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America can generate very different insights (Polanyi, 1944). In China, for example, Confucian ethics shape interpersonal relationships and their role in organizations and markets (Chen, Chen, & Xin, 2004; Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998). There, trust, networks, and reciprocity in management (Barkema, Chen, George, Luo, & Tsui, 2015; Hitt, Lee, & Yucel, 2002) reflect unique relational mindsets (Chen & Miller, 2011, 2015). Thus, research on social relations in non-Western economies could reveal important new perspectives, relations, and mechanisms.

ORCID iD

Isabelle Le Breton-Miller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5755-2939>

Notes

1. Subsequent derivative or related themes included the dynamics of collaboration (Dahlander & McFarland, 2013; Levin & Walter, 2019), competitive relationships (Chatain, 2011; Dyer et al., 2018; Hallen et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; McEvily & Marcus, 2005; McEvily & Zaheer, 1999), social capital (Antcliff et al., 2007; Engelen et al., 2016; Moran, 2005), relational capital (Kale et al., 2000), trust (Jeffries & Reed, 2000; Squire, Cousins, & Brown, 2009; Stevens, MacDuffie, & Helper, 2015), commitment (Robbins, Summers, & Miller, 2000; Skarneas & Robson, 2008), sharing behavior (Colman & Rouzies, 2019), and stakeholder relationship management (Wolfe & Putler, 2002).

2. Given the ambiguity and universality of the word “relationship,” a search of abstracts led to too many articles having nothing to do with the topic of this review.

3. The articles of our sample were published in these 15 journals: *Academy of Management Journal*; *Academy of Management Review*; *Administrative Science Quarterly*; *British Journal of Management*; *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*; *Human Relations*; *Journal of Business Venturing*; *Journal of Management*; *Journal of Management Studies*; *Journal of Small Business Management*; *Management Science*; *Organization Science*; *Organization Studies*; *Small Business Economics*; *Strategic Management Journal*.

4. Canada and the United States of America.

5. Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

6. Be aware that three articles had been miscategorized as non-Western by the Web of Science.

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