

## **Towards a Sociology of Reasonableness: Structure and Action in the Structural Interactionist Approach**

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# *Towards a Sociology of Reasonableness: Structure and Action in the Structural Interactionist Approach*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The principal aim of this article is to provide an introduction to structural interactionism, in particular examining its relationship to the concepts of structure and action, and the relationship between these two. The structural interactionist approach represents a distinct relational sociology perspective distinguished by its emergentist reading of the relationship between action and social structure. In this article, after presenting an overview of contemporary relational sociologies and examining the fundamental differences between relationist/relationalist sociologies on one side and structuralist sociologies on the other, we will expound the structural interactionist approach, starting with the relationship between structure and action and reserving attention for the concept of reasonableness. Lastly, we will discuss the methodological concerns surrounding structural interactionism, outlining a peculiar relationship in the process of social research between Social Network Analysis and qualitative research techniques.

Keywords: relational sociologies, structural interactionism, reasonableness.

## **1. Introduction**

This article aims to present the structural interactionist sociological perspective and to show how this approach is particularly suited to a study of contemporary society, as it allows one to conceptualise the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of the authors' shared reflections. For the sake of clarity, however, we inform readers that paragraphs 3 and 6 were written together, whereas paragraphs 1, 2 and 5 were written by Luigi Tronca and paragraph 4 by Michel Forsé.

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reasonableness, which is ever more important in a society where the spaces for and fields of subjective action are becoming more and more structured and complex. We have adopted the relationship between structure and action as a focus of attention which will serve as a useful guide throughout the article.

The article begins with an overview of the various contemporary relational sociologies, which we will attempt to classify using the traditional categories of macro-, meso- and microsociologies (paragraph 2).

Subsequently, we will present the foundation stones of the structural interactionist approach understood as a relational sociology, focusing in particular on the characteristics which make it quite distinct from relational sociologies of a relationist/relationalist kind on the one hand, and of a structuralist kind on the other (paragraph 3).

Therefore, in this article, the relationship between structure and action is identified as the theoretical (paragraph 4), epistemological and methodological (paragraph 5) space in which the challenge presented to sociology by the need for a valid, reliable study on the concept of reasonableness – this principle with the power to evoke subjective action intersubjectively, or, in other words, relationally – is faced.

## **2. Overview of contemporary relational sociologies: between relationism/relationalism and structuralism**

Before embarking on our overview of the characteristics of an approach to sociological knowledge of a relational type, perhaps we should begin with the distinction between macro-, meso- and microsociology. The distinction between macro- and microsociology is well known and has been amply discussed in the literature (Degenne and Forsé, 2004; Dumont, 1983; Smelser, 2011[1991]). On the one hand, macro-type sociologies, or in other words, those linked to methodological holism – for example, functionalist or conflict perspectives – place their focus on social structures or systems which determine and explain the actions of individuals through processes such as the process of socialisation, viewed as vital, generative social factors. On the other hand, we have microsociologies, or in other words, those linked to methodological individualism, for example those of a symbolic interactionist or ethnomethodological kind, which start from individuals and their representations of social phenomena in order to understand the social dimension of their actions. In summary, greatly simplifying the scenario emerging from the above, we can talk about sociologies which place their focus – on an epistemological and methodological level – on the one hand, on the structure of society, and on the other, on individuals' actions. We would like to

point out that, in the former type of sociological thought, what we have termed ‘structure’ for practical reasons has also been defined in several other ways; however, what tends to be a common thread in these definitions is the assertion that society, which is made up of superpersonal elements – *i.e.* elements which exist beyond the individual person, their characters and their perceptions – is real, in the sense that it presents its own ontological statute, although of course it cannot be fully known. These are just some of the distinguishing features of approaches to sociological knowledge based on methodological holism.

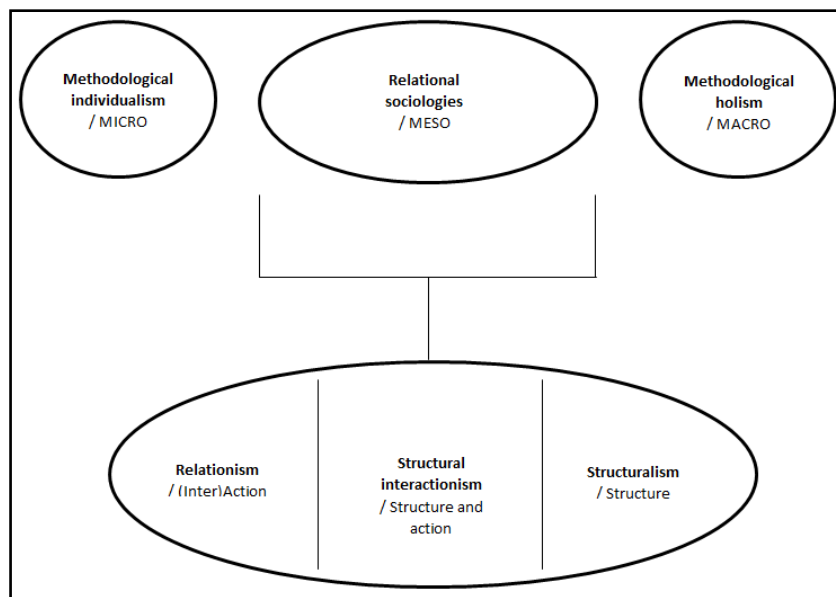
In the second current of thought, what we have called ‘action’ indicates the viewpoint of the subject/actor, who interprets the contents of what they observe and their own actions, assigning meaning to all of these factors. What we term ‘society’ – or perhaps we should call ‘the social sphere’ – therefore is not real, except as far as it can be said to be so for the individual who creates it. Please note that the literature has attributed principles (understood as values and rules) for action to the person which are rather different from each other. Again, these are just a few of the typifying elements of perspectives classified under the heading of methodological individualism.

Relational sociologies, in perfect synchrony with the line of thought now recognised as originating from Georg Simmel (1998[1908]), attempt to move beyond both the holist and the individualist perspectives, since neither has been able to take the analysis of what lies between subjects (whether individual or collective), or in other words the relationships and networks of relationships arising from connections between relationships, as a firm starting point from which to explain and/or understand social phenomena. In the eyes of a relational sociologist, both the macro- and microsociological perspectives are limited by the fact that they attempt to turn social behaviour into science regardless of the social sphere, *i.e.* the relationships between people. What the relational sociologist focuses on, however, is the analytical level which we have termed ‘meso’, as it lies halfway between the overall structure of society and its institutions, and the individual, and it attempts to analyse the elements connecting individuals and collective subjects, searching, with regard to the units of analysis (relationships and networks of relationships), for the social mechanisms and dynamics which can produce an effect both on individual subjects and on the level of social structure. The top part of Figure 1 provides a graphic summary of what we have asserted thus far.

In recent decades, the various forms of relational sociology have undergone considerable development (Crossley, 2011; Dépelteau, 2018a; Donati, 2011). This development process has led to one of significant differentiation, as shown in the lower part of Figure 1. It is not our intention to

propound an analysis of this differentiation in this article<sup>1</sup>, but we will attempt to outline some general trends, with particular focus on the implications of analysing relationships and, more specifically, networks of relationships, or, in other words, social structures.

FIGURE 1. *Micro-, meso- and macrosociologies.*



As far as the study of social structures – understood as networks of relationships – is concerned, studies are generally conducted using Social Network Analysis (SNA). Over the years, relational sociologies have tended in some ways to reproduce the difference between micro- and macrosociology, becoming polarised into relationist/relationalist<sup>2</sup> and structuralist perspectives (Tronca, 2022).

To put it very simply, the former perspectives, which a study of the literature reveals to be developing fast (Corcuff, 2011; Dépelteau, 2018a; Tsekeris, 2010), put a relational spin on a specific way of overcoming methodological individualism. The ultimate goal of these perspectives, which can be gleaned after parsing the differences between the various authors, is to

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of this kind, we recommend Dépelteau's excellent analysis and comparison (2018b).

<sup>2</sup> In this article, in line with Dépelteau's work (2018b) as well as our own studies, we consider the terms 'relationism' and 'relationalism' as equivalents.

avoid any hint of substantialism and to highlight how the science of society is never in any way a science of entities, whether individual or collective, but of relationships. With relationism, sociology has the task of studying what 'lies between', since without everything that 'lies between', nothing makes any sense. The work of Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) is emblematic of this perspective. For Emirbayer (1997), society is not made up of objects in the sense of static entities, but rather of processes, *i.e.* relationships. Emirbayer (1997: 282), asserts that the classic dualisms, such as material and ideal, structure and agency or individual and society, have by now been surpassed, and that anyone embarking on social research today needs to decide whether to adopt a substantialist or relational approach. As regards the latter, Emirbayer (1997: 282) uses the term 'relationalism'. From Emirbayer's point of view, substantialism is the foundation of both methodological individualism and holism, albeit of course with different units of reference, which, depending on the analysis – Emirbayer (1997) bases his on the work of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (1949), who argue that the concept of self-action is the founding category of substantialism – can range from individuals to, perhaps, self-subsistent societies, self-subsistent structures, or self-subsistent social systems. As Emirbayer reminds us (1997), a further category underpinning the substantialist approach and which gives rise to a different form of substantialism from the one mentioned above is, according to Dewey and Bentley (1949), the *inter-action* category, which arises from the belief that actions emerge *among* entities (individuals, social systems, etc.) and are not produced directly *by* them. Social reality – this is a way which can be used to interpret the substantialist concept of inter-action – emerges from the relationships between variables.

It is interesting to note how critical reference to a variable analysis based on subjective attributes strongly characterises the definition of the motives justifying the use of SNA (Freeman, 2004).

Emirbayer (1997: 286) also highlights how the 'perspective of *trans-action*' is in direct opposition to substantialism and is, from his point of view, the best path for relational sociology to follow. According to this perspective, the 'terms or units' involved in a transaction derive their meaning and their identity from the 'functional roles' – which are not fixed, but changing – 'they play within that transaction' (Emirbayer 1997: 287). Individuals cannot be examined without examining the transactions they are involved in, if we wish to understand their actions as normative or connected to a strategy. Out of the other features of substantialist scholars which, according to Emirbayer (1997: 291), open up to a more relational – understood as transactional – approach, the one we feel is most useful to mention here is Talcott Parsons's *generalized media*. According to Emirbayer (1997), in line with what is generally asserted within the sphere of relational sociology, the transactional – *i.e.* meso – level of investigation lies

between the macro and micro levels, which Emirbayer in any case sees as part of the same continuum. On this level of investigation, it is possible to find SNA techniques, which allow us to study social processes while and where they take place – in other words, within relationships – without any hypostatisation of subjective attributes.

Nevertheless, from an anti-substantialist perspective, relationships cannot, in turn, be considered as substances. This conclusion is very clear in the work of a number of scholars, including Emily Erikson (2018), whose work defines some of the keystones of *relationalism*. If it is used from a non-substantialist perspective, SNA must be able to make a dynamic analysis of the processes and to understand circumstance. Erikson (2018: 278) affirms that ‘Fixed and determinate social objects are anathema to the creative and dynamic flux that makes up a relational ontology’. According to Erikson (2018), a limit of SNA which needs to be combatted consists of the tendency to essentialise relational models. In her opinion, sociological analysis should be conducted by identifying the concept of tie with the concept of *content moving between nodes* and making an in-depth study of interactions.

Another interesting point of view is provided by Philippe Corcuff (2011), who, in an attempt to organise the new trends in contemporary sociology, assigns a highly important role to the *relationnaliste* perspective. Corcuff (2011) also begins his reflections with a discussion of the dualisms – idealism/realism, subject/object – which have always characterised sociology since its earliest days, but which can now be substituted (to use the briefest terms possible) with *relationnalisme méthodologique* and *langage constructiviste*. In this article, we will examine only the strategies identified by Corcuff (2011) in order to move beyond methodological holism and methodological individualism in relational terms.

As far as methodological holism is concerned, Corcuff (2011: 12) reminds us of Vincent Descombes’s work (2003) in order to underline the fact that it is possible to refute the hypothesis according to which there is such a thing as *collective agency* since it is crucial to understand what connections there are between the institutional spaces where individual actions take place and the meaning attributed to these actions. According to Corcuff (2011), if we do this, we can prise open a chink in the methodology in order to introduce the *relationnalisme méthodologique*. For his examination of methodological individualism, on the other hand, Corcuff (2011: 13) turns to Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s work (1988), which attempts to garner the meaning of a methodological individualism based on complexity, by means of examining the causal relationship existing at the same time between the whole and the parts, and the parts and the whole. This particular vision of individualism, in which individuals at one and the same time determine and are determined by a social



“whole” opens slightly to the possibility of moving beyond the original perspective – individualist, in this case – towards a more *relationnaliste* approach.

Like other scholars, when outlining the general features of the relationalist view, Corcuff (2011) points a finger at substantialism, which has been at least partially abandoned, in particular as regards individuals and collective subjects, but not as far as social relationships are concerned; these become primary entities where individual and collective subjects are considered secondary and emerge as “crystallisations” of the social relationships specific to the different historical and social contexts. Corcuff (2011) points out that it is the constructivist epistemological perspective according to which reality is a social construction that is the best suited to being linked to methodological relationism.

The work of Charalambos Tsekeris (2010: 140) is also in line with what we have seen so far regarding relationism: ‘In the obsolete substantialist framework, social reality is preferably described as, or uncritically reduced to, a dense and seamless constellation of things (*reification*) or essences (*essentialism*), which allegedly possesses a very wide range of “intrinsic” or “natural” properties – something that perfectly corresponds to (naive) everyday experience (that is, the experience of the daily life-worlds)’. Sociological relationalism on the other hand aims to explain individuals’ actions in the light of their social relationships.

Both Tsekeris (2010) and Corcuff (2011) highlight the connection between constructivism and relationism, and, rather interestingly for us, talk of a constructivist perspective according to which social reality is at the same time both “real” and “constructed”: society is real and it exists, but it is the product of a form of human activity for which – we would add – it is vital to produce a valid, reliable attribution of meaning.

Tsekeris (2010: 143-144) argues that ‘In methodological terms, relationalism mainly aims at *both* the theoretical modeling *and* the empirical analysis of social networks as *complex socio-cultural formations*. This systematic combination between emerging cultural patterns and network structure eventually succeeded to fruitfully transcend the spectre of pure structuralism that persistently hunted most network research’.

Indeed, what we can still term the mainstream in the sphere of relational sociologies is the predominantly structuralist approach. In the world of relational sociologies – and with this we arrive at the second group of perspectives mentioned above –, structuralist perspectives add a relational aspect to move beyond methodological holism. Within a framework of relationalism, the spirit of structuralism has been embodied by the work of Barry Wellman (1988) and of Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), among others. From Wellman’s point of view (1988), we can use structural

analysis to study the ties which, by distributing resources, condition the behaviour of the subjects concerned, and instead of examining the classifications assigned to their individual attributes, examine their relationships. Relationships are bearers of conditioning mechanisms, which we can then refer to “real” structures which work at the same time as individual actions, since, according to Wellman (1988: 20), ‘Structure is treated as a network of networks that may or may not be partitioned into discrete groups’. Lastly, SNA – as the *analytic method of structural analysis* – focuses primarily on analysing the ‘relational nature of social structure in order to supplement – and sometimes supplant – mainstream statistical methods that demand independent units of analysis’ (Wellman, 1988: 20), or nodes.

Starting from the work of Wellman (1988), Wasserman and Faust (1994: 4) argue that, as well as defining concepts and social processes through relationships, it is necessary for what they call the ‘social network perspective’ to adopt the following principles: 1. ‘Actors and their actions are viewed as interdependent rather than independent, autonomous units’; 2. ‘Relational ties (linkages) between actors are channels for transfer or “flow” of resources (either material or nonmaterial)’; 3. ‘Network models focusing on individuals view the network structural environment as providing opportunities for or constraints on individual action’; 4. ‘Network models conceptualize structure (social, economic, political, and so forth) as lasting patterns of relations among actors’.

Wasserman and Faust’s work (1994) also reveals a decidedly realist and non-constructivist vision of the “relational” structure of society, which is real, just as the effects it produces are real, and conditions its individual and collective subjects’ actions.

Apparently “in the middle” between the relationist and structuralist poles is Harrison C. White (1992, 2008). We use the term “apparently” because, while this scholar acknowledges the connection between identities and networks – for example, through the concepts of networks, domains, netdoms, switching, and identities –, creating this connection by attributing phenomenologically and historically constructed meaning and linking the abstractness of networks to the contents of the identities, thereby making it possible to also conceptualise the concept of control, his theoretical work appears to us to be precisely among the relational and structuralist perspectives.

Therefore, despite the fact that some scholars – for example Tsekeris (2010) – attempt to place H.C. White’s theoretical proposals in the constructivist segment of the relationist camp, strongly stressing White’s concept of “meaning”, let us not forget that White’s reflections still originate from the concept of “network”, understood as a highly (although not exclusively) un-dyadic structure (Fontdevila, 2018) and, therefore, not

equivalent to a communicative act or a simple attribution of meaning which does not go beyond the individual actions it contributes to the creation of.

We are, therefore, in complete agreement with Alain Degenne (1997) in his review of White's theory (1992), when he affirms that it can in no way be considered constructivist and that, moreover, 'Harrison White est aux antipodes de l'individualisme méthodologique' (Degenne, 1997: 241). Raymond Boudon (1993: 313-314), in his review of White's work (1992), also reminds him that, from an individualist perspective, 'no reasons exist without individual minds' and holds that 'White should have distinguished more carefully the genus "methodological individualism" from the very particular species of this genus he criticizes – "rational choice theory" (RCT)', even going so far as to add that 'But identity and control are problems: They do not define a program, much less an alternative to the ruling sociological paradigms'.

Even the symbolic interactionist variants of the relational perspective tend not to deny the substance of relationships, even though, as happens for example in the work of Nick Crossley (2011), relationships are defined simply as an interaction which is reiterated, *i.e.* activated repeatedly (but how many times?) between two subjects. Other relational sociologies, such as Pierpaolo Donati's (1991, 2011), are also substantialist as, despite not taking the concept of structure as the foundation of their analysis, they attempt to provide an ontological organisation of the concept of relationship and to semanticise it by identifying its core dimensions.

It is our belief that we need to engage in more social research in order to encourage the further development and maturation of a relational perspective which does not deny the essence of relationships and social networks, which are not referable to a simple process, phenomenon or communicative act, no matter how complex it may be, nor to a representation of the mind of the subject engaging in an interaction – in other words, a social construction – since relationships and social networks – here we find ourselves in complete agreement with both Crossley (2011) and Donati (1991, 2011) –, from a logical and a historical/temporal point of view, *exist* before actions.

We must remember that the concept of structure cannot be de-substantialised without inflicting a hefty blow to the explanation of the trajectories of individual actions, yet at the same time, actions cannot be reduced to a mere 'social automatism' without obliterating the complex system of attribution of meaning put in place by the actor which can lead to the reproduction or amendment – to a greater or lesser extent – of the structural *status quo ante*.

To express this unrestrainable *co-emergence relationship* between structure and action – inextricably linked concepts within the more complex concept of

network – the structural interactionist perspective has emerged. In the next paragraph, we will examine this new perspective.

### **3. Structural interactionism: a relational perspective in sociology**

Structural interactionism is explained in detail in Degenne and Forsé (2004)<sup>3</sup>. Here, we will briefly mention some of its features, focusing in particular on its orientation as a relational approach, then outlining its position as regards the concepts of structure and action in the light of the picture that has emerged in relation to contemporary relational sociologies.

The attempt to move beyond the dualism between methodological holism and individualism is a distinguishing feature of structural interactionism, as it is of relational sociologies in general. In Degenne and Forsé (2004), it clearly emerges that, like other relational sociologies, it assigns a central role to the study of relationships as a vital object of attention in order to allow society and the dynamics governing it to be analysed.

Therefore, structural interactionism involves moving well beyond the definition of society that emerges by combining the categories/attributes assigned to subjects. In fact, the practise of analysing relationships between categories instead of between subjects is based on two rather doubtful assumptions: (i) that subjects must behave in a similar manner when they belong to the same category; (ii) that the categories are linked to social phenomena, in the sense that they tend to produce specific effects of a social kind because of their inherent nature.

If we ignore social relationships, the first assumption leads us to the following conclusion: 'If we take as our starting point a view which ignores relations, then on the one hand we find ourselves unsure of the relevance of the categories we use; and on the other, we very quickly arrive at the belief that individuals who behave in the same way share the same norms or have the same collective consciousness that pushes them to act in the same way. In a word, norms are essentially causes' (Degenne and Forsé, 2004: 6).

Similarly to other structuralist perspectives, structural interactionism involves conceptualising the connection between structural condition and social norms; the latter are connected with a specific configuration of the social structure – understood as networks of relationships between subjects (whether individual or collective) – which is made up of structural positions with which we can associate roles and therefore sets of expectations with varying levels of formalisation. The behaviour of a subject can in part be explained by the social

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<sup>3</sup> First edition: Degenne and Forsé (1994).

norms the subject conforms to, but these norms nevertheless depend upon the existence of a social structure: through the image of a subject that has multiple relationships, which are potentially connected to multiple systems of social norms, it is easy to see how, for example, the concept of conflicting roles can arise.

The relationships experienced by subjects are real, as, evidently, the structures emerging from the composition of these relationships are real. Through relationships, structure exercises a conditioning role on subjects' actions and – to broach the second assumption – it is not necessary to seek abstract categories to assign to subjects, or *habitus*, to hypostatise, to which (or rather, to whose nature) we attribute the power to condition social actors.

Structural analysis implies an obligatory step towards reconstructing the structure of the networks within which the subjects are connected to each other, as this analysis allows us to establish the scope of the opportunities for the subjects' actions. In Degenne and Forsé (2004), the reference to a weak determinism in relation to the effects of structure is very clear. Indeed, defining the scope of the structural opportunities for action means identifying not only the characteristics of the network in terms of the contents of the ties (Tronca, 2013), but also its formal characteristics (Degenne and Forsé, 2004; Tronca, 2013). As regards the latter, it is quite clear, for example, that if two subjects (*egos*) have the exact same quantity<sup>4</sup> of relationships with other subjects (*alters*) from which they can derive social support, with exactly the same contents and with the same quantity/quality for each, but the first has a personal support network with an extremely dense structure – in other words, within which all or nearly all of the relationships between *alters* are active – and the second has a personal support network in which the *alters* are not at all or only rarely connected to each other, their respective structural contexts will have rather different shapes. The conditioning, *i.e.* the prospects for opportunities connected to these morphological situations, will also be different. In the first situation, *ego* will have a mainly bonding personal support network, because it is highly dense<sup>5</sup> and structurally more suited to the existence of reciprocal control between subjects, making it easier for interpersonal trust to circulate (Burt, 1992, 2005; Tronca, 2011). In the second morphological situation, of a more bridging kind, it is more likely that *ego* will perform a kind of brokerage role, or in other words will be on bridges built over the structural holes in a rather sparse network, and may, perhaps, gain a competitive advantage over other nodes in

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the quantity of relationships can also be considered a formal indicator of the structural position of a subject/node within a network.

<sup>5</sup> By this we mean that there is a high ratio between active and potentially activatable relationships between nodes.

their personal support network from this structural position. It should be pointed out that, in both cases, *ego's* structural position does not depend exclusively on the relationships which involve him/her directly as a dyadic node but also on whether or not there are also relationships between the subjects with whom he/she is directly connected (Burt, 1992, 2005; Tronca, 2011). As Degenne and Forsé (2004: 10) remind us, on a general level, 'a relationship does not derive its meaning from the single relation between two individuals': networks should be studied using a combinatorial and not only aggregative approach. It is the way in which relationships are structured and combined that determines the morphological features of a network, not the sum of the relationships it contains.

As Degenne and Forsé (2004) underline, structure and action are co-determiners: structure defines the scope of the opportunities for action and nodes act, retroacting at the same time on the structure, reproducing or modifying all the characteristics of the structure they are able to have an effect on. Please note that in structural interactionism, structure and action always remain analytically distinct and their co-emergence should be understood within the logical and temporal organisation of the connections which can be empirically observed (not simply theorised on an abstract level) to emerge between them. The goal of structural interactionism is, after all, to produce authentically empirical theories which describe the real (albeit always within the limits of what is knowable about social reality) organisation of the relationship between structure and action.

Degenne and Forsé (2004: 10) also clarify what the "weak" determinism of structural interactionism consists of: 'a) the structure is not reduced to a sum of individual actions; b) it exerts a constraint, but *only a formal one*, which leaves the individual *free* to act even though by dint of this constraint not everything is possible'.

This is where we find the above-mentioned concept of "prospects for opportunities" clearly defined. Subjects can decide to act or not to act within networks that are largely determined by others' actions as well as their own, and by acting/not acting, they affect the network itself, which becomes the product or emergent effect of the interactions between all those who form the network (Degenne and Forsé, 2004). As we have seen, the network takes on structural properties of its own also in terms of the circulation of the contents of the ties, which cannot be reduced to the aggregation of the individual interactions composing it, and especially not to the characteristics, in terms of contents, of the individual interactions.

While, in Degenne and Forsé (2004), structural interactionism is defined as a non-atomistic form of methodological individualism, in the light of the aforementioned contemporary scene regarding relational sociologies and the

arrangement of them we subsequently suggested, we believe that, today, structural interactionism should really be more clearly placed within the sphere of relational sociologies; however, it is important to avoid any possibility of this perspective being confused with transactional or relationist/relationalist perspectives on one side and structuralist approaches on the other. In point of fact, the definition of social reality as a relational reality and the inclusion of a weak determinism allow us to establish a significant distance from both relationist and structuralist perspectives.

The reasoning of subjects, which can have obviously an effect on their actions, is, according to structural interactionism, unavoidably connected to their relationships with other subjects (Degenne and Forsé, 2004).

The empirical implication this position produces has led us to investigate, among other things, some of the principles capable of founding an empirical theory of social justice. Starting from a structural interactionist perspective, it is certainly possible to compare the operational strategies for individual action most closely connected with, respectively, the anthropological paradigms of the *homo aconomicus*, who is under-socialised and focuses on maximising their own personal gain, and the so-called *homo sociologicus*, who is over-socialised and mainly capable of acting only within the established norm, with the actions of the “reasonable person”, who is ‘able to adopt a broader, more general model of reasoning which has the merit of making it fully compatible with a solid foundation in social relationships and their forms from the outset’ (Degenne and Forsé, 2004: 13).

Concerning the core issue of reasonableness, or rather a broader model of reasoning than the strictly utilitarian one, connected to a model of actor unable to understand the point of view of the people they have relationships with, we will make a more in-depth analysis in the following paragraph. What we feel is needed now, on the other hand, is to mention an important research outcome for the structural interactionist approach, obtained on this very matter. As has emerged from empirical research carried out on national samples of individuals (Forsé and Parodi, 2020; Forsé and Tronca, 2018), if the principle of reasonable action – *i.e.* which takes full account of the other subjects present in the social context – is associated with the Rawlsian maximin principle of social justice, we have seen that this principle is greatly preferred by individuals when orientating their actions. In particular, it prevails over utilitarianism – which we can associate with instrumental rational action – and egalitarianism, which we can associate with axiological rationality. It is well known that Weber (1922) distinguishes between two types of rationality: axiological rationality (*Wertrationalität*) and instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). The latter is consequentialist. Individuals are supposed to act according to their interests, in other words according to the consequences of their actions on their well-being.

They then use the most appropriate means to achieve their goals. Axiological rationality is of the deontological type. Individuals hold normative beliefs that are consistent with the values to which they adhere because (according to Boudon, 1999) they have good reasons for adopting those values. In both cases rationality is at stake. If values or interests are conflicting between different groups, in order to avoid the use of force (or its equivalents), everyone must give the priority to the right over the good or, equivalently, to reasonableness over rationality (in a narrow sense).

We should also point out that the point of agreement with the Rawlsian maximin principle tends to have only a tenuous connection, or none at all, to the personal characteristics (or attributes) of individuals.

Therefore, we have seen quite clearly how this approach is able to place relationships and networks – in particular because of their ability to enter into reciprocal connection with actions – at the centre as irremissible objects for the study of social phenomena.

#### **4. The relationship between structure and action: the challenge of reasonableness**

##### ***4.1 The reasonable versus the rational***

In everyday life, especially when people argue about moral issues, they ask themselves what they should do, and look for reasons to justify the things they think or do. In a discussion, one of them may say: “this may be rational, but it is not very reasonable”. What is the distinction that this person wishes to make? What is the principle being implicitly supported here? When we say that someone is reasonable, we mean that they can be reasoned with, that they are willing to listen and take into consideration the arguments put forward by others. On the other hand, to say that someone is rational is to admit that they act methodically and know how to achieve their objectives effectively. Sometimes it also implies that they are calculating only in terms of their own interest or without regard for others. The common image of a rational, but not reasonable, being is that of a cold calculator who acts like a machine: there is no question of reasoning with them. Only strength can dissuade them from following their own course, and when shown the slightest weakness, they will be able to assert their advantage. One might also imagine that this individual should fear various reversals of fortune and they are unreasonable insofar as they have failed to properly assess the risks they run. But if this individual fails through carelessness, they have simply miscalculated; they have acted irrationally. This is not what is meant here by reasonable. In the context of a moral discussion, to be reasonable is to take into account others’ reasons while



striving towards a position that is justified from one's own point of view, whereas to be merely rational is not to ask whether one's actions or opinions are as acceptable to others as they are to oneself. Thus it appears that when a person says "this may be rational, but it is not very reasonable", in addition to merely drawing the distinction, they are implying that in a moral argument the reasonable should prevail over the rational.

However, this common way of looking at things does not correspond to the one advocated by many social scientists, for whom reason is reduced to its rational dimension. The reasonable is only an appendage of the rational. It is confused with a cautious attitude, an aversion to all forms of risk. It is therefore understandable that there are contemporary forms of irrationalism. Since a fundamental dimension of practical reason has been ignored, there is no other recourse than to go outside of it to find a palliative to reasonableness. This conclusion is, however, hasty, and even wrong, according to a Kantian conception of reason or its various contemporary re-readings.

When an actor is reasonable, and not just rational in a restricted sense, the activity of their reason is no longer defined in relation to nature, but in relation to another being recognised as free and capable of reasoning. Practical reason is thus placed in a different register. The *ego* discovers a new possibility: that of associating with a free and reasonable being by means of an agreement that is acceptable to everyone. Far from considering the other as a natural hazard, the individual recognises them as an *alter ego*. The *ego* will then self-limit<sup>6</sup>. It is no longer a question of subjugating the *alter ego* merely by considering the balance of power. It is a matter of acting on shared reasons. An economist would say that the *ego* agrees not to maximise its utility. This does not mean that a reasonable actor has become irrational. In the long run, they will always have to find the right means to achieve their desired ends. Each actor continues to pursue their own idea of happiness, but here they agree to do so under the auspices of what is reasonable for all.

In the event of divergence or conflict, this means that everyone seeks a solution that everyone agrees with and agrees to give priority to this solution over optimising their own or another's particular good. This amounts to giving priority to the just over the good (Rawls, 1971) or to the reasonable over the rational (in the narrow sense). The use of force (or its equivalent) is avoided. One defers to what everyone considers fair (Forsé and Parodi, 2005) although,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that this idea of self-limitation is applied by Simmel (1981[1917]) to analyse sociability and is essential (Forsé, 2002) to any understanding of his outlook. According to him, it is thanks to this self-limitation being exercised by each person that, beyond the subjective and objective differences that separate them, relations of sociability can be established that bring people together.

barring accidents, this choice does not coincide with the maximisation of one's utility (as understood by explanatory utilitarianism, *i.e.* the standard and restrictive theory of rational choice) or of the sum or average of these utilities (as desired by normative utilitarianism).

It goes without saying that an atomistic vision cannot explain or comprehend this situation and that, conversely, it would be difficult to take social relations into account in order to achieve this. This does not mean that we leave the field of relational sociologies – provided, of course (Boudon, 2003) that we do not unduly restrict its meaning to a theory of expected utility. Moreover, rational choice is not rejected as part of an empirical reality. It is considered one special case. The hyperbole indulged in by many proponents of expected utility theory appears unsustainable. To avoid this hyperbole, let us look at what we can call the reasonable limits of individualism and, to that end, let us take a diversion through its ethical dimension in order to assess what this entails for its methodological dimension.

#### ***4.2 The reasonable limits of individualism***

When talking about individualism, many authors rightly refer to Tocqueville (1992[1835-1840]). For him, democracy and equality of conditions go hand in hand with a withdrawal into oneself, *i.e.* 'a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends' (1992[1835-1840]: 612). However, according to Tocqueville, this can result in two very different and indeed opposing forms of individualism (Lamberti, 1987). In the one he observes in the United States, this individualist withdrawal does not foster illusions in individual self-sufficiency and does not sap the vitality of civil society. The individuals do not forget their civic duties. Their "well understood" interest leads them to take an interest in local affairs or associations. This well-tempered individualism is therefore compatible with both order and freedom. In another form, however, which Tocqueville sees threatening to emerge in France, freedom tends to be little more than a right, and less and less a duty (*i.e.* the duty to participate in public life). Each person living in seclusion becomes a "stranger to the destiny of all others" and soon comes to believe that private interests should be defended without reference to public order. This time, withdrawal leads to forgetting the limits of individual reason and denying any authority other than oneself. Undermining public virtues, it ends up absorbing itself in selfishness. However, as Tocqueville reminds us, man's freedom cannot be total. It cannot be conceived of as absolute independence, without running the risk of anarchy or despotism. On the one hand, therefore, there is an individualism within the limits of simple

reason, in other words, one that derives its legitimacy from reason, and on the other, an individualism that is oblivious to these limits.

To emphasize this distinction, let us note that if valuing the individual means affirming the value of the self, *individuality* becomes the measure of all things. But on the other hand, if valuing the individual means asserting that we are the source of evaluations, then the *subjectivity* of each person must be taken into account in order to reach a common judgement. In the first case, the evaluation is based on the simple fact of being singular, and it proceeds from the *independence of the individual*; in the second, it is freely established, taking as its foundation the recognition of a common humanity. It stems from the *autonomy of a subject*. In the first case, individualism is *undifferentiated* or without a framework, whereas in the second it is *framed* by reasonableness.

In a similar vein, let us recall that Durkheim (1898) distinguishes between an individualism linked to utilitarianism, which can only see personal interest, and a “humanistic individualism” which values, beyond these selfish interests, “the quality of man *in abstracto*”. Correctly enlisting Rousseau and Kant to identify the characteristics of this humanism, Durkheim insists on practical reason but unfortunately without always clearly distinguishing it from a “religion of humanity”. The essential feature of this “humanistic” or reasonable individualism is that it makes man an end in himself, and is thus as opposed to an “undifferentiated” or selfish individualism as it is to a humanism based on altruism or holiness. Presented in this way, it is of course linked to the priority of the just which underpins the “organic” solidarity of a modern society.

Let’s take an example to measure the difference between an undifferentiated individualism and the fact of an autonomous subject which, as such, expresses itself only under the auspices of the reasonable. Picture a canteen. According to the view that tradition or charisma is the source of legitimacy, it is up to the chef (cook) to impose a menu on everyone, so that individual tastes are not taken into account. This kind of submission is left behind with the advent of modernity. With reasonableness as the framework, it is important to recognise that everyone has a say in setting the menu. There will be a discussion with the cook to decide what everyone will eat. With undifferentiated individualism, the main thing is to move from a single dish to the à la carte menu. Each person will decide on their own meal according to their own tastes, and will distinguish themselves as an individual by this very act. First of all, it should be noted that insofar as people have different tastes and *nothing else* comes into play in determining the meal from a factual point of view (for example, it is possible to satisfy everyone’s tastes without any problem), reasonableness is reduced to simple individualism. But reasonableness and undifferentiated individualism collide as soon as it is no longer possible to fulfil everyone’s desires without going to any trouble (*i.e.* in

the ordinary circumstances of life). The reasonable solution then requires a decision over which desires will go unsatisfied on the basis of a discussion in which everyone agrees to limit their claims in the name of principles that are appropriate to the situation (these principles are general *and* deemed relevant to the given situation) and acceptable to all those involved in the meal (these principles are universal). In other words, a *reasonable* menu should be sought here. Individualism falls outside this framework when the individual does not accept to limit their desires and demands that they be served what they want; when the individuals demand a meal which corresponds exactly to their own tastes, even at the expense of others. This desire must become unreasonable since it does not take account of what others will receive on their plate, and in fact it will be rejected by others according to the principle of equal respect (or the principle of universality).

As we can see, the unreasonable individualist remains rational. By seeking to serve their own best interests or values, they are optimising a good. This can be transmuted into altruism if the individual seeks to best serve another or a particular set of others. The logic remains that of an individual following their own nature (= serving their interests or values). However, as soon as all things cease to be possible, each person must give up maximising their own utility function. From here on, a reasonable attitude consists in seeking agreement on a rule which is applicable to all because it respects the equal freedom of each person. This amounts, as we said, to giving priority to the just over the good or to the reasonable over the rational (in the narrow sense) or, to use Kant's vocabulary, to pure practical reason over empirical practical reason. Structural interactionism takes this into account insofar as it is based on this extended dimension of rationality which includes both the rational *and* the reasonable.

Structural interactionism, insofar as it is associated with this model of extended rationality or with the framework of relational sociologies which are not limited to the theory of expected utility and are therefore not atomistic, can then fully achieve the double aim of a structural analysis, which is to show: (i) how the structure (or form) of the network favours (makes more likely, determines in a weak and not a strong sense) the choice of this or that action or opinion and (ii) how this structure is also the result of these individual choices. Without this principle, the network would remain a kind of black box. We would not be able to explain how an actor chooses to establish, albeit within a pre-existing structure, one type of relationship rather than another. In turn, and as has been said, as a formal constraint the structure of the network is likely to favour the choice of one action over another, for example serving the common interest or the reasonable rather than a strictly individual or narrowly rational interest. In the end, it is this circularity between structure and action,

through individual rational choices in a broad sense, that seems to us to constitute the core of structural analysis in its interactionist component.

This structural interactionist perspective is required in particular because actors do not reason in a social vacuum (otherwise we would quickly return to the atomistic vision that we criticise). An actor can certainly arrive at a reasonable orientation on their own, and if we assume that everyone does it on their own, we end up with a trans-subjective view of practical reason. This so-called “monological” approach might be thought to be that of a Kant or a Rawls but, within the same family of thought, other authors such as Fichte or more recently Habermas or Apel have insisted, on the contrary, on the necessity of intersubjectivity. The debate is important, not least as it permits us to better characterise an essential dimension of structural interactionism. This should not be underestimated, but its effects should not be exaggerated either, because in reality the fundamentals remain common to both schools of thought.

#### ***4.3 The reciprocity of the subjective and the intersubjective***

Many commentators have pointed out that the main difference between Habermas (1992[1991]) or Apel (1994) on the one hand and Rawls (1971) or Kant (1943[1788]) on the other lies in their way of thinking through the process by which justice or reasonableness is achieved. The former argue that this process is necessarily dialogical in nature. This requires real, effective discussion between the protagonists of a conflict or difference. On the one hand, this is surely an important condition to ensure that all reasonable views are taken into account in the debate, in order to reach agreement. On the other hand, it seems rather difficult to deny to a subject, endowed with practical reason, that is to say to any subject, the faculty of being able to know the moral law. Rawls’ notion of reflective equilibrium is a reminder of this. Discerning what is right or reasonable is possible for any subject who reflects “sincerely and honestly” on the reasons for what they think or do. We can therefore (this time following Kant or Rawls) focus first on the subject. They must, following a process of abstraction, eliminate arguments that are only subjective or linked to empirical interests and retain only those that are neutral or objective, and which any other sincerely and honestly thinking subject would agree upon. It is true that this presupposes a capacity for abstraction of motives, but it is not clear why one would think that a subject, otherwise capable of abstraction in the theoretical domain, would *a priori* lack this capacity in the practical domain<sup>7</sup>, especially since it is *knowledge* of the moral law or of the just or the reasonable that is at issue

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<sup>7</sup>This has been confirmed by studies in the psychology of morality ever since they were begun by Piaget (1932).

here. Or rather, it is all too clear how one might come to such a view. To arrive at it, one would need to leave the terrain of an autonomous subject and sink, for example, into a radical empiricism or total determinism, which is certainly not the perspective of any of the authors cited here. Finally, from this point of view of knowledge, this debate refers to the way in which practical objectivity should be understood and to the question of whether, in order to achieve this objectivity, it is possible to start from the subject or whether, on the contrary, given the risk of solipsism that this entails, it is better to focus directly on intersubjectivity, which is indeed the hallmark of a public discussion or argument.

Beyond this procedural debate, it is in any case rather curious to claim that transcendental philosophy has forgotten about intersubjectivity. The solipsism of a subject reflecting outside any social community about what might constitute their duty is an extreme that this philosophy avoids. When a subject wonders whether a given rule (*e.g.* not keeping a promise to pay back one's debts) can be morally valid, they ask whether this rule could be the rule for any other subject in their community. Without this community, the question is simply meaningless. Universality should be thought of in the context of the relationship to a structured community of subjects and not in the context of the relationship of the self to the being-in-itself. The moral rule can therefore in no way be understood as the product of pure solipsism. Moreover, the categorical imperative appeals to intersubjectivity and Kant did not forget to draw consequences from this fact, for example by insisting on the fact that the moral law is a medium of communication between reasonable beings, in the framework of his famous "cosmopolitical society". The same is true of Rawls. To claim that *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971) is oblivious to the social bond is a contradiction in terms. Its reflections start by identifying the "basic structure" of a society (which is not just any society, but a modern society), in order to draw up a list of the primary social goods necessary for every individual, and whose fair distribution, which the theory must precisely define, allows a "well-ordered society".

Fichte for his part reformulates<sup>8</sup> the reasons that a transcendental philosophy must support the thesis of reciprocal action. He does not hesitate to write (Fichte, 1994[1794]: 48) in the *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation*: 'Man is destined to live in society; he is obliged to live in society; he is not a whole, complete man, and he contradicts himself if he lives in isolation'. He would repeat these ideas (Fichte, 1984[1796-1797]: 54-55) in a different form in the *Foundations of Natural Right*: 'Man (as well as every finite being in general)

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<sup>8</sup> By his own admission, in the mid-1790s Fichte did not aspire to anything other than a "systematic" reformulation of Kantian philosophy.

becomes man only among men; and since he can be nothing but a man, and since he would be nothing if he were not such – if there are to be men in general, they must be many. [...] The concept of man is therefore not really the concept of an individual, for that is unthinkable, but that of a species'. Incidentally, Simmel uses almost these exact words (1981[1917]) and it is hardly surprising that this led him to define sociology as the science of forms of reciprocal action (= structures of social interaction). It has therefore been rightly said that Fichte's philosophy (in the tradition of Kant's) foreshadowed more contemporary developments, notably in its insistence on intersubjectivity as the essence of man.

In the end, the difference between the monological and dialogical approaches is much more procedural than substantive, since it boils down to a difference in what should serve as the starting point for the reasoning. Kant starts from the subject. But this is in no way an obstacle to thinking about interaction. Subjectivity contains intersubjectivity as its very condition. This concept of subjectivity is, as Fichte would have said (1984[1796-1797]: 62), 'a reciprocal concept, that is, a concept that can only be thought in relation to another thought'. There is therefore no risk of falling into a methodical solipsism.

Starting from interaction is not a prohibitive problem either, as long as we can return to a morally responsible subject, which is the case with Habermas or Apel, who do not deny this responsibility in the name of the constraints of a practical discussion. As Renaut points out (1997: 503), each actor legitimises the principles arrived at through discussion; they are not legitimised simply by virtue of having been discussed: 'I have to reinterpret them as if they were posed by my autonomous freedom – otherwise I would receive them, so to speak, from outside, be subjected to them in a heteronomous way, without this dimension of adhesion and recognition which supposes, no longer a relationship to the other, but a relationship to myself in which I can recognise myself in this part of myself which has participated in the discussion and which has produced the law or the principle of justice'. Although this undoubtedly requires some partial rearrangement, this idea is not incompatible with the ethics of discussion, and this is why it does not seem to us that the dispute between monological and dialogical approaches within transcendental philosophy hides deep divergences. The reason is that, for everyone, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are *reciprocal* concepts and, within the framework of such an approach, there is no doubt that no one denies that a reasonable subject is also a responsible subject.

The reciprocity between action and structure that defines structural interactionism, as we have established above, ultimately finds its foundation in this necessary reciprocity between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. It is

precisely here that a reasonable is constructed, framing the rational in purpose or value.

## **5. The methodological concerns of structural interactionism**

Having investigated the issue of the reciprocity between action and structure, we are now ready to examine the research strategy forwarded by structural interactionism.

There are many fields of research in which the structural interactionist approach has been tested using empirical research. These include social capital (Degenne and Forsé, 2004; Forsé and Tronca, 2005; Secondulfo *et al.*, 2017; Tronca, 2005, 2019, 2021), social justice (Forsé and Parodi, 2005, 2020; Forsé and Tronca, 2018), social work (Tronca and Sità, 2019), consumerism (Secondulfo *et al.*, 2017; Tronca, 2019, 2021) and – of a highly interdisciplinary nature – socio-archaeological and historical research (Rante *et al.*, 2022).

In presenting some of the aspects of the most strictly methodological dimension of structural interactionism, our aim is to explicitly meet two challenges which, according to Corcuff (2011: 10), will be faced by any scholars wishing to propose research strategies which are not excessively rigid (and, we would like to add, which are more appropriate) to keeping up with the increasing swiftness and complexity with which the conditions for human action develop: (i) from a theoretical point of view, one needs to thematise and understand the connections between the objective and subjective characteristics of society; (ii) from an epistemological point of view, one needs to focus one's attention on the connections between the external point of view – in other words, the dualism between the observer and the observed so often found in holist approaches – and the internal point of view – *i.e.*, the perception of the actor, who assigns special meaning to what they perceive and what they do, or in other words how they act socially<sup>9</sup>.

The challenges which Corcuff (2011) summarises so well are inextricably linked to the opportunity to arrive at a valid and reliable contemporary social science. As Donati reminds us (1991, 2011), society – contemporary society in particular – is eminently relational. It is made of relationships and, more now than in the past, tends to immunise itself against the attributive predictability of personal courses of action. Paola Di Nicola (2015) lays down very clearly how the typifying social processes of prevalently ascriptive traditional societies can

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Corcuff (2011: 10) links this second challenge to the concept of 'sociological reflexivity', which adapts to the role of the researcher, who has to also thematise their particular relationship to their object while they construct it.



also be explained by analysing the relational structures they are composed of. Nevertheless, contemporary societies are being characterised more and more by their greater potential in terms of the production of phenomena that depend on the free initiative and, therefore, in the light of the new and ever more widespread opportunities for connection available to subjects – whether individual or collective –, it is becoming vital to examine the networks these subjects belong to: the structured and structuring places in which social actors' actions are defined and take shape, retroacting on their networks at the same time.

For these reasons and in line with the theoretical and epistemological necessities many scholars<sup>10</sup> refer to, we need to find a research strategy which is heedful of the issues which interactionist approaches generally focus on but which doesn't give in to the siren song of the constructivism, holding firm to the need to grant its own order of (relational) reality to the structure of social networks.

From the methodological point of view, we believe it is extremely important to adopt a sequence of methods which will make it possible to provide a valid representation of the causal connection which goes from the structure – understood as a network of relationships – to the action, and from the action to the structure, producing a reliable analysis of the external point of view, which is connected to the objective dimension of social phenomena, and the internal – *i.e.* the actor's own – point of view, connected to the subjective dimension of these phenomena.

If we differentiate these methodological concerns analytically, the following four methodological steps for social research using a structural interactionist approach emerge. These steps – or methodological concerns (MCs) – should be construed within the logical and temporal scope of the mutual determination between structure and action:

- MC1 Establish the objective structural opportunities for action: in this step, the researcher's attention is focused on the relational analysis of the social structure the actor performs within. This analysis is conducted from a realist standpoint and from a point of view which is external to the actor. The tools used for this analysis are those belonging to SNA, both in *whole* and *personal* variant (Tronca, 2013). This analysis can reach varying levels of depth/complexity, depending on how far one wishes to extend any indirect ties taken into consideration for a given social actor (second degree, third degree, etc.).

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<sup>10</sup> To name but a few: Corcuff (2011), Crossley (2011), Di Nicola (2015), Donati (1991, 2011), Mercklé (2011), White (1992, 2008).

- MC2 Establish the subjective representation of the social structure: in this step, the researcher's attention is focused on the actor's unique perception of the social structure, therefore this analysis is performed from a point of view which is internal to the actor. It uses qualitative research techniques which allow the researcher to understand how subjects represent the social structure they live in to themselves by establishing the opportunities and constraints they perceive regarding their social acts.
- MC3 Establish the subjective representation of the action: in this step, the researcher can focus their attention on the subjective meaning the subject assigns to their action(s), therefore it is again adopted the actor's internal point of view. The analysis is conducted using qualitative research techniques and is aimed at pinpointing which principles of reasonableness/rationality the actors base their actions on and which aims – in other words structural scenarios – they are trying to achieve through their actions.
- MC4 Establish the objective structural effects of the action: in this step, the researcher focuses their attention on a relational analysis of the social structure the actor has helped to form through their action(s). The analysis is conducted from a realist standpoint and a point of view which is external to the actor. The tools used to perform the analysis are those used in SNA, both in *whole* and *personal* variant, and the analysis can reach varying degrees of distance as far as any indirect ties involving the social actor are concerned.

When longitudinal investigations are impossible, a fully structural interactionist study should include the research activities corresponding to MC1, MC2, and also MC3, but only in relation to the analysis of principles of reasonableness/rationality shared by the actors.

As can be rather easily seen, in the sphere of relational sociologies, the more structuralist approaches tend to stop at MC1, while relationist/relationalist studies focus mainly on MC2.

To express it simply, structural interactionist research methodology allows the researcher to arrive at an operationalization of the social dynamic in which the social structure (which can be identified through MC4) depends on the actions of its subjects (MC3) – and, in particular, on the reasons they identify as being behind them –, these actions are based on the perception the subjects have of reality (MC2), which in turn is conditioned primarily and together with the effective possibilities for action by their position in the social structure (MC1).

## **6. Conclusion. Social network analysis and reasonableness: a structural interactionist research programme**

As Ronald S. Burt (1982) illustrates so well, the more structural approach is deductively superior to the more normative (or holist) approach, because, by using rigorous network models, it manages to represent society, thus allowing researchers to correctly formulate their research hypotheses. As far as SNA is concerned, as a ‘paradigm for research’, this feature is affirmed by Freeman (2004: 3) when he says: ‘All four of these features are found in modern social network analysis, and together they define the field: 1. Social network analysis is motivated by a structural intuition based on ties linking social actors, 2. It is grounded in systematic empirical data, 3. It draws heavily on graphic imagery, and 4. It relies on the use of mathematical and/or computational models’. Going back to Burt (1982), we need, however, to point out that this author views the structural approach as being superior also to the atomistic (or individualist) approach, thanks to its ability to describe the social context for actions, a crucial factor for the evaluations and decision-making performed by subjects.

To this structural perspective, we have in a way “added” the interactionist perspective, which is of course not shared by all authors in the field, and we wanted to show the basis of the reciprocity between structure and action which is an essential characteristic of what can then be referred to as structural interactionism. As we have seen, this interactionism is based on an expanded conception of rationality. It avoids any methodological solipsism or atomisation because it conceives of the subjective as existing within its reciprocal relationship with the intersubjective. It rejects strong determinism but accepts that a relational structure exerts a formal (and only formal) constraint on the interactions within that structure, while being the emergent effect of those interactions. In doing so, it provides itself with the means to think of a reasonable framing for the rational, whether instrumental or axiological. It is the case when the just prevails over the good (whether this good corresponds to an interest or a value).

As the studies we have helped conduct – based on the Rawlsian principle of the maximin – clearly show, the contemporary Western societies examined display a decided tendency to apply the maximin principle, therefore prefer *reasonableness* to *instrumental* or *axiological rationality*, the principles represented respectively by utilitarianism and egalitarianism.

This is decisive proof of a decidedly empirical nature of the analytical power of structural interactionism, but also, on a more general level, of the theoretical and methodological superiority of mesosociological approaches over both macro- and microsociological perspectives.

Indeed, only through a relational and, in particular, a structural interactionist lens can the connection between structure and action be explained through reasonableness, a broader concept (in the sense that it can contain both elements) than the concepts of instrumental or axiological rationality, understood as acting to serve one's own interest without regard for the interests of others or under the auspices of one's own values regardless of the values held by other people, respectively.

In the case of instrumental rationality, the origin of the meaning of an action is completely individual, therefore it can be understood by examining the individual person, taken as being under-socialised, in accordance with methodological individualism (when it tends to be reduced to an atomistic theory of expected utility).

The centrality of the extra-individual normative dimension of individual action, taken as being largely hetero-directed, is, on the other hand, strongly tied to the idea of an over-socialised individual, perfectly in line with the precepts of methodological holism (when it tends to a strong deterministic point of view).

In conclusion, structural interactionism allows us to outline the complex empirical features of the concept of reasonableness, which is highly prevalent in contemporary society. Our hope is that, in future, this approach will be more fully tested in further contexts and fields of research.

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