**relation/关系(Guān Xì)**

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| European Perspective | Erik Guignard | 22 Apr 2022 |

If the concept of relationship appears to be a fundamental concept used in a very general way to describe or account for relationships between any two entities, it seems difficult to find a general definition. On the other hand, it is possible to clarify its contours in specific contexts. The example chosen here is, with Confucius for whom "the person and the relationship come first", that of *human relations*: it is indeed, in this context, that misunderstandings may arise because of the frequent use of the word *relation* in everyday life. Elsewhere, “rational” (scientific) contexts are, a priori, more susceptible to disagreements than to misunderstandings[[1]](#footnote-1).

**Human relationships**

Both interpersonal and social human relationships are established from birth of each individual in a family, embedded in relationships of kinship and alliance, and then continue through personal and social relationships within a complex social fabric.

The simplest situation is dyadic: x (a person, a group, …) has a relationship R (business, family, work, …) or is (an acquaintance, a friend, …), with y. But it easily becomes triadic with the intervention of a third party (mediator) xRy/z and beyond in a more or less extended network xRyRzR...

To enter into a more precise description, two other concepts can be closely associated with a human relationship:

-The first, which underlines its character, is that of *"link"* since, paraphrasing Confucius, "there is no humanity except in the social link" and that, by their multiplicity and abundance, links are constitutive of the life of communities, whether they are positive (solidarity, friendship, equality, sharing), negative (violence, subordination, dependence, predation), neutral or ambivalent (competition, authority, hierarchy), and this according to values that are rarely universal, as communities often prefer to favour what distinguishes them rather than what brings them together.

-The second, which is part of everyday life, is that of *"exchange*" made of gifts, words, or symbols between people of the same community.Etymologically, the Latin word “*com\*munis”* suggests, at the root of the word, what is shared together (*com*, with) and what is both a gift and an obligation, *"munus"* marking an implicit reciprocity of exchanges within a community and raising, at the same time, a question: *"****to* whom** do we give,***from whom*** we receive*...?* A relationship unites what is separate and separates what is united but is defined just as much by the actors.

However, the answer is not univocal because the conceptions of the person have never stopped changing according to societies and times.

F. Tönnies (1855-1935) proposed to distinguish a “communal” vision (Gemeinschaft) concerning small, not very mobile populations, with a defined corpus of beliefs and an identification through a specific vision of parental relations and cooperation, as opposed to a “societal” vision (Gesellshaft) where the individual as a person is not integrated in such a strict manner with his relatives. The matrimonial prohibitions and the rigor of reciprocity are then blurred in favor of other values where exchanges are increasingly regulated by law.

**\*Exchanges in a “community” vision (Gemeinshaft)**

From this standpoint, it is relevant to look at the concept of the person, starting with a significant example. Among the Sereers of Senegal, the person is conceived as the intersection of several relationships: that of flesh and bone, which comes from the mother and her matrilineage; that of blood, through the father and his matrilineage (at least among the Saafen); but also that of seniority - the elder/cadet relationship; and finally, that of friendship, that of the “nose-friends” which each person inherits and which follows the order of seniority. In addition, each person receives his or her “smell*”, kiili*, carried by the reincarnable soul, *coona,* of an ancestor of his or her cognatic kin, who thus provides soul and protection until weaning.

Each one, except for twins for whom an additional marker must be found, thus becomes unique, determined by these crossings, like those of the height lines that sailors traced to determine their position according to that of the stars far from terrestrial markers. And life then proceeds from the simultaneous and distinct existence of all these relationships, and thus of these names that make the bearer a unique being, integrated into a community that functions mainly according to principles of reciprocity and continuity between generations.

We can distinguish two archetypal figures of exchange characterising relations between people, both of which differ from authority relations[[2]](#footnote-2), communal sharing and commercial exchange (or any dyadic exchange without involvement of third parties). These are the *agonistic exchange*, of struggle, rivalry and even destruction (potlach) and the *triangular exchange*, that of Seneca (Allegory of the Three Graces) and of Marcel Mauss (Essay on the Gift,1923), which inscribes the exchange in a ceremonial network: *give, receive, return.* The *“gift”* (and counter-gift) is a mutually obliging process which, with its symbolic dimension, ensure a permanent regeneration of the social bond.

**Ceremonial gifts** are those which, after a more or less extensive process, return to the initial donor. These are specific gifts where relationships are more important than individuals; neither commercial nor inalienable, they ensure mutual recognition of status and mark the reciprocal belonging to the same network which may go beyond the borders of a group. These are exchanges involving several partners and a deferred reciprocity: A gives to B who gives to C who gives directly to A or to B to give back to A and the return, without being equivalent, confirms the reciprocity of the exchanges because giving back is not cancelling the relationship but presages its renewal.

These reciprocities are at the basis of ***triangular relationships:*** those of matrimonial alliances when a woman cannot marry without the agreement of her 'brother'[[3]](#footnote-3) at the expense of a deferred reciprocity, or, when, as among the Udalen Tuaregs, relations between lineages are scrupulously carried out in the ternary mode of generalised exchange; but also, within filiations in classificatory kinships[[4]](#footnote-4) where parents are classified as a group and not individually, the child belonging to the paternal or maternal group as much as to its progenitors. Finally, they are found in relationships mediated by a third party or a sacrificer, for example among the Hindus, where the gifts received by the Brahmins are returned by the gods themselves or the ancestors' spirits...

The ternary symbolism of family relationships is even found in divine relationships, in the Greek mythology, between Kronos and Zeus replaced by a swaddled stone; in the Hebrew world, between God and Isaac replaced by a sheep, a precursor of a revolution in the relational triangle.

***\*Exchanges in a societal vision: "Gesellshaft”***

It was in Christianity that the “*nuclear family”* appeared, composed of a father (husband), a wife (wife) and their children (in principle biological...) and always ritually established by a public and/or sacred word, replacing the *"kinship atom"* highlighted by Lévi-Strauss. Baptism embodies this transformation where the individual can then exist as a self, creature and “son” of God. It was in the 18th century that Europe consolidated the status of “free” citizens, less dependent on their group, with considerable consequences: people will be more likely to think in terms of competition and equality than in terms of reciprocity, bonding and fairness; it is no longer compulsory to return what one had received; a gift can even be negatively perceived ... as a debt or a mark of inferiority.

This is what A. de Tocqueville observed, *"individualism is a reflective sentiment which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows in such a way that, after having created a small society for his own use, he willingly abandons the large society to itself...".* Neo-liberal economics further emphasises individual responsibility in any enterprise even for the constitution of common goods, with some pleasant nuances: *"... at the head of a new enterprise, you see, in France, the government; in England, a great lord, ... in the United States, an association...".*

This individualism is clearly correlated with an idealisation of economic growth and a required acceptance of growing social inequality against egalitarian values. It also mirrors the weakening of reciprocal triangular relationships, religious beliefs and family networks.

The Chinese translation of "relationship" as "Guanxi" 关系网 would confirm this evolution at least within professional networks among which preferential treatment between partners can be established with reciprocal exchanges as soon as an opportunity arises. However, specificities of the relation inside a European company should be underlined: building an extended network would, for example, be a more key objective than making a personal “career” and it would be unethical for the network to benefit individuals at the expense of the group or the community.

The professional network would, in a sense, fill the void left by the decline of the traditional large family networks in favour of the urban nuclear family.

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In Latin *homo*, with *man* in English and *Mensh* in German, *mental* in French, we find the Indo-European root *men,* whichis also related to the Hebrew *humus,* the earth.

If Man is thus considered to be endowed with an earthly and mental nature, he belongs to a specific culture where the "person" is woven by perennial, reciprocal relationships or remains free in the choice of his relations within a minimum of external constraints whether required by law or agreed ethics and morals.

1. Relationships between concepts (metonymy), between a Whole (symbolic) and parts (synecdote), between mathematical or physical equivalences (between matter and energy, through the mediation of light, ....) nor relationships between proven facts (historical or contingent). As well the verb “*to relate”*, which tells a story, recalling significant events that carry a "truth" for the foundation of an identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Kojeve proposes four basic types of authority relationships: that of the master over the servant or slave, that of the military leader or teacher over the pupil, that of the judge over the petitioners, and that of the father or parents over the child. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The exchange can be deported inside the lineage to preserve its unity: among the Bedik, for example, two brothers must exchange their daughters before marrying them off to a relation of their wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The mother's “sister” is a “mother” and the father's “brother” is a “father” (patruus) (elder or younger), generally in opposition to maternal uncles (avunculus); the “cousin” is an elder or younger “brother”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)