4   Relational diagramming

Abstract

A purified form of relational method is introduced through an exploration of the workings of Dowling's Social Activity Method. By juxtaposing binary oppositions of a processual rather than substantial kind, properly relational diagrams can be achieved. A notion of strategic action becomes apparent that does not rely on containerised essences such as 'actor,' 'agent' or 'society.' The intentionality of the social, and thus the 'aboutness' of social research, is seen to be a matter of action on action leading to emergent alliance/opposition. Dowling's analysis of authority strategies is used to explain this, proving to be a productive way of reflecting on the nature of academic scholarship. The chapter then outlines and responds to criticisms that the use of formal analytical technologies – such as the artifice of the relational diagrams deployed by Social Activity Method – often receive. In addressing these, the chapter considers how this method understands the 'aboutness' of research. Further, it draws attention to the significance of modes of deformance to the academic endeavour in terms of the maintenance of the principle of recontextualisation in its empirical descriptions.

The black square

Figure 4.1

This is not a window. As one contemporary commentator has noted, "The slab of black paint that dominates the canvas works as grand refusal, repudiating nature in favour of abstraction" (Shaw, 2013, np). Unlike the Play School frame discussed in Chapter 2, there is no longer any possibility that the surface of the painting (Figure 4.1) can be read as a screen on which is projected what is (or what might be taken as) behind it. An assertion is made of the productivity of the negative. The painting rejects the viewer who wants to know what the painting is of, to bask in the security of recognition, to become lost in the admiration of a skilfully represented world. An immediacy of recognition and appreciation is denied. The potential positivity of this profound negativity was insisted on by Malevitch who regarded his pictures as analogous to sacred icons,[1] the "obfuscation of vision" configured "as a principle of sublime incomprehension" (Shaw, 2013, np)

The new subject for this picture is thus forged without recourse to representation. In its place, a new potential for movement is established, a freedom for the reader in exchange with the painter. Nicely, the craquelure (the cracking and break-up of the paint over time) may help to situate that reader's recognition in the materiality of Malevich's new practice. In this (by no means absolute2) minimalism, the reader is interpellated as having to begin work on their relation to the painting from the simplest of resources and in ways that ordinary subjectivity may well resist. There is nothing ready-made to fall back on – such as the admiration of a landscape, for example. Just a framing of (non-)figure on (non-)ground, and a few indications of the human involved in making the artefact. There is no representation either of perfect form, of some abstract meaning divorced from the practical sense through which Malevich worked. A dialogue can then progress as each new painting disturbs any equilibration of what might have been 'meant': sense-meaning is freed to develop as the reader compares spatial or temporal arrangements of the pictures.
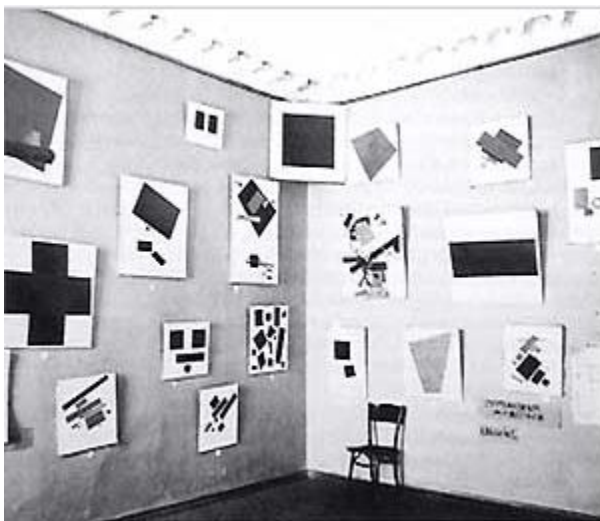

Figure 4.2

As the photograph in Figure 4.2 shows, the Black Square was originally (very narrowly) framed. This can be interpreted as a necessary indication – 'here is a picture' (Bateson, 2000[1972]). The frame leads the viewer from their surroundings to the discontinuity it marks: a rupture, given the conventional expectations of art galleries at that time. There then follows a doubling of that discontinuity: the ideal viewer must consider what might come from nothing (a black square) on a white (all colours, none discernible) canvas. The subsequent collection of paintings exhibited on the wall then insists on its own context of interpretation. External reference is eviscerated in favour of self-reference.

Malevich's move from the figurative to the relational can be taken as a metaphor for social research. The discipline of social research is not to mirror social reality – to see it more clearly, to feel more at home thereby knowing it better, to offer it an improved ordering through the analytical intelligence of the academy – but to imagine another way of thinking about it, by making, and making explicit, its own values.

Opening up social description

This chapter builds on our consideration of the various experiments in relational thought discussed in Chapter 3. There, we argued that the move in the direction of relationality often drifts back towards the

categorial in various ways. We are now concerned with establishing the principles by which avoidance of this might be achieved.

We will frame this discussion by drawing attention to a necessary tension in the doing of research: that between tightness and looseness. There are some significant paradoxes here. The primary concern is to position contemporary methods of social research as opening-up sensitivities towards the empirical rather than closing them down. Our critique of the container diagrams in Chapter 2, with their tightly fitting lids, was that they pre-assume the categories of social description (in terms of pre-social agency or gender ontology). And yet looseness may itself close the productivity of research by failing to provide necessary analytical order.

Initially, research tends to be as messy as the mess it seeks to describe. The dialectic of tight and loose can thus be seen to bring some cognitive order into social description. Bateson's description of the "fluctuating business of the advance of science" suggests how these might work together:

[…] first the loose thinking and the building up of a structure on unsound foundations and then the correction to a stricter thinking and the substitution of a new underpinning beneath the already constructed mass.

(Bateson, 2000[1972], p. 85)

Here, the process of research is convincingly described as a pulsing (not an epistemic break) in which sequences of "corrections" must be made to an initial ordering. But an initial looseness has further properties: particularly in the way that it provides scope for imagination and play. Even Bateson's designator 'science' might risk foreclosure here.

To illustrate how such considerations inform an orientation to relational thinking, we start by discussing an analysis of authority strategies by Dowling (2009). Dowling introduces two dimensions of modes of authority that, in their cross-product, produce four modes of strategic action. This analytical move is immensely productive because it takes social description away from substantive categories of authority that 'individuals' might be conceived to 'have' towards a purely relational diagram of the ways that 'authority' is invoked within social activity.

The chapter then turns to confront head-on some of the critiques commonly levelled at this sort of diagrammatic relational technology. We consider the ways that Social Activity Method spaces might be misread and – through a development of our earlier consideration of the emergent, autopoietic nature of sociocultural activity (see Chapter 2) – make a case for the productivity of the rationalisations that they enable. In the final part of the chapter, via a reading of work by Jerome McGann (2001), we respond to one of the criticisms that are often levelled at formal approaches of the kind we value: their separation from the political. Whilst we do not disagree about the need for political action such as greater social justice, we argue that social research gains authority by separating itself from such concerns. Academic work should speak on its own terms, not in the terms of those whom it describes. The concept of deformance (Dowling, 2009) becomes central to research: an ethics of generating counter-description to the categories and narratives that lock-in what seems so misguided and unjust.

The loss of categorial modes in social research involves considerable difficulty. Without recourse to the everyday concepts through which experience is stabilised, the reader tends to be placed in an uncomfortable position of liminality. The move is therefore one towards an initial productive ignorance

under the principle that only relational description should be allowed to fill the void. In this, there is a giving up of the "daydreams of intimacy" which Bachelard (2014[1958], p. 99) links to the notion of drawers and wardrobes in the imagination in a refusal of the attachment to categorial modes of thinking. There is also, in the idea that social action is a relationally defined tapestry of strategic action, a threat to the values invested in a notion of independent self-agency. But – as was highlighted in our discussion of Butler in Chapter 2 – the (analytical) subject in what follows is constituted in the relational spaces described (for example in terms of the modes of authority they claim or resist). Agency is then predicated on reflexivity towards such structuration – without such reflexivity, the sense of agency is a misrecognition.

Modes of authority action

Authority, like 'deviance' and the other concepts targeted by those engaged in moves towards relationality discussed in Chapter 3, is often essentialised. Authority conceived as something one might have ('they have natural authority') reinforces the container of the autonomous self by filling it with something to be deployed. This suggests an individualistic sense of strategy as conceived by methodological individualism: that is, what the ego plans for their future success. Such thinking all too quickly becomes tied to the naturalising of expectations regarding which voices are to be respected and listened to (see Kay, forthcoming). In the academy, personal properties are often taken to be the consequence of the possession of 'knowledge' or exceptional 'intelligence' and so on (one that again often 'naturally' maps onto the marking of 'different' genders).

For these reasons, Dowling (2008, 2009, 2013) was concerned to contest and reorganise claims to what are often referred to as 'types' of authority. Against Weber's various typologies of authority (most familiarly the traditional, the charismatic and the bureaucratic3), Dowling's analysis ruptures such subject–object thinking by marking out four different modes of authority action. These are introduced by him through a discussion of the ways that academic work operates.

The technique of Social Activity Method is to identify dimensions of action (Dowling, 1998, 2009, 2013). The interest is in the doing, not in the state, in becoming not being. Social forces are understood as stabilising or de-stabilising alliances and oppositions. Because there are no inscription devices with which to measure the dimensions of interest, the dimensions are configured as binaries not spectrums. The analytically productive nature of orthogonality can then be introduced by (tightly) taking cross-products of the two-dimensional binaries to produce four modes of action. These do not define types or categories of person – any individual may find themselves articulated in any of these modes.

For Dowling there are two dimensions of interest in circumstances where authority is recognised:

Category of author	Field of Practice	
	Open	Closed
Closed	*charismatic*	*traditional*
Open	*liberal*	*bureaucratic*

Fig 4.3 Modes of authority action (from Dowling, 2009, p. 53)

Figure 4.3

In the first dimension, a recognised field of practice is or is not invoked. In this book, for example, we are locating our own discussion in Social Activity Method, which is an established sociological language, and have made explicit claims thus to close the practice against rival descriptions of social research such as those discussed in Chapter 3. At a more general level of description (the relational space thus proving fractal) there is closure of this practice against other disciplines such as biochemistry. In a book about social research, the difference between this and other practices is clearly marked out with a specialised formation of descriptive principles (here especially our emphasis on an esoteric idea of "relationality").

In the second dimension, the category of author may vary. We can identify that (in relation to the field of practice) our author voices are often closed in discussing Social Activity Method. In writing this book we are, for example, inevitably claiming some unique expertise in the chosen field that means that we are the right people to produce this text (the reader may disagree, but this is the claim). Put together (closed practice, closed author) these constitute a traditional mode of authority action.

Three further modes become visible in Dowling's space. One is indicated by the backdrop to which he was writing: developments in school curricula, qualifications frameworks, and software such as Adobe Photoshop that were at the time challenging the idea of the individual-as-expert in the UK (see Dowling, 2008). This saw a move towards forms of closed practice but open authorship in that, with these new technologies, it becomes possible for a much wider range of people to produce work in previously traditionally closed professions such as teaching or professional photography. Academic writing provides a further example of this move from the traditional to the bureaucratic. Dowling gives the example of the use of stereotypical academic style and terms. Such terms can be copied and pasted by anyone. Today, in the UK the demand to use REF language4 to achieve 4* status – involving the promotion of terms such as "paradigm shifting," "rigorous," "world leading," "pioneering" – is similarly bureaucratising. There is a need for conformity, but anyone can conform.

A PhD thesis in the UK must make "an original contribution to knowledge." Authorship is closed but the field of practice is to be opened-up, at least to some limited extent: the charismatic mode of authority action. As Dowling notes, charismatic authority action is vulnerable – it can be challenged in relation to

institutionalised evaluation (2018, p. 191). The academic author faces a complex task of challenging and extending their chosen field of practice whilst also deploying traditional and bureaucratic authority action to ensure that their position in the field is recognised. Each may prove necessary to sustain an acceptable authorial voice. Agency emerges in the composition of such strategies, often non-consciously.

In an academic context, liberal authority is possible only for the reader, not for the author: "[…] unless you intend or are required to respond to this essay in public, then there are no necessary constraints on the way in which you read and make use of it (or choose not to)" (p. 192). This is because in the liberal mode of authority action there is no restriction upon who can speak or what can be said; it is, then, "a mode of action in which authority is negated" (p. 192). Dowling (2004) describes how student-centred, Piagetian pedagogy often privileges liberal authority in how it is conceived, if not practised. (The reader may have noticed some bureaucratic authority action in our last few paragraphs in the quite heavy use of quotations from, and references to, Dowling's work.)

These modes are not just evident in reflexive statements on practice, or assertions of academic contribution and expertise. Consider the list of references at the end of this chapter, for instance. This sort of list is a way of establishing a closed practice. But it is simultaneously a means by which authorship can be closed by demonstrating through bibliographic selections a particularly knowledgeable, up-to-date or extensive selection within that practice – traditional mode of authority action. Often, however, the references, whilst closed in terms of the field of practice, show no such selective skill. In such cases authorship is available to anyone – the authorship is open not closed. Dowling (2013) gives the example of the countless references to stereotypical but fashionable authorities such as Deleuze . Little, if anything is developed in the writing that demonstrates the productivity of the chosen 'master.' In the terms of Figure 4.3, this constitutes a bureaucratisation of research. Yet it was not that long ago that a citation to Deleuze was a move to the avant garde – the reference claiming closed authorship (to be in the know by discussing obscure French intellectuals no one else has read) and at the same time thus opening the field of practice in charismatic mode. We might finally note that from time to time references may be 'off topic.' These establish no specialised voice and an open field of practice: a liberal mode.

We can therefore think of a list of references, bibliography, or any other writing or artefact, as a combination of such strategies. Each involves the establishing, maintenance or destabilisation of social alliance. This writing is with/against these other social practices. I am operating with/against these others. It is worth repeating here that this avoids essentialising social objects; in the case of the construction of bibliographies, either the person putting the bibliography together, or the cultural object being constituted (the list of texts). The academic may or may not be aware of what they are doing (perhaps Figure 4.3 might help in this). Yet the logic of the space realises the possibilities that can then be mapped onto textual action even if there is no such awareness.

Towards an ethics of relationality

Dowling's relational description of modes of authority action allows an interrogation of the sorts of claims that academics explicitly or tacitly find themselves making all the time. It thus turns out to be an excellent way to organise one aspect of research reflexivity. The space intervenes by superimposing on practice. Figure 4.3 is not the empirical practice itself – that is messier than description would allow. Instead it is a contraction of just one aspect of social relations (how authority might be asserted) into a

formal expression. The vital point is the move to relational mode rather than to some over-arching explanatory concept such as 'authority' as a thing that might be possessed (or, indeed, measured). This is achieved through a form of condensation. But, contrary to the closing action of essentialised terms, the contraction achievable by juxtaposing binaries in this way opens in dialogue with the practice it describes. The diagram can then be thought of as a machine for mapping what happens when these binaries are seen to be in play within the empirical by the researcher. Measurement gives way to polarity. The formality has a consequence: as discussed in Chapter 3, the logic guarantees the completeness of the relational space with respect to what it is about (the strategies articulated by the binaries).

As there is a very great deal indeed going on in the above, our objective now is to unpick this a little. A significant aspect of Figure 4.3, for example, is that it coordinates an inter-play between the social and the cultural. Authority relations are mapped as being simultaneously one of social position (who can say what) and of the cultural (who can say what). The diagram therefore articulates strategic modes that enable the reader to map a view of socio-cultural action. The result refuses classifications of subjects/objects and eviscerates the 'essence' of authority.

A further fundamental property of Figure 4.3 is that it works at any scale of description. The 'unit of analysis' can be as micro or macro as the researcher likes. In terms of the example of academic writing, if the binary dimensions are at work, then authority strategies can be discerned in only a few words or in the framing of an entire book. These may differ – a potential destabilisation of the text. At a general level, a bibliography might be constituted traditionally but there may be charismatic, liberal and bureaucratic deviations from this, even down to the smallest level of detail. And, as both traditional scholars and hyper-bureaucrats know, it is always possible to close a practice more than has currently been achieved to push others into a relatively liberal mode. In his wonderful guide to academic work, for instance, Eco (2015) suggests very strict rules for academic referencing that in practice are rarely followed. The same is true of the text of the paper or book. We have just used Dowling's work in a traditional way. But consider the space itself – it is simply reproduced (with permission) from Dowling's book: a bureaucratic strategy, one that plays here, as it were, within the traditional.

Figure 4.3 might be therefore also be recruited as part of an ethics of research. In our example, unless one is writing a textbook (where traditional modes are expected although bureaucratising ones are only too frequent), at least some "opening" moves with respect to the field of practice should occur. Otherwise the reader is condemned to déjà vu. Staking a claim to charismatic modes in the closure of the author's voice establishes a text as potentially worth reading. It also clarifies that for academic writing bureaucratic modes are something of a lure. As we suggested at length in Chapter 1, such bureaucratisation often takes the form of a 'theoretical framework' that is introduced as traditional authority but then not operationalised: it is as if such writers, under the duress of pressure to publish, are dreaming of being traffic wardens. In Chapter 1, our look at some recently published academic articles revealed that they are riddled with bureaucratic strategies – having to publish so much, and so quickly, these offer a way of merely simulating an academic voice. The problem is that the alternative, to stick your neck out and seek to establish a charismatic mode of authority, carries great risk: not least that your work will simply remain unrecognised.

Relational spaces when designed according to the same principles as Figure 4.3 also have the quality of generalisability. Once the coherence of a particular relational space has been established through an

engagement with a given practice it can be applied anywhere where the dimensions hold. This kind of diagramming therefore gives an explicit rather than an improvised way of making analogies across very different social activities. The authority space has proved particularly productive in this sense because authority strategies can be found being deployed wherever people position themselves relative to each other – which in the social is just about everywhere (in our own work we have used it to consider the very different empirical contexts of online videogame and television fan communities – see Whiteman, 2012).

This observation leads to what is perhaps the most fundamental issue for social research: interrogating the role and significance of a formalist approach to the analysis of data. Social Activity Method, as illustrated above, organises its description of the empirical in an explicitly principled way. On the one hand, some formal rigour seems to be both a necessary prophylactic against the multiplication of conceptual terms that we noted in Chapter 1 and an artifice for engineering rupture. On the other, any such formalism risks freezing its referent if it claims that it is itself the generative structure of that reality – what in Chapter 3 we noted Dowling (2009) has called forensics.

There is nothing new about this dilemma. In a vivid example, Peter Osborne (2018) has discussed Althusser's late critique of structuralism. Althusser came to the realisation that some of his work had fallen into "[…] project[ing] the production of the real out of a combinatory of elements" (ibid., p. 97). Osborne further notes Althusser's recognition that concerns with epistemology (as in his "epistemological break") itself inclines to idealism (the idea that a formalism can contract reality itself).

Osborne provides a second example. In his commentary on Rosalind Krauss' theorisation of sculpture, he notes that her use of Greimas' (certainly relational in our sense) semiotic square is one where "the outcome of the game is fixed in advance" (ibid., p. 101) through the choice of what are (in our terms) culturally arbitrary categorial oppositions. This is not to dismiss such work, but, as Osborne notes, to consider it an imaginative foray into the possible, not a representation of the order of things-in-themselves. A map is always a deformance of its referent activities. It is this notion to which we will turn below. The tightness of Social Activity Method offers such an artifice, but this is cohered through analytical self-reference rather than by some imaginary anchor embedded in the real.

There are three frequent mis-readings of relational spaces that we now want to draw attention to. First, because a relational space is a static array of a dynamic process, it is easily misread as itself representing an eternal 'structure' somehow generative of the social. Second, because of the either/or digitisation intrinsic to taking binarised dimensions, relational spaces might be thought to be alienated from the practices they seek to describe. Third, the challenge "what is the point?" (often a demand to hear positive ideas about impact or social improvement). If fully relational technologies such as Social Activity Method are self-referential, why should anyone bother to engage with them?

In our view, none of these criticisms hold. The strategic modes identified in relational spaces are dynamic (e.g. closing/opening authorship). Their analytical representation is synchronic, but they identify modes of action (processes not entities). They certainly objectify and deform: a 2 × 2 table is able to determine precisely what it claims and no more, and it is the construct of the researcher not of the actor. However, when properly constituted, relational spaces of this kind have a significant value – they hold open the possibility of dialogic relations with the described. As indicated above, it is here that we have found them to be highly productive, and this is also the answer to the third question: what is offered is a transaction, not a way to reorder the world. In this case, we have found with students and

indeed with our own work, that the authority space is a way of engendering reflection on academic writing. It is not a program for how to write but a way of understanding that all writing must inhabit this space when conceived of according to these dimensions. And – as we have indicated – these modes are constantly in play in the current institutionalisation of the academy.

The materialisation of practice

The 'tightness' of constructing relational spaces is, however, accompanied by a necessary looseness: there is no algorithm for how to produce them. To explain this, we now want to draw attention to the 'aboutness' of social research – something that is given surprisingly little attention in methodological writing. In Chapter 2 we emphasised the significance of being able to distinguish between continuities and discontinuities. Above, we have focused on the strategic action through which alliances and oppositions materialise. Yet the understanding of this process is largely tacit. What comes to mind by way of organising it as research is a product of the "sociological imagination" (Mills, 2000[1959]) rather than the observance of a descriptive procedure. One way of getting at this is through an example of a recent incident that nearly annihilated one of the authors of this book.

It is 6.30AM. The taxi is doing a steady 30 mph down the road leading to the station. Cocooned in the back-passenger seat, I watch the shops and terraced houses glide by in a semi-conscious state. The driver is silent, and mercifully for once the radio is off. We will make my train.

It is of some comfort that – had they been my last words to myself – they were just surprised (not angry or regretful): 'But that light is red,' not even with exclamation, and as if they just passed through my mind.

The taxi drove through the red light and hit the van without breaking.

My panic, now, was the smoke. The panic intensified. If the seat belt had just saved me it was now likely to kill me – I could not find the release. By pulling on the slack of the belt I could just manage to wriggle out, crawling on to the road on my hands and knees. To my surprise, there were already cars trying to navigate their way around the debris. I was overcome by an intense feeling of vulnerability to being run over.

In this situation one may be lucky. The taxi hit the van (orthogonally given that this took place at a crossroads) on its side, a perfectly designed crumple zone. Travelling a second earlier (perhaps less) there might have been no more thoughts. The driver of the taxi was also fine and was asking why the van driver had gone through the red light.

Crossroads are, in cultures that have not yet lost a well-placed sensitivity to such arrangements, places at which anxiety rises. This is numbed by the bureaucratised routine of electronic lights. Yet there is good reason for anxiety given the number of accidents that take place at intersections. It is noticeable in the internalisation of driving-skill, for example, that a sense of caution may occur even when going through a green light. One can calculate that a light just turned red is probably safe to pass; but as noted in Chapter 2, this is a (to some, exciting) violation of habitual norm. For the most part, when driving skilfully, one does not put into words the colour of the light – rather, there is an embodied enaction of what is appropriate given the conventions in place. This makes driving without undue expenditure of mental energy possible. Finding yourself in a crash at a junction might very well then be rationalised as only possible due to the actions of the other driver.

In the terms we first introduced in Chapter 2, we can refer to affectual regularities of socio-cultural action as an aspect of embodiment. As we noted there, culture habituates affect. Social-alliances are formed with other drivers by participating in – and thus reproducing – regularities of practice such as stopping at red lights. The purification involved in this activity is then recognised in transgression – in affects such as, depending on the position of the observer, outrage, excitement, shame or fear. The analysis of authority action above, now suggests further descriptors. The authority of the traffic lights is in bureaucratic mode: Latour would say their actions are agentic. Social Activity Method can say that the lights are constituted in the institutionalisation of a specialised practice: the materialisation of when to stop or go. The practice is closed (feel free to disobey if you are a pedestrian) and take the consequences if you want to be charismatic (the cyclist who dares). In some sense, therefore, the social is always ahead of the game. Affectual response to the recognition of impurity (by self or other) may indeed surprise the person if they have not experienced such recognition before. As described in Chapter 2, the habituation of order (of the proper, of legitimacy) is always-already an affectual order.

Where regularities of practice are observed to be enacted with relatively stabilised patterns of affect and social-alliance we will now refer to social activities and their institutionalisation (Dowling, 2009). We will not prejudge whether these satisfy the conceptual requirements of 'system' (Luhmann, 1995[1984]), or whether the best metaphor for thinking about the ordering of the activity is in the form of a 'network' (Fuchs, 2001): these may or may not be productive in the description of specific empirical settings. Rather, the focus will be on the (sometimes rather short-lived) ways alliances and their oppositions are formed, maintained and destabilised (Dowling, 2013).

Different social activities can be organised through relational spaces thought of metaphorically as maps of action (achieved through the juxtaposition of binaries forming each dimension) that describe strategies that self-organise in ways that are distinct from (and may be incommensurable with) the principles of other action. Subjects attracted by (or called into alliance with) a given activity often form deeply affectual habitual responses to the norms involved through practice (Bourdieu, 1992; Althusser, 2001) rather than through conscious commitment. Thus, currently on London streets, the activity of cycling is principled very differently to car-driving and the regularities of practice of one often prompt outrage as perceived violations of the other. They occupy different "chronotopes" (Bakhtin, 1981). The governmental response has been, where possible, to provide different spaces for the two sometimes-opposed practices rather than attempting to enforce a change of behaviour (by, for example, requiring cyclists to take a driving test, or vice-versa).

Car-driving and cycling are different social activities. In the process of doing them regularities of feeling (affect) and cognition, normative discourse and reflexive discourse are constituted. Language provides opportunities both for normalisation (satisfying communicative expectations) and for embedded critique (for example, in the restatement of norms – you should not go through red lights!). The crystallisation of such practices is, then, a matter of social classification.

The description of social activity is another social practice with its own polarity of principles and habituated norms. The description may be personal and informal: the immediate response to surviving the crash was for the passenger – slightly to their surprise – to begin messaging their contacts with photos of the event. The principles here are still perhaps quite idiosyncratic: norms of what are acceptable to relay are not established. Alternatively, the description may be institutionalised as social

research. Social research is not car-driving – it cannot speak for the car driver. Such a project, although widely demanded in return for funding the academy, would be misconceived.

Methods need then to be aligned to a paradox. Car driving is generally regulated according to a categorial, classificatory, diagram. There is a technology: cars built to certain standards, the roads, the lights, and to some extent nationally habituated styles of driving. The law becomes regulative in retrospect when things go wrong. In an activity which to a great extent is regulated by rules, blame can be apportioned, and redress calculated. Yet many of these rules are ignored when traffic is flowing normally and people have to get places. For the most part this is achieved in a stable way. For example, on local roads in South London, a speed limit of 20 mph has relatively recently been introduced. Traffic seems to have self-organised a norm of something like 28 mph. This accomplishment is autopoietic – an emergent regularity. A method that cannot accommodate such contestation because it reproduces static categories will have little purchase on even this most everyday practice.

The person is then subjectivated in multiple contested regularities of practice. After a car crash, other social activities quickly intervene making claims on the person to act according to their principles. Insurance companies must be notified of what happened and who was at fault. The police arrive to determine if an offence has been committed: statements are taken; reports made. The judiciary then divides: it allocates people on the basis of causal responsibility to innocence or guilt. The in-between is allocated to innocence in English Law; but the only necessity for the integrity of the operative diagram is that it allocated somewhere and not allowed to remain indeterminate.

The complexity of the social is rarely apparent even when things go wrong. Method conceived as typology and classification cannot produce a commentary on this. After the crash, the ambulance service was not needed, the police left when they ascertained no one had been injured (this being their current interpretation of whether it is worth investigating what might have been judged a criminal offence). The road was cleared of debris very quickly after the crash. The taxi was a write-off but a smooth return to habituated order was quickly achieved.

There is, then, a continual process between embodying and objectifying action. From this , the strategic modes of diagrams such as the authority space above can be thought of as emergent expressions of alliance and opposition. The iterations of action are (more, or less) stabilised through forms of the socio-cultural that provide organisation and principles of recognition for both practice and thought: to whom one does/does-not belong. The police were in a position that they could decide to take no further action. This should not be thought of as simply a language: the child learns language in use, gathering the ordering principles through both habituation and interruption. Recruiting terms from Dowling (2009) we have (Figure 4.4):

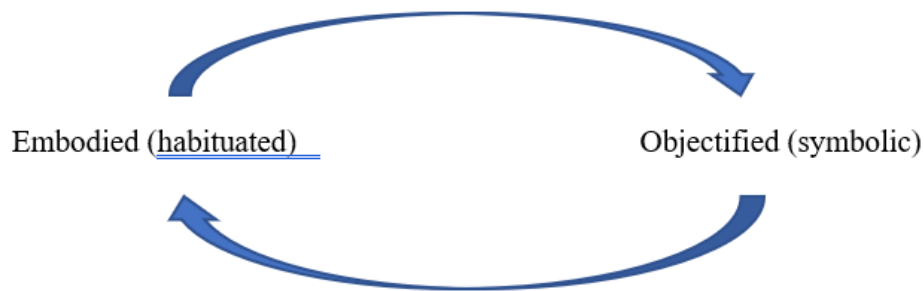Embodied (habituated)   Objectified (symbolic)

Figure 4.4

In any socio-cultural process, especially in the complex division of labour of modernity, there are multiple patterns with potentially incommensurable principles of interpretation. Thus, the alliance between cyclists and vehicle-drivers may be highly antagonistic. They may (for the most part) be governed by different procedures, for example with respect to what to do at traffic lights. Yet road users act categorially. Move your car, it's where I want to park outside my house! The process of objectification/embodiment, the precipitation of what one finds oneself saying or doing, has an attractor: an atomised sense of "interpersonal relations". A sense of legitimation derives from isolated (and isolating) personal territorial sovereignty.5

In an important sense then, as introduced in the previous chapter, social process needs to be modelled as "recursive" (Law, 1994, p. 14) in the sense of identifying "self-generating" (ibid., p. 15) regularities of practice. In the cybernetic language of Maturana and Varela (1980[1972]), interrogating the social becomes a matter of emergent autopoiesis (Luhmann, 1995[1984]; Dowling, 2009). The question is how to capture this idea without forensic formalisation. The process aspect of action entails a move to thinking in terms of feedback (Figure 4.5):

Relations (social alliance in culture)   Practice (cultural social alliance)
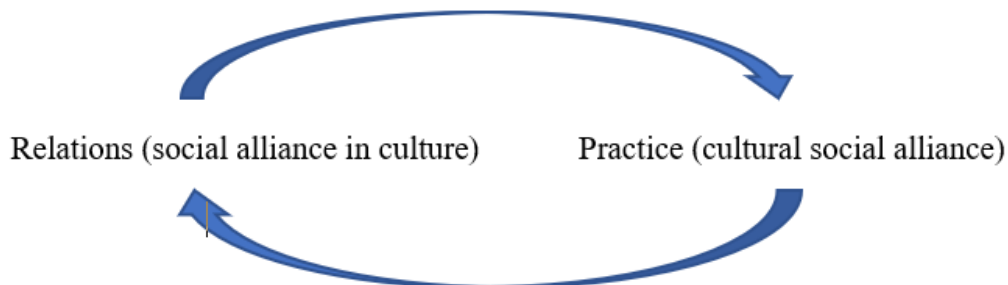
Figure 4.5

Here, an analytical focus on social relations has to do with pattern of association and hierarchy; a focus on culture has to do with ways in which practice is patterned through habitual dispositions and symbolic resources: both are co-determined. In Chapter 5 we will discuss the productivity of juxtaposing these two processes.

The regulative aspects of Law's suggestion of "recursive" process have already been hinted at in our discussion of authority above. The self-organisation of practices is given structuration in Social Activity Method in that relational spaces have a fractal quality (Dowling, 2009, p. 42) – they are able to describe self-similarity at different levels of action. As we discussed, this allows (dis)orderings to be discerned at even micro levels (for example, a single phrase in the articulation of the text of authority action). Yet our reason for not using "recursion" is to resist any sense that emergent strategies are algorithmically or 'logically' generated. Partly this is simply a matter that Law himself refers to as the "messy" contingencies of practice. It is also due to constant "interference" (Mol, 2002, p. 121; Barad, 2007) as regularities of practice clash – the ambiguities of being torn between competing regulative activities.

Deformance modes

We want now to amplify our response to the third criticism of relational method reported above, the assertion that such commentary has no use-value. In a direct sense this is true. As with all research, as opposed to politics, the specialised principles that inform academic work recontextualise social activities that are organised according to other principles. As Samuel Weber (2001, p. xi) discusses, cohering a relational research regard thus inevitably involves transformative action. Some regularity of practice is then required so that it can be recognised/realised in the many arenas in which research is articulated (journals, university seminars, discussions over coffee or on Zoom and so on). But what is the potential productivity of this process of transformation?

In his landmark essays on digital culture, McGann (2001) emphasises the deformative work involved in textual interpretation. It bears repeating that interpretation is a socially and historically informed practice. Recognition and realisation principles may be quite strongly institutionalised, with would-be adepts presenting weakly institutionalised work as candidates for future orthodoxy. We find McGann's work particularly interesting because it marks a schism of institutionalisation that is present in his own text, giving it a disjunctive feel. This produces a particularly striking liminality in the model reader. McGann does however, in the end, resolve the central ambiguity that characterises his criticism.

McGann's book is a collection of articles published over the period of a decade. It is unsurprising that in coming to terms with nascent ways of digitising texts, the early works put significant emphasis on the greater productivity available from computerised storage and retrieval. For example, in a digitised archive of the collected works of a poet, the determination would be to find a way to mark up all the cultural resources bequeathed by a given author, to enrich the interpretation of their poetry. Thus, the inclusion of paintings as well as poetry, the very many drafts and changes made to some poems, the potential feedback between critical commentary of the time and the poet's work, etc. This, when organised and indexed in a format that would allow searches both across all content and at variable scales (even for paintings), would open-up a wealth of potential perspectives previously simply unavailable to the book-based scholar.

The potential instability of this argument is twofold. Firstly, an expansion of the empirical field does not determine the potential 'depth' of an interpretation. A restriction of empirical scope might perhaps enable a more profound reading; offering a satisficing solution in the sense of Herbert Simon (1996) whom McGann cites frequently (the 'rational' pursuit of the optimal, seeking to incorporate all information being itself irrational). It is not obvious that a completely open inter-text is manageable: what restrictions should apply? Secondly, and perhaps more unsettlingly, a digitisation must both rationalise the analogue text and in doing so impose a specific order. This raises the following question:

is that order an artefact of the encoding, or is it a mirror of the underlying structure of the text? Only on the second view could digitisation in-itself be thought to allow critics to reveal more about the previously hidden truth of artefacts of the kind McGann is interested in, such as paintings.

There are therefore two dimensions with which to describe the modes through which McGann's argument fluctuates. The situation is summarised in Figure 4.6:

	Object Text	
Target	Closed	Open
Uncovering	*revealing*	*determining*
Transforming	*mis-taking*	*reimagining*

Fig 4.6: Deformance modes

Figure 4.6

Perhaps the most familiar mode adopted by orthodox literary scholars is that of revealing. The artefact is here taken as an integral object. Underlying or inner meanings wait to be uncovered (such claims are usually hedged and stated to be fallible). To expand consideration to the inter-text – interpretation across artefacts – would be to destroy that integrity. To seek to transform the true meaning of the text would be to betray both its true sense and the value of revelation.

Opposed to this, one might, with the objective of uncovering meaning, try to contextualise the object – perhaps the author had produced a co-text, an earlier draft or sketch, for instance – which sees the sense resonating between valued objects. Such determining of an artefact's relation to other artefacts is tied to a sense of pre-existing worlds of meaning that the scholar is there to explore and report back about.

Against such literal mindedness, a reading might take as its target a transformation of the text. The literalist will immediately feel that an injury is about to be inflicted; but this strategy is unembarrassed by such criticism. The view here is that sense is co-produced in the engagement by the reader. The reader brings a unique history (the traces of their antecedent readings) which cannot be anticipated by the work. To follow Dowling (2009), whose recontextualisation of McGann's notion of deformance inspired Figure 4.6, if they are to escape a naïve literalness, the reader must en-strange the work through their misprision (Bloom, 1997) of it, a mis-taking. The liminality of estrangement on the reader's first encounter with a new poem, for example, is resolved in a productive deformance. A new reading is

a making-strange in relation to prior ones enabled via the scholar finding a position only dreamed of before. Such transformative work may extend to the inter-text: a reimagining mode.

There is a more complex claim to be made here. In academic work, the subject who becomes social researcher by being open to the empirical which they then relationally describe (here through the putting together of relational spaces), may seek dialogue with the researched. If this process is taken as transformative rather than as uncovering, it is one of disruption of sedimented categories: the defamiliarisation (Shklovsky, 2015[1917]) of habitual modes of action and imagistic patterns of thought.

Conclusion

One way of thinking about the productivity of research is that it consists of opening a research gaze on to an empirical setting, enacting a mapping of that setting through the rationalisations enabled by the relational principles of the research, and then offering the result to the lived-world of the researched as something necessarily strange. The image we would suggest is that of the researcher surprised. If the stereotypical or pre-existing 'deep' has been allowed to preconceive the research, there can be no surprise. Nor can there be if the research is produced in terms of the containment of things. We have even insisted that these rupturing errancies constitute a necessary aspect of ethical research.

Becker (1998) provides a way of seeing very clearly what is at stake here for the researcher's own subjectivity, a matter that concerns the contested definitional process in which sociology recognises itself and its practitioners. In his extended discussion of 'logic,' he notes the retroactive process by which the work of the past changes in response to the innovations of the present. This is as true for social research and those working within it as it is for Art Worlds or any institutionalised practice. As new dimensions are introduced in current work, past objects are reconfigured according to the dimensions now visible. The rejection of grand theory is simply an emphasis on the transactional nature of productive work, made possible in alliance with others. Introducing action as strategy located relationally has, then, the same power as Malevich's rejection of representation had for art and for artists.

If, at the most general level, the purpose of social research is to make sense of the ways that people produce (dis)order in their interactions with each other, to map the (very often tacit) principles of who may be recognised as legitimate or illegitimate in that action, then several things follow. Of immediate critical concern is the principle of non-simultaneity. The researcher producing such a map must take up a position of description separate from that of the organising principles of the described. These may well be discursively unknown to the described. As Bourdieu (1990[1980]) has noted, some of the most intensely moving human rituals do not have a narrative meaning – the meaning is the habitus of socio-cultural alliance, that 'this is how we always do things.' People will come up with meanings if you ask them for them, being for the most part politely obliging when questioned by researchers. Yet the work of social research cannot be of the described, which in any case may be organised on non-discursive principles. This is even true of autoethnography (and all social research includes an element of self-description given that a researcher is also part of the social setting they describe).

In some sense therefore, in doing research the researcher must seek out an otherness which negates what they have taken themselves to be in order to develop new forms of self-organisation. The movement back and forth from the in-itself to descriptive reflection, from immersion to a sense of distance, is characteristic of all human activities, including customary ones. What is different in the

academy is the systematic driving forth of explicit principle to constitute a specialised practice – here of social description. As with all practices, not all principles can be made explicit. Yet the primary orientation of the academic regard is to interrogate this fact. It is this institutionalisation of reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) that is the main legitimation of the activity of social research (other modes of interpretation are of course possible and potentially productive6). But if it is to be worth anything, the academy requires discursive organisation of the moment of criticality: what are the conditions under which these patterns of the social achieved some stability?

Dowling refers to relational spaces as the technology through which the text of the social (the semiotic nature of any reading of action) can be made into commentary (2009, p. 224). The choice of this technology, biased towards a broad concern for the ways in which social alliance is reproduced, determines that the commentary is concerned with modes of strategic action. These are not treated as individualistic but emerge as ordered inscriptions of each relational space. The interpretative work enabled through the configuration of technology-text-commentary is self-referential but responds to what it finds in the empirical. It is thus itself autopoietic. Pragmatic engagement with the empirical ensures that the intrinsic self-reference of the method is not solipsistic (as would be the case with a theory imposing a priori theoretical frames on what can be discerned to happen in social action).

We will end this discussion with one further relational space (Figure 4.7):

	Organising Dichotomies	
Focus of Explanation	Second-Order	First-Order
Entity	*type*	*classification*
Relation	*strategy*	*motive*

Figure 4.7 Explanatory modes

Figure 4.7

Our argument is that relational method breaks with what it enables to be described in a productive way. We have critiqued diagrams that constitute research by adopting quotidian – "first-order" – categories. People get-by in the social by establishing norms of understanding that often diverge between tacit and discursively articulated sense. It is on the basis of these norms that, for example, trust can be given or withheld. This may involve (with a necessary injustice) the allocation of people to groups – classification – or a judgement of the motives of action through which to hold them to account. Against this, and for research, we have argued that "second-order" interpretative work must take place. In Chapter 3 we saw that one step towards achieving this is the orthogonalising of dichotomies into schemas of the kind exemplified by Becker. This suggested new types but condensed action to entities (in Becker's case the types of deviant). Our move – informed by the principles of Social Activity Method – rejects such substantive abstraction by incorporating process, the definitional imperative, and delimiting categories to a concern solely for the relationally conceived strategy discernible as modes of action. In the next chapter, we will consider how this rejection might enable the destabilisation of a different substantive target: classifications of ignorance versus knowledge.

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1 As in Figure 4.2, the picture when exhibited was in "the same sacred spot that a Russian Orthodox icon of a saint would sit in a traditional Russian home. This likeness wasn't lost on people in Petrograd." https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/kazimir-malevich-1561/five-ways-look-malevichs-black-square

2 "Much has been said about the inexactness of the geometry in Malevich's paintings, that they fail in their attempt at 'pure form' – as if handmadeness undoes 'purity of form' and dismantles what these works aspired to. But it is this 'failure' (if that is what it is) that is the most interesting thing of all. The not quite straight lines, the rough edges, the slightly course brushed marked surface, all perhaps imply spatial conventions still tethered to representation – foreground/background, in-front/behind, interior/exterior" (Peters, Callery and McCausland, 2014, np). https://abstractcritical.com/note/the-black-square-part-2/index.html#comment-739346

3 To the creative intellectual brain, there are as many 'types of authority' as you like. Guzmán's (2015) introduction of a "missing" type demonstrates this. In this work a table outlines previous studies that have introduced anomalous cases that don't fit Weber's model, thus provoking the need for "modification" of the framework via the introduction of a newly discovered type. 12 new named types (including Guzmán's own – "substantive-rational authority") are introduced including "ideological authority" "Office charisma," "charisma of reason" and "Performance authority" (2015, p. 78).

4 Academics in the UK are now required every six or seven years to submit publications for scoring in the Research Excellence Framework. A failure to achieve the highest scores may result in the withdrawal of active researcher status.

5 In his final writing, Norbert Elias makes the point that such principles

induce in people the feeling that in some sense their individual self and, by proxy, every other individual, exists as a kind of monad independently of all others in a central position in the world and that one can explain all social events, including human communication, in terms of individual actions.

(Elias, 1991, p. 20)

6 Some mixed modes of description can be effective in the right hands. For example, the philosophical conundrums embedded in Iris Murdoch's novels, or the social commentary that forms a substantive part of novels such as Thomas Mann's (2005[1924]) The Magic Mountain. In such cases, the ideal reader is prompted to break from the immersion of narrative to an objectification of their own reading towards philosophical or social–philosophical concerns. It is notable that sometimes these can feel a little forced. A purer form of prompting such objectivity in literature is to introduce incoherence (for example, Hopscotch (Cortázar, 2014[1966])) or inconsistency (for example, Malone Dies (Beckett, 2010[1956])) into the narrative: here the for-itself is not offered a ready-made alternate subjectivity.