

*Annual Review of Sociology*

# Relational Work in the Economy

Nina Bandelj

Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, California 92697, USA;  
email: nbandelj@uci.edu

Annu. Rev. Sociol. 2020. 46:251–72

First published as a Review in Advance on  
April 14, 2020

The *Annual Review of Sociology* is online at  
[soc.annualreviews.org](http://soc.annualreviews.org)

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054719>

Copyright © 2020 by Annual Reviews.  
All rights reserved

## Keywords

relational work, economic exchange, embeddedness, emotions, inequality, earmarking money, moral markets

## Abstract

In her groundbreaking scholarship on intimacy and economy, Viviana Zelizer coined the concept of relational work, or efforts in matching social relations with economic transactions and media of exchange. This article reviews the conceptual advances and empirical applications of relational work over the past two decades. I first trace the origins of the concept and discuss how it is distinct from the idea of embeddedness. I then identify variants of relational work proposed in economic sociology, including relational accounting, obfuscated exchange, clarifying and blurring practices, and emotions and power in relational work. The second part of the review discusses research on relational work in five areas: earmarking money, walking the terrain of morally problematic exchange, configuring social relations through economic activity, using social relations to negotiate economic interactions, and scaling up to relational work of organizations and institutions. I end by proposing areas of future research to examine the determinants and consequences of relational work for (dis)trust, (in)equality, and relational (mis)matches.

ANNUAL  
REVIEWS **CONNECT**

[www.annualreviews.org](http://www.annualreviews.org)

- Download figures
- Navigate cited references
- Keyword search
- Explore related articles
- Share via email or social media

## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade of the twentieth century, we witnessed a relational turn in sociology (Mische 2008, Powell & Dépelteau 2013). In 1997, Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) published a “Manifesto for Relational Sociology,” where he advocated that the basic unit of analysis for sociology should not be individuals or macrolevel institutions but, instead, the social relations between actors. Certainly, the emphasis on relationality did not suddenly appear in the 1990s. Classical sociologists—Marx, Simmel, Mead, Goffman, and Bourdieu, among others—considered social relations, albeit at different scales of analysis, as fundamental to understanding the social world. Feminist scholarship early on paid attention to the gendering of relational and emotional efforts (Hochschild 1983, Laslett & Brenner 1989, Hill Collins 1990). During the 1990s, several developments explicitly called for relational analyses to be placed center stage in sociological inquiry. One such initiative was the New York School of relational sociology (Mische 2011) centered around Harrison White (1992) and Charles Tilly (1998), who were reframing their own theoretical models. The relational focus has persisted into the twenty-first century. Desmond (2014) proclaimed the need for relational ethnography, which shifts the substantive and analytic focus from groups and places to relations, boundaries, and conflicts. Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt (2019) proposed an organizational approach to relational inequalities.

A focus on relationality has played a foundational role in the new economic sociology, which staked its claim on understanding the role of social relations in economic life. After all, Mark Granovetter (1985, p. 482) famously stated that “economic behavior and the institutions . . . are so constrained by ongoing social relations that to construe them as independent is a grievous misunderstanding.” The emphasis on this embeddedness of economic action in social relations sparked influential research on networks and the economy (for a review, see Smith-Doerr & Powell 2005). Parallel to these developments, efforts to rethink relationality in economic life were ongoing, with Viviana Zelizer’s focus on relational work as the most influential among them. Zelizer (2000) first introduced the concept of relational work in her article “The Purchase of Intimacy” and later wrote a manifesto statement as part of a special issue of *Politics & Society* (Zelizer 2012) following a conference on relational work organized by Fred Block at the University of California, Davis, in 2010. Commenting about developments in economic sociology, Ezra Zuckerman (2019, p. 934) recently quipped that, “whereas during the 1980s and 1990s Granovetter’s ‘embeddedness’ was where it was at . . . during the aughts, Zelizer’s ‘relational work’ and ‘circuits’ became all the rage.”

What, then, is relational work, and how have researchers used it to understand economic life? This review first traces the origins of the concept to Zelizer’s scholarship and discusses how relational work is distinct from the idea of embeddedness. Afterward, I identify ways in which Zelizer’s concept has been further specified by economic sociologists, including through ideas of relational accounting, obfuscated exchange, clarifying and blurring practices, and power and emotions in relational work. The second part of the review discusses studies that apply the concept to answer specific research questions in the sociology of economy: (a) how individuals earmark money, (b) how they deal with morally charged economic transactions, (c) how they configure social relations through economic practices, (d) how they use social relations to accomplish economic exchange, and (e) how organizations and institutions engage in relational work. In the last part, the review identifies several lines of research that can animate the future research agenda on the topic, including specifying the determinants of relational work as well as examining its consequences for forging trust or repairing mistrust, negotiating equality or inequality in exchanges, and understanding relational matches versus mismatches.

## ZELIZER'S RELATIONAL WORK

Zelizer (2000, 2005) introduced the concept of relational work to explain how people negotiate the intersections between intimate and economic relations. In her landmark book, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, she distinguished between the standard separate spheres account of the relationship between economy and intimacy—which sees these two domains as two separate entities with distinct and opposing logics of operation—and her own account of connected lives, in which economy and intimacy coexist and are mutually constitutive. Zelizer used the concept of relational work to explain how this connection is made possible, especially since the common sense image of mixing intimacy and economy can be so unsettling. Zelizer explained that “people create connected lives by differentiating their multiple social ties from each other, marking boundaries between those different ties by means of everyday practices, sustaining those ties through joint activities (including economic activities), but constantly negotiating the exact content of important social ties” (2005, p. 32). That is, connected lives are possible because of relational work in which people engage. In her article explicitly discussing relational work, “How I Became a Relational Economic Sociologist and What Does That Mean?” leading off the special journal issue of *Politics & Society* on the topic, Zelizer (2012, p. 145) defined relational work as follows:

[In] all economic action, I argue, people engage in the process of differentiating meaningful social relations. For each distinct category of social relations, people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation. I call that process relational work.

Importantly, for Zelizer, relational work is not just sociality. Admittedly, “the process of differentiating meaningful social relations” is the first part of the definition. However, the connection to the economic activity is paramount. In her definition of relational packages, which relational work involves, Zelizer put four components on a level playing field. “Relational packages consist of combinations among (a) distinctive interpersonal ties, (b) economic transactions, (c) media [of exchange], and (d) negotiated meanings” (Zelizer 2012, p. 151). Actors seek to find viable matches across these four components.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, while these components imply a micro focus on individuals’ ties and personalized meanings, on multiple occasions Zelizer (2005, 2006, 2012) has made clear that the categories of social relations strongly inform this process and that those categories derive their meanings from broader and historically variable cultural, institutional, and legal frames. Moreover, Zelizer (2012, p. 149) positioned an inquiry into relational work as one aimed to advance economic sociology by proposing an “alternative view” to the account of embeddedness.

## EMBEDDEDNESS AND/OR RELATIONAL WORK

Several analysts have set out to clarify how relational work may, or may not, be different from economic sociology’s longstanding focus on embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; see Krippner & Alvarez 2007). Stoltz (2017) has proposed that the difference between the two perspectives is that relational work investigates relations and relationships from an emic (insider’s) perspective, while the embeddedness approach investigates them from an etic (outsider’s) perspective. For Healy

---

<sup>1</sup>Zelizer (2006, p. 307) referred to “good matches” but explained that “good” does not imply some morally superior or efficient outcome, necessarily, but the fact that people seek viable matches: something that “gets the economic work of the relationship done and sustains the relationship.”

(K. Healy, unpublished manuscript), one of the distinctions between the two perspectives appears related to substantive foci, with embeddedness scholars zeroing in on market actors in business and financial markets, and relational work being applied to how people lead economic lives in so-called softer domains such as households and the sexual economy. Healy also noted methodological differences, with the embeddedness approach preferring quantitative measures of the structure and density of social ties, and relational work aligning with qualitative work or comparative historical analysis. Admittedly, as this review shows, these distinctions are not very firm, since relational work has been fruitfully applied in standard markets, and using quantitative methods, especially experimental work (Hayes & O'Brien 2020), has become increasingly prominent.

Yet others wonder if the difference between relational work and embeddedness is mostly about the culture versus structure question, an entrenched debate in the field of economic sociology (Fourcade 2007). Indeed, in early stages of the new economic sociology, the dominant perspective emphasized the structural influence of social networks in the economy (e.g., Granovetter 1974, Powell 1990, Burt 1992, Uzzi 1996; for a review, see Smith-Doerr & Powell 2005), with some exceptional work focusing on culture (e.g., Zelizer 1979, 1985, 1994; Biggart 1989; Smith 1990; Abolafia 1996; Dobbin 1997). However, the cultural approach to economic sociology is no longer “a minority perspective” (Swedberg 1997, p. 168), with cultural economic sociology on the rise (e.g., Zelizer 2005, Velthuis 2005, Beckert 2008, Wherry 2008, Bandelj & Wherry 2011, Mears 2011) and, most recently, the flourishing of morality in markets scholarship (e.g., Fourcade & Healy 2007, Quinn 2008, Abend 2014, Reich 2014, Wilkis 2017, Beunza 2019, Kiviat 2019, Livne 2019, Altomonte 2020).

Nevertheless, there seems to be a persistent theoretical divide between those economic sociologists who pursue structural and those that engage in cultural analysis. Economic life, however, is not just of one or the other flavor. Max Weber's (1968, p. 63) original definition of economic action as social action was meant to emphasize that economic action is behavior invested with meaning that is oriented to other actors. Karl Marx was explicit about inherent power inequalities in economic relations. For that matter, Adam Smith, who gave us the invisible hand of the market, also wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [Smith 1984 (1790)], with its emphasis on moral norms as the foundation for market activity. That is, the reality of economic life is multifaceted: Social relations are multiplex, and exchanges are interdependent and infused with meaning, which derives from broader cultural repertoires. These are the features of economic life that the relational work perspective underscores. As such, paying attention to the meaningful socioeconomic relations, with their emotional and political undercurrents, relational work analysts overcome the structuralist or the culturalist bias in economic sociology and “offer more realistic accounts of what people are doing when they engage in economic activity” (Zelizer 2012, p. 166).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Zelizer (2012) unequivocally stated that relational work is not just about adding culture to the networks mix. She insisted that relational work is an alternative to embeddedness.<sup>3</sup> How? The gist of this distinction is about the conceptualization of the relationship between economy and society and about the proposed nature of economic action. The standard embeddedness perspective sees social relations as a context for economic action and, therefore, envisions the domains of society and economy as autonomous. This is reflected in the distinction between arm's length ties and social ties (e.g., Uzzi 1996). From the relational work perspective, however, social relations are constitutive of economic action because “economic transactions are fundamentally social

---

<sup>2</sup>I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that situations involving multiplex and interdependent ties are likely to make relational work more visible. I also note that Zukin & DiMaggio (1990) differentiated between cultural, structural, political, and cognitive embeddedness to denote that a multitude of social forces shape economic processes.

<sup>3</sup>For early critiques of the embeddedness approach, see Krippner (2001) and Krippner & Alvarez (2007).

interactions” (Zelizer 2012, p. 149). Economy and society are mutually constitutive, and individuals lead connected lives (Zelizer 2005). In addition, Bandelj (2015) has pointed out the difference in the theory of action that is associated with the two perspectives. While network analysts often conceive of economic actors as (boundedly) rational utility maximizers, tracing relational work, especially as revealed in unscripted interactions, exposes economic actors as practical negotiators employing procedural varieties of action, including commitment, muddling through, and improvisation (on creativity in economic interaction, see Bandelj 2009a; Zelizer 2012, p. 163). These conceptual distinctions could lead to different expectations resulting from the embeddedness and relational work approaches. Within the embeddedness perspective, the structure of relations is hypothesized to influence economic outcomes. In contrast, relational work analysis would predict that whether an economic transaction is accomplished, and how, depends on the viable matches of relations, transactions, meanings, and media of exchange. (The section titled Future Research elaborates on relational work matches or mismatches.)

This said, embeddedness is a very broad conceptual framework and open to many interpretations. In particular, the Polanyian variant of economic embeddedness does not share most of the basic assumptions of the network embeddedness perspective (Bandelj 2015). According to Polanyi (1957), embeddedness refers to the coconstitution of the economic with the social (see Block & Somers 2014). Hence, if an analyst’s investigation of embeddedness departs from the analytically autonomous economy and society and slips away from the bounded rationality tenet, then the rift between embeddedness and relational work can be bridged.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, these conceptual considerations underscore that economic sociologists working across various empirical sites with different methodological tools would be well served to clarify their basic assumptions about the economy/society relation and the theory of economic action that they bring to bear in their analyses.

## RELATIONAL WORK IN THE ECONOMY AND ITS CONCEPTUAL VARIANTS

Since its initial formulations by Zelizer in 2000, the adoption of the concept of relational work has flourished. Admittedly, as the concept has entered economic sociology’s analytical toolkit, researchers have not always strictly aligned with Zelizer’s original definition. Indeed, Zelizer (2012) herself has moved beyond the emphasis on distinct interpersonal ties as a core relational work component to encompass broader classes of ties, which allows relational work to scale up to organizational and institutional settings (on the scope of relational work, see Zelizer 2012, p. 165). Here we should additionally note that scholars outside of economic sociology use the notion of relational work (e.g., Fletcher 1999, Tilly 2006, Locher & Watts 2008) but primarily in reference to the management of social relations in noneconomic forms of interactions. Importantly, within economic sociology, analysts have forged ahead by proposing a set of new notions that are subsumed under relational work, including relational accounting, obfuscated exchange, clarifying and blurring practices, and the place of emotions and power in relational work. I review these in turn.

### Relational Accounting

A central insight from Zelizer’s sociology of money is the practice of earmarking, or the creation of social distinctions among categories of money, which challenges entrenched assumptions

---

<sup>4</sup>That embeddedness and relational work can be complementary is also Whitford’s (2012) perspective. In making this argument, Whitford relied on an understanding of embeddedness that has since been further developed in the most recent work by Granovetter (2017, p. 144), which moved away from instrumental action, “lean[ing] toward the pragmatist epistemology” (see also Whitford 2002).

of money's fungibility (Zelizer 1994, 2012; Stellar & Willer 2014; Sykes et al. 2015; Sussman & O'Brien 2016; Bandelj et al. 2017a). Frederick Wherry (2016) extended Zelizer's (2012) discussion of relational earmarking to identify relational accounting, defined "as the set of cultural and social processes used by individuals and households to organize, evaluate, justify and keep track of financial activities" (Wherry 2016, p. 132). Wherry's intentional move to name this process relational accounting contrasts it with the idea of behavioral economist Richard Thaler (1999, p. 184), who defined mental accounting as "a set of *cognitive* operations used by individuals and households to organize, evaluate, and keep track of financial activities" (emphasis added). Wherry instead positioned money practices in relationships as well as in culturally and morally meaningful occasions: "unlike mental accounting . . . relational accounting locates individual decision-making in the moments of the lifecycle that are culturally meaningful and collectively enforced and in overarching moral structures" (Wherry 2017, p. 59).<sup>5</sup> Wherry also made a strong link to the dramaturgy of relational accounting and performances that ensue, especially occasions of meaningful time that shift accounting priorities, including rites of passage and celebrations such as graduations, funerals, births, Christmas, Passover, and Thanksgiving.

Quantitatively testing the power of relational accounting, Hayes (2019) found that those saving for retirement, a meaningful life stage, become very conservative with their retirement money following market losses. While behavioral economists would predict loss aversion, and thus investment choices to try to make up for losses, Hayes observed that individuals gravitate to durably conservative portfolios for their retirement investment, while at the same time leaving their ordinary investment accounts that do not contain the shared symbolic meaning of retirement exposed to far greater market risk. Similarly, in cases of debt settlement, Polletta & Tufail (2014) showed that moral evaluations of debt, and the quality of social relations affected by it, influenced which debts individuals agreed to settle. For instance, if debt incurred was related to an ex-spouse who behaved badly, respondents felt it was appropriate to try to lower that debt. However, they were extremely resistant to settle their life-saving medical debt, consistent with Wherry's (2017) emphasis on the importance of monies tied to meaningful time, in this case near-death experience.

### Obfuscated Exchange

In dialogue with Zelizer's hostile worlds and connected lives perspectives, Gabriel Rossman (2014) developed a concept of obfuscatory relational work for cases of disreputable exchange, or what he calls taboo exchange, referring to morally objectionable transactions that seem to commensurate the sacred with the profane. Obfuscation masks intentionality, minimizes explicitness of reciprocity, and makes the exchange appear to be a common practice. It can take various structural forms: (a) bundling together multiple exchanges; (b) relying on brokerage through a third-party actor who accepts responsibility for the exchange; (c) gift exchange, with expectation of future reciprocity; and (d) pawning by using the sacred to redeem debt [added as the fourth form in Schilke & Rossman (2018)]. To test their framework, Schilke & Rossman (2018) asked participants to assess acceptability of behavior in different vignette scenarios presenting more or less morally appropriate exchange for a case of political bribery, commercial bribery, and paying directly to a birth mother to adopt a baby. (Each of these three cases was presented in its four obfuscation structural variants.) The findings revealed that the respondents (hired through Amazon Mechanical Turk) showed less offense when presented with scenarios where exchange was obfuscated than when it

---

<sup>5</sup>While Wherry did not make this explicit, because of their connection to culturally meaningful occasions, relational accounts are collectively or, at minimum, intersubjectively shared. In contrast, mental accounts, consistent with an individual-centered analysis of behavioral economists, are treated as specific to any one individual. I thank Adam Hayes for suggesting to clarify this.

was presented as *quid pro quo*. Moreover, respondents' reactions were mediated by the perception of lack of clarity about one's intentions (perceived attributional opacity), perception of direct causality between the goods exchanged between parties (transactionalism), and one's judgment of whether others will think the exchange is right and proper (collective validity).

For Rossman (2014, p. 43) obfuscatory relational work represented "a synthesis of 'nothing but' [economic] reductionism and 'hostile worlds' moralism, rather than an alternative to them as Viviana Zelizer suggests." As such, Rossman seemed to uphold the hostile worlds perspective, which dichotomizes the sacred and the profane. He reasoned that people are conflicted over their "desire to make an exchange and their recognition that the exchange is taboo [which] leads them to engage in elaborate relational work to obfuscate the taboo exchange, even to themselves" (Rossman 2014, p. 57), citing Bourdieu's (2000) discussion of self-deception in gift exchange. Admittedly, it is hard to know, or empirically identify, when individuals obfuscate to deceive others or themselves. Zelizer proposed the connected worlds perspective precisely to underscore that people operate within various moral gradients, not mere dichotomies, and that they are adept at negotiating moral dilemmas in concrete situations.

Therefore, depending on the circumstance, obfuscation may serve not to conceal taboo or uncomfortable transactions but to reinforce caring relations. For example, in their qualitative study about how low- and moderate-income people respond to requests for money loans, Wherry et al. (2019, p. 753) found "face-saving obfuscation" when individuals denied or greatly modified loans to family members in need or when individuals gave unreciprocated gifts disguised as loans to allow kin or friends to save face. We hear from Simon, a man in his thirties of moderate income, who told the researchers that he was approached by his friend who had cancer and was behind on his bills. "So I let him borrow \$200 . . . That was four months ago," said Simon, and he acknowledged that the friend had not yet paid him back. Simon's response to nonpayment? "I don't care, because I know he's going through a really tough time" (quoted in Wherry et al. 2019, p. 771). Simon was not expecting a repayment of the so-called loan, and he was willing to let it go because he was sympathetic to a devastating situation that his friend was experiencing. Caught in-between the expectations of an economic transaction and a meaningful social relation, Simon modified the character and terms of the economic transaction (from loan to gift) to match the emotional quality of the relationship to his friend.

## Clarifying and Blurring Relational Work

Other scholars have also debated the practical organization of moral transactions. Leading these efforts, Lainer-Vos (2013, p. 145) distinguished between clarification and blurring practices, whereby "clarification practices allow actors to treat the exchange as either gift giving or market exchange . . . [and] blurring practices allow actors to complete a transaction without agreeing on its meaning." Given that actors attach meaning to their economic practices and social relations, the possibility always exists for ambiguity (Altomonte 2020). To avoid it, actors select the appropriate medium of exchange to align it with their socioeconomic intention (give a gift card to a cousin who tutors your son but not a cash payment) or to purposefully delineate their understanding of the relationship (insist on splitting the check at dinner so as not to confuse it with a romantic date). Fridman & Luscombe (2017) used the case of donations to police departments from individuals and businesses to identify a series of clarifying practices for dealing with gift giving in public agencies, which are expected to maintain impersonality, fairness, and equality before the law. As the authors revealed, accepting donations requires their purification through several management strategies, including institutional separation via recognized charity organizations, denial of reciprocity, limits on donation use, and screening of givers.



In other instances, however, actors use blurring practices to mask the distinctions between different economic transactions (market exchange versus voluntary bestowal of value) or various media of exchange (payment versus gift), creating a zone of indeterminacy, or “an institutional context within which actors can engage each other without sharing a consensus regarding the meaning of the object that changes hands and the rights and obligations that follow from the exchange” (Lainer-Vos 2013, p. 146). Indeed, while Zelizer (2012, p. 145) included the erecting of boundaries as part of relational work’s definition, it may also be advantageous to keep the boundaries between formal and informal economic exchanges blurred. Such was the case in Cederholm & Akerstrom’s (2016) study of Swedish small-scale horse-riding establishments. Owners, customers, employees, and volunteers intermingled various media (favors, gifts, payments, etc.) with economic activities (e.g., labor at the horse-riding establishment, taking horse-riding lessons, leisure riding), making it all work by keeping fuzzy boundaries between different categories of social relations at play (e.g., employment, sales, friendship, volunteering). Likewise, Patrick’s (2018) ethnographic fieldwork of panhandlers identified blurring practices at work and also suggested that these may help foster interactions between participants from different socioeconomic worlds.

### **Making Emotions and Power Visible**

While obfuscation, clarification, or blurring practices apply to contexts that intermingle moral and pecuniary motives (e.g., taboo exchanges, ethical consumerism, socially responsible investment, and venture philanthropy), relational work is not restricted to morally conflicted situations. Indeed, Nina Bandelj (2012, 2015) has argued for the application of relational work to socioeconomic relations, broadly defined, including production, consumption, investment, labor market, and financial exchange. She has distinguished between more or less scripted relational work (see also Block 2013), or how much negotiation about the nature of the exchange at stake in an economic encounter will be required to get to a match between social relations, economic transactions, and media of exchange. Some exchanges are very routinized, and relational work is done rather habitually (e.g., as a customer, we know to pay and not to bargain over prices with the cashier at a grocery store), while others will make relational work more visible (e.g., at bazaars, bargaining is expected). Bandelj suggested that how complex and visible unscripted relational work is will depend on the extent of the uncertainty of situations, ambiguity in expectations about the outcome or variable goals across parties engaged in relational work, and potential misunderstandings about appropriate media of exchange but also challenges to power positions and interventions by third-parties, broader sets of relations, or institutions in which partners to an exchange are situated.

Uncovering its unscripted nature, Bandelj (2012) made explicit that relational work is work, because it requires effort in negotiating socioeconomic relations, but such effort is also deeply implicated with power and emotions. “Power is . . . part and parcel of relational work, whether it is apparent in blunt physical force that one can exert over the other in a relation, or conveyed through subtle linguistic expressions that give away the asymmetry between the participants in relational work” (Bandelj 2012, p. 180). Actors assess the worth of exchange partners based on value perceptions influenced heavily by existing status hierarchies (Roscigno 2011), such as gender or race or class, which enter into relational work interactions. As such, and as Tilly (2006, p. 15) asserted, through relational work people negotiate their relationships of equality or inequality.

In addition to power, emotions are also central to relational work because socioeconomic encounters are symbolic interactions, and visceral and physical manifestations of emotional currents result from, and are influenced by, interactions between economic actors—what Bandelj (2009a, p. 347) referred to as “emotional embeddedness.”<sup>6</sup> Economic sociologists have examined

---

<sup>6</sup>Hochschild (2011, p. 23) has also made a connection between relational work and emotional work.



emotions' consequences for economic outcomes. In the case of hiring, Rivera (2015) described how recruiters for prestigious law firms and investment banks go with their gut in deciding whom to hire. In the case of real estate markets, Besbris (2016) demonstrated how real estate agents induced emotions when meeting with clients, which produced or altered clients' economic preferences. More generally, emotions in relational work may play a central role by helping us understand when matches of social relations, economic transactions, and media of exchange feel appropriate or not to the parties involved. For instance, when relational work fails, the violations that create mismatches between relations, transactions, and media often elicit powerful emotions such as betrayal, shame, outrage, or disappointment. Alternatively, viable matches likely not only make cognitive sense but also feel right to the parties involved.

## PROCESSES OF RELATIONAL WORK

Which empirical questions does the focus on relational work help to answer? In her own research, Zelizer has asked how people earmark money (Zelizer 1994) and how they negotiate morally tinged economic exchanges (Zelizer 1979, 2005). Others have added to these concerns but also applied relational work to understand, more broadly, and outside of earmarking and moral contestation, how social relations are (re)configured through economic activity and how social relations are managed to accomplish economic exchange.

### Relational Earmarking of Money

For Zelizer, relational earmarking of money is central to relational work (see also Bandelj et al. 2017a). Not only is money earmarked for different uses, but money earmarks relations. Admirably, economist Jonathan Morduch (2017) has recognized the power of relations in shaping the uses of money in his research on low-income Americans' financial practices. Still, it is mostly sociologists who have built on and extended research on earmarking to different domains. For instance, Almeling's (2007, p. 336) study showed how egg and sperm donor agencies employed gendered organizational practices to match the contributions of donors with appropriate payment. Specifically, men sperm donors were treated as workers who are paid a wage for their labor, as we would expect for male providers. In contrast, women's egg donations were treated as gifts of life, as we would expect for caregivers. Where money comes from is also relevant. Interviews with Earned Income Tax Credit program recipients revealed that delivery through a mainstream system via the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) kept the money distinct from stigmatized welfare transfers (Sykes et al. 2015). Recipients anticipated the particular time of the year for the refund and earmarked it relationally, often for special treats to children or to subsidize a family trip to see relatives. In the very different setting of research universities, participants nevertheless engaged in earmarking, differentiating the rigidly specified purposes of national agencies' grants from the more flexible industry funding that professors could spend with less restrictions (Biscotti et al. 2012). This showcases how earmarked university monies help to maintain academic freedom and keep at a distance the industry's influence on academy.

Scholars have also been interested in how the changing nature of relationships transforms payment systems. Hoang (2011) found that when the relationship between clients and prostitutes in Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry became more like that between a boyfriend and girlfriend, men's payments were earmarked differently. Men purchased clothing and jewelry for women they had sex with, and when they gave cash, it was to help out with living expenses and not as a payment for sex. Gawayed (2019) observed how Syrian refugee men and women shifted traditional household relationships and power over spending decisions soon after arrival to the United States because

of new payments earned by women's part-time work. Interestingly, money can also be a medium of distancing. Singh's (2016) remittances research revealed the importance of the quality of relationships for relational work. In cases of fraught family ties, a dutiful cash transfer back home substituted for deeper expressions of care and meaningful communication. In all these cases, allocations of various monies had less to do with economic efficiency or broad cultural norms and more with negotiating through efforts of matching the meaning of social relations with that of economic transactions.

### **Walking the Terrain of Morally Problematic Economic Exchange**

As we have seen in the discussion of obfuscation, disreputable exchanges, such as those of political bribery, commercial bribery, or reproductive markets, make relational work salient. Haylett's (2012) study of egg donors for in vitro fertilization identified agency staff's acts of relational work to enable a morally problematic exchange by carefully structuring interactions with donors and between donors and clients (who are never allowed to meet each other) in order to support and solidify the meaning of egg donation as gift giving. Anteby (2010) showed how commerce in human cadavers for medical education and research is sustained through market participants' efforts to legitimize this practice by eliminating the profit motive, such as by getting a doctor's (not only family's) consent and keeping cadavers intact (and not cut up into pieces).

However, according to the moralized markets perspective, which sees "markets as cultural phenomena and moral projects in their own right" (Fourcade & Healy 2007, p. 285), moral considerations are not only relevant in taboo exchanges. Basically, in many economic interactions, people may find themselves dealing with socially awkward relations (K. Healy, unpublished manuscript) and being confronted with moral dilemmas that require relational work. Indeed, issues as commonplace as housework can be morally tinged and/or emotionally charged when, for instance, a wife earns more income than her husband, with the backdrop of a cultural understanding that men are the primary breadwinners. Such situations might require relational work to match the economic contributions (earned income) with the spousal relation (understood in traditional or egalitarian terms) and media of exchange (equal or unequal housework). Indeed, research has found that women who earn more than their husbands compensate by doing more household work to align with gender-typical masculine and feminine expectations (e.g., Brines 1994). By extension, situations across a wide range of cultural and moral incommensurabilities will require relational work to surmount potential ambiguities or awkwardness.

Care work presents an especially salient case of relational work in a morally tinged domain. In her review of the theories of care work, England (2005) discussed Zelizer's research on the relationship between love and money, as it pertains to paid or unpaid care giving. For England, Zelizer's identification of the prevalence of the hostile worlds ideology separating intimacy and economy can be seen as rooted in gender frames. "Because male and female are seen as opposite, and because gender schema organize so much of our thinking, we develop a dualistic view that women, love, altruism, and the family are, as a group, radically separate and opposite from men, self-interested rationality, work, and market exchange" (England 2005, p. 393). Hence, Zelizer's (2005) emphasis on how the connected worlds of intimacy and economy are sustained by relational work challenges the often assumed, and gendered, binary of care versus money.

Indeed, scholars have found the concept of relational work useful to showcase the intermingling of payments and care. For instance, Torres (2015) reported on negotiating money and intimacy in the context of lactation consultants and doulas who legitimize requesting payment for their work by carefully distinguishing their provision of professional services from family care. Toledano & Zeiler (2017) discussed relational work in the context of surrogacy, whereby close friends and

kin serve in the role of a surrogate (so-called altruistic surrogacy) and where the surrogacy is considered a gift of hosting a child for the intended parents. Undoubtedly, those performing care work are disproportionately women. However, it is important to reiterate that relational work is not a woman's job alone.

### **How People Reconfigure Social Relations Through Economic Activity**

Morally problematic exchange is not the only context for relational work. Emerging studies have fruitfully used the concept to understand how people configure their social relations through a wide range of economic activities. A study of charity shop volunteering in the United Kingdom showed how gifting of one's time by volunteering helped individuals who suffered social dislocations such as retirement and bereavement form new relations (Flores 2014). Napolitano et al. (2014) revealed how middle class parents strive to support their young adult children by providing necessary financial backing to cover the cost of college (see also Zaloom 2019) and the relational damages that result when they are unable to do so. Kim's (2019) case of migrant women who marry South Korean men in brokered marriages showed dynamic relational work in reconfiguring family ties through payments. Immigrant women reported dutifully sending regular remittances to their families of origin in the initial period upon migrating but gradually reframing remittances, not as an obligation but as a voluntary occasional gift, allowing them to keep their money for their new family in destination countries, especially once they had children. Likewise, McDonnell (2013, p. 336) reported on how budgetary management in low-income families, in particular provisioning of in-kind support by nonresident fathers, affects the patterns of these families' relationships.

It would be incorrect to assume that affirmation of social relations through economic activity is possible only in charity, education, and household economies. Chen & Roscoe's (2017) study of nonprofessional investors in Taiwan, where the levels of household participation in the stock market are very high, pointedly showed how stock market investing reinforces family relations. The authors reported how relational work among investors helps strengthen family relationships, deliver parental guidance, and avoid family conflict. Trading forms the basis for conversations between parents and siblings. It serves as family entertainment, productive pastime, and a parental lesson. For instance, parents earmark sums of money for training, or playing in the market, making loss expected and acceptable. In this way, the authors showed how stock trading is constitutive of family relations, and they encouraged further investigations into "the relational work of Wall Street" (Chen & Roscoe 2017, p. 597).

### **How People Use Social Relations to Accomplish Economic Exchanges**

The broadest application of relational work is one that speaks to "how social relations animate market exchanges" (Chen 2019). Examining how foreign investors enter and navigate markets in developing countries, Hoang (2018) drew on interview data with 100 respondents in Vietnam's real estate market to identify different relational strategies that market actors pursue to manage risky investments. Investors finesse the market through obfuscation of bribes by bundling and brokerage but also through direct and personalized forms of gift giving. The gift giving practices are crucial for developing a long-term relationship that often transcends the economic transactions. Ultimately, the relational work of investors is essential for the realization of risky investments.

Research also shows that selling goods and services is often accomplished by using social relations. In her study of life insurance in China, when the market had just opened to foreign companies, Chan (2009) discovered how Chinese sales agents introducing a new financial product considered taboo (because life insurance may be interpreted by the Chinese as profiting from

death) often drew on their preexisting family or friendship ties to sell the insurance policies; and these close contacts of sellers bought the product, not so much to get life insurance, per se, but because of the reciprocal obligation that an intimate kin tie implies. Similarly, Hardon et al. (2019) used relational work to describe how young people in the Philippines who work as a sales force for a global purveyor of nutritional supplements are encouraged to recruit their intimate ties as potential customers of these supplements (see Huang 2017). Indeed, direct-selling organizations capitalize on dismantling the idea that personal and work lives should be kept separate and thrive when workers rope in personal connections to do the work (Biggart 1989). Finally, for some economic actors, doing relational work is, in fact, an integral part of their primary work occupation and income-generating activity. Roussel (2017) used the concept of relational work to describe the activity of Hollywood agents, whose main goal is to bind people together for the purpose of creating entertainment business production connections.

### Scaling Up Relational Work

What is the scale of relational work? While Zelizer's original definition focused on interpersonal relations, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer 2005) also showcased the role of the law in relational work. In a subsequent statement, Zelizer (2012, p. 165) also explicitly stated that relational work's scope extends to organizations and institutions.

**Relational work of organizations.** Kushins (2016) adopted the concept of relational work to analyze interfirm exchanges between small business executives and large corporate business executives and found that good relational matches (appropriate combinations of strong/weak ties, routine/nonroutine exchanges, and formal contracts/informal agreements) helped to sustain relationships between executives, facilitating future transactions. Likewise, other analysts could emulate this approach for understanding the creation of strategic alliances between organizations and relational contracting (Macneil 1980), which require viable matches of social relations, economic transactions, and media of exchange to cultivate long-term business objectives based on mutual trust (see Macaulay 1963).

In a study of original equipment manufacturers and their suppliers, Whitford (2005, 2012) showed that firms do relational work as they engage in what he referred to as contradictory collaboration. Firms intermingle "hard-nosed bargaining and the strategic and cautious withholding of information" (Whitford 2005, p. 84), hedging as they try, on the one hand, to discern what their counterparties are likely to do next and, on the other hand, also ensuring that the relationship does not break down. In a case of philanthropic donations, Lainer-Vos (2014) used relational work to understand how organizations negotiate the obstacles associated with monetary donations to co-ethnics in diasporas to construct gift giving mechanisms that bind together a very large number of people who have no personal acquaintance. Yue et al. (2019) described a case of commercialization of Buddhist temples in China from 2006 to 2016, which were caught in between local governments' attempts to boost the local economy by transforming temples into tourist enterprises that charge admission fees and resistance to commercialization by monks and the public. Here, local government organizations became involved in relational work as they negotiated the appropriate economic transactions for a sacred space. Similarly, Healy (2006) shows how procurement organizations need to produce proper public accounts of what organ donation means to frame it as gift giving and not a commercial transaction.

**Institutions and relational work.** In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Zelizer (2005) examined how courts and the legal system engage in relational work when making decisions about cases where pecuniary

and nonpecuniary worlds entwine. Courts “engage in their own complex process of matching certain forms of intimacy to particular types of economic transactions and media, making them subject to legal action: enforcement, compensation, and penalties” (Zelizer 2012, p. 153). For example, legal scholar Noah Zatz (2009) offered an intriguing discussion of whether prison labor should be treated as compensable work. He raised a question about matching the economic transaction of work performed in prison with the definition of the social relation at stake and the appropriate medium of exchange. Should prisoners, who are working a laborer’s job in the prison, be treated as workers deserving of wages or as those punished for crimes and thus expected to contribute free labor? Needless to say, which definition prevails becomes consequential for prisoners’ rights and responsibilities, including whether they have the right to a minimum wage or whether their earnings are reportable to the IRS as income.

Regulators similarly engage in relational work when they institute policies and provisions about appropriate payments (or lack thereof) for particular economic relations. For instance, King & Bearman (2017) reported on the pharmaceutical industry’s detailing, or providing gifts, conference payments, free samples, and the like, to encourage physicians to prescribe their drugs. If we apply here a relational work lens, as Zelizer (2005) did to legal action regulating intimacy/economy, then what is at stake is differentiating between what is essentially a quid pro quo compensation for services (detailing for drug prescriptions) and what may be a gift of appreciation, which does not demand reciprocity. Quantitative analysis by King & Bearman (2017) showed that once laws against detailing are implemented in a particular state, drug prescriptions in that state significantly decrease. This suggests that even when exchanges are defined as gifts on the books, they can function in practice as compensation. Passing gift-banning laws, regulators engaged in relational work to define that no exchange of value (be it compensation or gift) is appropriate for the relationship between pharmaceutical salespeople and doctors.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Over the past decade, studies of relational work have provided multiple insights into the negotiation of contested commodities, relational earmarking, configuration of social relations, and accomplishment of economic exchange. We need more research in all of these areas to refine our understanding and make further conceptual advances. In addition, relational analysts would be well served to scrutinize the social determinants of relational work as well as relational work’s consequences for (dis)trust, (in)equality, and mis(matches).

## Determinants of Relational Work

What shapes how relational work unfolds? Among consequential determinants are characteristics and attributes of the parties involved in relational work, such as their social status and relational work skill. The properties of situations in which relational work unfolds are also consequential, including time and timing. Likewise, we should consider the influence of third parties and brokers as well as various features of context in which relational work takes place, such as cultural frames, political dimensions, organizational structures, and technological underpinnings, among others.

**Social status.** While the focus of relational work analysis is the relation and not social status characteristics of parties to the exchange, these characteristics will nevertheless matter, in particular, by shaping the ways in which actors interpret and negotiate the relational matching process. These interpretations derive from broader cultural schemas and group experience. For instance, Lanuza (2017) emphasized the role of race and ethnicity in shaping the matching of media and relations

when he reported on how racial cultural schemas bear on monetary exchanges between parents and young adult children. He found that the majority of White young adult children did not report giving or receiving money from their parents, which aligns with the idea that young Americans should be independent from their parents. In contrast, Blacks were more likely to both receive money from and give money to parents, showcasing interdependence connected to linked fate. Immigrants, more frequently than other groups, provided child-to-parent monetary assistance, being influenced by the immigrant bargain frame. Future research should examine the influence of not only race and ethnicity (Hirschman & Garbes 2019) but also other social statuses such as gender, social class, age, religion (DePalma 2020), and others. It would also be important to consider intricacies that ensue when there is a cultural mismatch, or power imbalance, due to social status differences across parties to a relational work encounter. In such cases, it may be fruitful to consider the role of relational work skill.

**Relational work skill.** Fligstein (2001) theorized that actors differ in their social skill, or their ability to induce cooperation (see also Wyant et al. 2018). Following this, Bandelj (2012) proposed that actors will also be differentially versed in relational work skill. This idea seems close to those of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) or shared habitus (Bourdieu 1977), as it includes the ability to sense and maneuver emotional currents of interactions; balance the interactional power; and tune in to culturally and situationally appropriate meanings of transactions, social relations, and media of exchange. Actors may also differ in their flexibility to match the exchange partner's understanding of the relational work situation, or the ability to persuade the other to define the situation from one's point of view. Rivera (2012) discussed the importance of fit between the recruiter and the job-seeker as a driver of hiring decisions, beyond technical or hard skills for the job. If fit is important, this suggests that those candidates who are more relationally skilled can more quickly signal their compatibility with the interviewer, verbally and nonverbally communicate the right things in the right way, and thus increase their chances of being hired. It also suggests a category of strategic relational work: for example, offering a gift with the intent of defining the relationship as intimate, although the ultimate purpose is exploitation of a tie. Moreover, a question arises for relationally skilled actors who occupy lower positions in systemic hierarchies (due to age, gender, race, class, citizenship, disability, sexual identity, etc.) as to whether their relational work skill can help them overcome, at least somewhat, the disadvantages that arise on account of their positionality (Bandelj 2012).

**Relational situation and temporality.** Wherry (2016) emphasized the importance of meaningful time for relational accounting. Time also manifests itself in history and the future. To any interaction, actors bring all of their selves as well as their history and imagination about the future (Beckert 2016). Economic encounters are often repeated, and what happened in the past would likely matter in the future. "Shadows of [the] past and future" impinge on current interactions in long-term relationships (Zelizer 2006, p. 308). Emotional valences from previous encounters, expectations based on the past, and pending obligations will all enter into a negotiation of a socioeconomic encounter. These situational and temporal characteristics will likely influence how relational work unfolds.

**Role of brokers and third parties.** Most of the discussions in the economic sociology of brokerage (Stovel & Shaw 2012) pinpoint the advantageous position of the *tertius gaudens* (Simmel 1950), the ego who keeps two alters disconnected and reaps the benefits of the structural holes (Burt 1992). In contrast, Obstfeld (2005) argued that it is an impulse to join disparate individuals to cooperate, *tertius iungens*, rather than keep them apart that yields positive results, especially in

cases of innovation and discovery. More generally, exploring connections between brokerage and relational work would be fruitful. For instance, researchers have used the concept of relational work to make sense of the role of intermediary organizations, such as health navigators who help low-income people choose health insurance (Vargas 2016) or agents that acculturate the elderly to the social insurance market (Chen 2019). These navigators or agents who intervene between providers and users of services need to build trust with clients and build the legitimacy of the services they are trying to get their clients to adopt. We need to understand better how intermediaries, brokers, and third parties, generally, shape relational work.

**Role of context: cultural, political, organizational, technological, and more.** Relational work does not happen outside of specific historical, legal, political, cultural, technological, and other dimensions of context. Hoang's (2018) study has advanced relational work research along these lines by deftly identifying how the relational work of foreign investors in Vietnam's real estate market is shaped by the legal environment, social ties, cultural matching, and the stage of investment. Hoang investigated a concrete historical and cultural environment, an emerging South Asian market that simultaneously displays corruption, legality, and transparency, and this environment strongly shaped the type of finessing strategies that investors would deploy. Indeed, there are a whole set of laws, varying across countries both in the regulations themselves and in the level of their enforcement, that proscribe ways of linking economic transactions to relationships such as, for instance, tolerance (or lack thereof) of bribery and nepotism. Furthermore, the organizational-level context matters as well. Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt (2019) made clear that organizational culture and inequality regimes influence how employees negotiate social relations of inequality within organizations. Moreover, Fourcade & Healy (2013) reminded us that relational practices connect with social classifications and institutions in a new, data-driven, digital economy, emphasizing the importance of the technological context. Indeed, relational work analysts would be well advised to situate relational work in its mezzo and macro contexts as well as in broader transformations of such contexts.

## Consequences of Relational Work

What are the consequences of relational work? How does it influence economic transactions, social relations, and media of exchange? To address these questions, researchers could focus on the link between relational work and the role of trust or mistrust in economic exchanges. It is also important to understand how and why relational work contributes to inequality in economic transactions with an eye toward identifying possibilities for relational work to help challenge and subvert existing inequalities. Furthermore, recognizing when and how relational work leads to viable matches or mismatches would help reveal relational work's consequences.

**Building trust or repairing distrust in economic exchanges.** The issue of trust in economic exchanges is central (Granovetter 1985, 2017), but its investigation does not feature prominently among economic sociologists. Some relational work studies have identified producing trust as a central goal, such as Kusimba's (2018) account of Kenyan women's use of mobile money to establish themselves as connected and trustworthy members of financial groups and collectivities. In the process of relational work, trust likely plays a vital role in producing viable relational matches. This may be related to emotions, since perceptions of another person's empathic reactions have been shown to lead to higher levels of trust toward that person (Ickes 1993). Still, trust and emotions should not be conflated, and their link in relational encounters deserves more scrutiny (Bandelj 2015). Importantly, relational work is not only about trust-building and empathy or producing



beneficial outcomes. For instance, Chan & Yao (2018) presented a situation where it is distrust that drives relational work in the case of patients giving *bongbao* (a Chinese custom of gifting money in red envelopes) to doctors in China in order to secure more caring service. Also, parties to the exchange can be honest or deceptive in relational work encounters (Block 2013). Relational work could help repair broken trust. Future research should investigate the scope conditions and consequences of such situations.

**Negotiating equality and inequality in exchanges.** Block (2012, p. 138) proposed “an analytic distinction between relational work that tends to maintain or increase informational asymmetries and relational work that diminishes those informational asymmetries” and, therefore, reconfigures relations of power. Moreover, instituting a particular medium of exchange as appropriate for certain relations, for instance, expecting gifts of time and love rather than providing compensation for care work, may open a relationship to exploitation and reinforce inequality. This said, and while relational work often reproduces existing hierarchies, we should nevertheless try to identify cases in which it offers an opportunity to reconfigure the relational power dynamic and subvert inequality (Bandelj 2012). For example, at the institutional level, mandating proper compensation for care work would foster greater gender equality, as feminist scholars have argued (Folbre & Nelson 2000). At a micro level, asymmetries of power could be challenged interactionally. For instance, Degenshein (2017) observed in her ethnography of a Chicago pawnshop that in many cases where shopkeepers and clients negotiated the value of pawned objects, emphasizing need and lower socioeconomic status by the client actually increased the perceived value of a pawned object and resulted in a higher payment to the client. This example showcases, as Bandelj (2012) has proposed, that relational work may offer a chance to overcome the rigidity of status inequalities, even if temporarily. A way forward would be to zero in on the relational work in unequal exchanges either to find the reason for sustained hierarchy (or accompanying practices of exploitation or manipulation) or, alternatively, to identify ways to use relational work, at both the institutional and interactional levels, to overcome disadvantage. Indeed, Zelizer’s own most recent work applied relational work to the management of inequality, focusing on how students’ cross-class interactions are negotiated on a college campus through their exchange of various monies, including gifts, loans, and payments (Zelizer & Gaydos 2019).

**Relational work matches and mismatches.** In her study of women who perform unpaid work for VIP nightclubs, Ashley Mears (2015) found that party promoters, who recruit the women, perform relational work when they give gifts and cultivate intimate friendships with the women whose presence at parties helps clubs sell very expensive (and large quantities of) drinks at party tables. However, Mears reported that sometimes mismatches happen, as in the case of promoters offering direct payment. This leads women to experience the VIP scene less as leisure and more as work and, as a consequence, withdraw their participation. Likewise, Harvey (2018) studied doubled-up households (defined as those that contain any adults besides the householder and their romantic partner) to reveal that negotiations over economic exchange within, and contributions to, the household have high stakes. Disagreements over those exchanges, and over expectations of how the payments and contributions should be matched with the social relation between a host and a guest, would lead to dissolution of the doubled-up arrangements.

Partners bring different intentions and different cultural schemas to bear in negotiating relations, which can be a source of conflict. We need to know more about why, and when, relational work leads to mismatches. One option is that certain media of exchange are experienced as exploitative or offensive for the social relation at hand, and as a consequence, one or both parties withdraw their economic participation. When women experienced the VIP scene more as work

and less as leisure, they were less likely to respond to promoters' calls to join the parties (Mears 2015); people moved out of dysfunctional doubled-up arrangements (Harvey 2018). Alternatively, parties in the relationship may decide to cool off their intimacy to render the relationship appropriate for the economic transaction at hand. As Wherry et al. (2019) showed, some people who loaned money to their family members (including a mother and a brother-in-law), which was not repaid, severed their relationship ties. Analysts should examine critical junctures or characteristics of relational situations, or interventions by third parties, in which a viable match between social relations, economic transaction, and media of exchange is not obtained. Moreover, how are mismatches possibly repaired?

## CONCLUSION

Many economic sociologists are dedicated to examining the embeddedness of economic processes in social networks. Increasingly they have also sought to unearth the role of cultural understandings, morals, and meanings in economic life. Sociological analysis of the economy has paid much less attention, simultaneously, to relationality and meaning. The notion of relational work, originally proposed by Viviana Zelizer (2000, 2005, 2012), occupies this interstitial conceptual space by revealing how actors manage the connections across social relations, economic exchange, and media of exchange, thus dovetailing with the broader relational turn in sociology. Promising substantive avenues for study of relational work are vast. Scholars have called for applications ranging from surrogacy (Toledano & Zeiler 2017), artistic work (Montanari et al. 2016, Alacovska 2018), and consumption (Bandelj & Gibson 2019) to financial investments (Hayes & O'Brien 2020), innovation (Block 2013), and relations between human and nonhuman agents (Garcia 2014). The role of technologies and infrastructures (Pardo-Guerra 2019) in relational work also remains underexplored. In approaching these fruitful areas of research, a focus on relational work in the economy requires that we reorient our understanding of the social as not the context for but constitutive of the economic. Paying attention to relational work uncovers the role of emotions in economic interactions, the production of trust or repairing of distrust, and the rigidity of inequality or the promise of negotiated equality in economic exchange. More research is needed to elaborate on the creativity of actors in the economy to obfuscate, blur, or clarify contested exchanges or awkward relations and to relationally account for spending, saving, investment, debt, or other allocations of monies.

Viviana Zelizer (2012) ended her manifesto by underscoring relational work's potential to translate into policy. Researchers have yet to make strides in this direction, but to stay relevant, not only for the discipline but for society, this is the path forward. If behavioral economics has nudged its way to public attention by uncovering the psychological and cognitive underpinnings of individuals' economic decision-making, it is the understanding of the fundamental role of creating, maintaining, negotiating, or breaking meaningful affective relations in economic life that is the promise of the relational work agenda.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank an anonymous reviewer for a careful reading and valuable suggestions and Debra Boka and Celeste Villarreal for excellent research assistance. I gratefully acknowledge the fellowship

from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, where this article was completed. I am deeply grateful for insights, comments, or conversations about relational work with Rene Almeling, Fred Block, Cheris Chan, Daniel Fridman, Heba Gowayed, Alya Guseva, Anita Hardon, Adam Hayes, Kieran Healy, Kimberly Hoang, Barbara Kiviat, Sibel Kusimba, Dan Lainer-Vos, Yader Lanuza, Ashley Mears, Smitha Radhakrishnan, Gabriel Rossman, Fred Wherry, Josh Whitford, and especially Viviana Zelizer.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Abend G. 2014. *The Moral Background*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Abolafia MY. 1996. *Making Markets: Opportunism and Restraint on Wall Street*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Alacovska A. 2018. Informal creative labour practices: a relational work perspective. *Hum. Rel.* 71(12):1563–89
- Almeling R. 2007. Selling genes, selling gender: egg agencies, sperm banks, and the medical market in genetic material. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 72(3):319–40
- Altomonte G. 2020. Exploiting ambiguity: a moral polysemy approach to variation in economic practices. *Am. Soc. Rev.* 85(1):76–105
- Anteby M. 2010. Markets, morals, and practices of trade: jurisdictional disputes in the US commerce in cadavers. *Admin. Sci. Q.* 55(4):606–38
- Bandelj N. 2009a. Emotions in economic action and interaction. *Theory Soc.* 38(4):347–66
- Bandelj N, ed. 2009b. *Economic Sociology of Work*. London: Emerald Press
- Bandelj N. 2012. Relational work and economic sociology. *Politics Soc.* 40(2):175–201
- Bandelj N. 2015. Thinking about social relations in economy as relational work. In *Re-Imagining Economic Sociology*, ed. P Aspers, N Dodd, pp. 227–51. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press
- Bandelj N, Gibson C. 2019. Relational work and consumption. In *The Oxford Handbook of Consumption*, ed. FF Wherry, I Woodward, pp. 151–66. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press
- Bandelj N, Wherry F. 2011. *The Cultural Wealth of Nations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press
- Bandelj N, Wherry F, Zelizer V. 2017a. Introduction: advancing money talks. See Bandelj, Wherry & Zelizer 2017b, pp. 1–24
- Bandelj N, Wherry F, Zelizer V, eds. 2017b. *Money Talks: How Money Really Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Beckert J. 2008. *Inherited Wealth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Beckert J. 2016. *Imagined Futures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Besbris M. 2016. Romancing the home: emotions and the interactional creation of demand in the housing market. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* 14(3):461–82
- Beunza D. 2019. *Taking the Floor: Models, Morals and Management in a Wall Street Trading Room*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Biggart NW. 1989. *Charismatic Capitalism*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
- Biscotti D, Lacy W, Glenna LL, Welsh R. 2012. Constructing “disinterested” academic science: relational work in university–industry research collaborations. *Politics Soc.* 40(2):273–308
- Block F. 2012. Relational work in market economies: introduction. *Politics Soc.* 40(2):135–44
- Block F. 2013. Relational work and the law: recapturing the legal realist critique of market fundamentalism. *J. Law Soc.* 40(1):27–48
- Block F, Somers M. 2014. *The Power of Market Fundamentalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Bourdieu P. 1977. *The Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press
- Bourdieu P. 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press
- Brines J. 1994. Economic dependency, gender and the division of labor at home. *Am. J. Sociol.* 100(3):652–88
- Burt R. 1992. *Structural Holes*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
- Cederholm EA, Akerstrom M. 2016. With a little help from my friends: relational work in leisure-related enterprising. *Sociol. Rev.* 64:748–65
- Chan CS. 2009. Invigorating the content in social embeddedness: an ethnography of life insurance transactions in China. *Am. J. Sociol.* 115(3):712–54

- Chan CS, Yao Z. 2018. A market of distrust: toward a cultural sociology of unofficial exchanges between patients and doctors in China. *Theory Soc.* 47(6):737–72
- Chen KK. 2019. Bounded relationality: how intermediary organizations encourage consumer exchanges with routinized relational work in a social insurance market. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwz037>
- Chen Y-H, Roscoe P. 2017. Practices and meanings of non-professional stock-trading in Taiwan: a case of relational work. *Econ. Soc.* 46(3–4):576–600
- Degenshein A. 2017. Strategies of valuation: repertoires of worth in the financial margins. *Theory Soc.* 46:387–409
- DePalma LJ. 2020. The separation of economy and sentiment: a comparison of how individuals perceive hostile worlds. *J. Cult. Econ.* In press
- Desmond M. 2014. Relational ethnography. *Theory Soc.* 43(5):547–79
- Dobbin F. 1997. *Forging Industrial Policy*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press
- Emirbayer M. 1997. Manifesto for relational sociology. *Am. J. Sociol.* 103(2):281–317
- England P. 2005. Emerging theories of care work. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 31:381–99
- Fletcher J. 1999. *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work*. Boston: MIT Press
- Fligstein N. 2001. Social skill and the theory of fields. *Sociol. Theory* 19(2):105–25
- Flores R. 2014. From personal troubles to public compassion: charity shop volunteering as a practice of care. *Sociol. Rev.* 62:383–99
- Folbre N, Nelson J. 2000. For love or money—or both? *J. Econ. Perspect.* 14(4):123–140
- Fourcade M. 2007. Theories of markets and theories of society. *Am. Beh. Sci.* 50(8):1015–34
- Fourcade M, Healy K. 2007. Moral views of market society. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 33:285–311
- Fourcade M, Healy K. 2013. Classification situations: life chances in the neoliberal era. *Acc. Org. Soc.* 38:559–72
- Fridman D, Luscombe A. 2017. Gift-giving, disreputable exchange, and the management of donations in a police department. *Soc. Forces* 96(2):507–28
- Garcia A. 2014. Relational work in economic sociology: a review and extension. *Sociol. Compass* 8(6):639–47
- Goleman D. 1995. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bentam Books
- Gowayed H. 2019. Diverging by gender: Syrian refugees’ divisions of labor and formation of human capital in the United States. *Gen. Soc.* 33(2):251–72
- Granovetter M. 1974. *Getting a Job*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
- Granovetter M. 1985. Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness. *Am. J. Sociol.* 91(3):481–510
- Granovetter M. 2017. *Society and Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Hardon A, Davatos IA, Lasco D. 2019. Be your product: on youth, multilevel marketing, and nutritional cure-alls in Puerto Princesa, Philippines. *Am. Ethol.* 46(4):429–43
- Harvey H. 2018. *Experiences of doubling-up among American families with children*. PhD Diss., Harvard Univ., Cambridge, MA
- Hayes A. 2019. The social meaning of financial wealth: relational accounting in the context of 401(k) retirement accounts. *Fin. Soc.* 5(1):61–83
- Hayes A, O’Brien R. 2020. Earmarking risk: relational investing and portfolio choice. *Soc. Forces*. In press
- Haylett J. 2012. One woman helping another: egg donation as a case of relational work. *Politics Soc.* 40(2):223–47
- Healy K. 2006. *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs*. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press
- Hill Collins P. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge
- Hirschman D, Garbes L. 2019. Toward an economic sociology of race. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* In press
- Hoang KK. 2011. “She’s not a low-class dirty girl!”: sex work in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. *J. Cont. Ethnogr.* 40(4):367–96
- Hoang KK. 2018. Risky investments: how local and foreign investors finesse corruption-rife emerging markets. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 83(4):657–85
- Hochschild A. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. Calif. Press

- Hochschild A. 2011. Emotional life on the market frontier. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 37:21–33
- Huang JQ. 2017. The ambiguous figures of social enterprise: gendered flexibility and relational work among the iAgents of Bangladesh. *Am. Ethnol.* 44(4):603–16
- Ickes W. 1993. Empathic accuracy. *J. Pers.* 61(4):587–610
- Kim JS. 2019. Payments and intimate ties in transnationally brokered marriages. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* 17(2):337–56
- King M, Bearman PS. 2017. Gifts and influence: conflict of interest policies and prescribing of psychotropic medications in the United States. *Soc. Sci. Med.* 172:153–56
- Kiviat B. 2019. The moral limits of predictive practices: the case of credit-based insurance scores. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 84(6):1134–58
- Krippner G. 2001. The elusive market: embeddedness and the paradigm of economic sociology. *Theory Soc.* 30(6):775–810
- Krippner G, Alvarez A. 2007. Embeddedness and intellectual projects of economic sociology. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 33:219–40
- Kushins ER. 2016. A relational approach to matching interfirm exchanges between SME executives and corporate business executives. *J. Bus. Entrep.* 28(1):95–123
- Kusimba S. 2018. “It is easy for women to ask!”: gender and digital finance in Kenya. *Econ. Anthropol.* 5(2):247–60
- Lainer-Vos D. 2013. The practical organization of moral transactions: gift giving, market exchange, credit, and the making of diaspora bonds. *Sociol. Theory* 31(2):145–67
- Lainer-Vos D. 2014. Brother’s keepers: gift giving networks and the organization of Jewish American diaspora nationalism. *Socio-Econ. Rev.* 12:463–88
- Lanuza YR. 2017. *My family’s keeper: children’s sources of support for immigrant and native-born families*. PhD Diss., Univ. Calif, Irvine, CA
- Laslett B, Brenner J. 1989. Gender and social reproduction: historical perspectives. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 15:381–404
- Livne R. 2019. *Values at the End of Life: The Logic of Palliative Care*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Locher MA, Watts RJ. 2008. *Relational Work and Impoliteness: Negotiating Norms of Linguistic Behavior*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter
- Macaulay S. 1963. Non-contractual relations in business: a preliminary study. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 28(1):55–67
- Macneil I. 1980. *The New Social Contract: An Inquiry into Modern Contractual Relations*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press
- McDonnell E. 2013. Budgetary units: a Weberian approach to consumption. *Am. J. Sociol.* 119(2):307–50
- Mears A. 2011. *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Univ. Calif. Press
- Mears A. 2015. Working for free in the VIP: relational work and the production of consent. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 80(6):1099–122
- Mische A. 2008. *Partisan Publics: Communication and Contention Across Brazilian Youth Activist Networks*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Mische A. 2011. Relational sociology, culture, and agency. In *Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis*, Vol. 1, ed. J Scott, P Carrington, pp. 1–28. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Montanari F, Scapolan A, Gianecchini M. 2016. “Absolutely free”? The role of relational work in sustaining artistic innovation. *Org. Stud.* 37(6):797–821
- Morduch J. 2017. Economics and the social meaning of money. See Bandelj, Wherry & Zelizer 2017b, pp. 23–38
- Napolitano LJ, Pacholok S, Furstenberg F. 2014. Educational aspirations, expectations, and realities for middle-income families. *J. Fam. Issues* 35(9):1200–26
- Obstfeld D. 2005. Social networks, the *tertius iungens* orientation, and involvement in innovation. *Admin. Sci. Q.* 50(1):100–30
- Pardo-Guerra JP. 2019. *Automating Finance: Infrastructures, Engineers, and the Making of Electronic Markets*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Patrick M. 2018. Gift exchange or *quid pro quo*? Temporality, ambiguity, and stigma in interactions between pedestrians and service-providing panhandlers. *Theory Soc.* 47:487–509

- Polanyi K. 1957. The economy as instituted process. In *Trade and Market in the Early Empires*, ed. K Polanyi, C Arensberg, K Pearson, pp. 243–70. Glencoe, IL: Free Press
- Polletta F, Tufail Z. 2014. The moral obligations of some debts. *Soc. Forum* 29(1):1–28
- Powell C, Dépelteau F, eds. 2013. *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Powell W. 1990. Neither market nor hierarchy: network forms of organization. *Res. Org. Behav.* 12:295–336
- Quinn S. 2008. The transformation of morals in markets: death, benefits, and the exchange of life insurance policies. *Am. J. Sociol.* 114(3):738–80
- Reich A. 2014. Contradictions in the commodification of hospital care. *Am. J. Sociol.* 119(6):1576–628
- Rivera LA. 2012. Hiring as cultural matching: the case of elite professional service firms. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 77(6):999–1022
- Rivera LA. 2015. Go with your gut: emotion and evaluation in job interviews. *Am. J. Sociol.* 120(5):1339–89
- Roscigno VJ. 2011. Power, revisited. *Soc. Forces* 90(2):349–74
- Rossman G. 2014. Obfuscatory relational work and disreputable exchange. *Soc. Theory* 32(1):43–63
- Roussel V. 2017. *Representing Talent: Hollywood Agents and the Making of Movies*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
- Schilke O, Rossman G. 2018. It's only wrong if it's transactional: moral perceptions of obfuscated exchanges. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 83(6):1079–107
- Simmel G. 1950. The triad. In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. KH Wolff, pp. 145–69. New York: The Free Press
- Singh S. 2016. *Money, Migration, and Family*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Smith A. 1984 (1790). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. DD Raphael, AL Macfie. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund
- Smith C. 1990. *Auctions: The Social Construction of Value*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Univ. Calif. Press
- Smith-Doerr L, Powell WW. 2005. Networks and economic life. In *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. N Smelser, R Swedberg, pp. 379–402. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Stellar J, Willer R. 2014. The corruption of value: Negative moral associations diminish the value of money. *Soc. Psych. Pers. Sci.* 5(1):60–66
- Stoltz D. 2017. Relations and relationships: clarifying the terms of the 'new' relational economic sociology. *Am. Sociol.* 49(1):64–79
- Stovel K, Shaw L. 2012. Brokerage. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 38:139–58
- Sussman AB, O'Brien RL. 2016. Knowing when to spend: unintended financial consequences of earmarking to encourage savings. *J. Mark. Res.* 53(5):790–803
- Swedberg R. 1997. New economic sociology: What has been accomplished, what is ahead? *Acta Sociol.* 40(2):161–82
- Sykes J, Kriz K, Edin K, Halpern-Meeke S. 2015. Dignity and dreams: what the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) means to low-income families. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 80(2):243–67
- Thaler RH. 1999. Mental accounting matters. *J. Behav. Decis. Mak.* 12(3):183–206
- Tilly C. 1998. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. California Press
- Tilly C. 2006. *Why?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Toledano SJ, Zeiler K. 2017. Hosting the others' child? Relational work and embodied responsibility in altruistic surrogate motherhood. *Fem. Theory* 18(2):159–75
- Tomaskovic-Devey D, Avent-Holt D. 2019. *Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press
- Torres JMC. 2015. Expertise and sliding scales: lactation consultants, doulas, and the relational work of breastfeeding and labor support. *Gen. Soc.* 29(2):244–64
- Uzzi B. 1996. The sources and consequences of embeddedness for the economic performance of organizations: the network effect. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 61(4):674–98
- Vargas R. 2016. How health navigators legitimize the Affordable Care Act to the uninsured poor. *Soc. Sci. Med.* 165:264–70
- Velthuis O. 2005. *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Weber M. 1968. *Economy and Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Univ. Calif. Press

- Wherry FF. 2008. *Global Markets and Local Crafts: Thailand and Costa Rica Compared*. Baltimore, MD: JHU Press
- Wherry FF. 2016. Relational accounting: a cultural approach. *Am. J. Cult. Sociol.* 4(2):131–56
- Wherry FF. 2017. How relational accounting matters. See Bandelj, Wherry & Zelizer 2017b, pp. 57–73
- Wherry FF, Seefeldt KS, Alvarez AS. 2019. To lend or not to lend to friends and kin: awkwardness, obfuscation, and negative reciprocity. *Soc. Forces* 98(2):753–93
- White HC. 1992. *Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Whitford J. 2002. Pragmatism and the untenable dualism of means and ends: why rational choice theory does not deserve paradigmatic advantage. *Theory Soc.* 31(3):325–63
- Whitford J. 2005. *The New Old Economy: Networks, Institutions, and the Organizational Transformation of American Manufacturing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press
- Whitford J. 2012. Waltzing, relational work, and the construction (or not) of collaboration in manufacturing industries. *Politics Soc.* 40(2):249–72
- Wilks A. 2017. *The Moral Power of Money: Morality and Economy in the Life of the Poor*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press
- Wyant A, Manzoni A, McDonald S. 2018. Social skill dimensions and career dynamics. *Socius* 4:1–12
- Yue LQ, Wang J, Yang B. 2019. Contesting commercialization: political influence, responsive authoritarianism, and cultural resistance. *Admin. Sci. Q.* 62(2):435–65
- Zaloom C. 2019. *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Zatz N. 2009. Prison labor and the paradox of paid nonmarket work. See Bandelj 2009b, pp. 369–98
- Zelizer V. 1979. *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press
- Zelizer V. 1985. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. New York: Basic Books
- Zelizer V. 1994. *The Social Meaning of Money*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Zelizer V. 2000. The purchase of intimacy. *Law Soc. Inq.* 25(3):817–48
- Zelizer V. 2005. *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press
- Zelizer V. 2006. Money, power and sex. *Yale J. Law Fem.* 18:302–15
- Zelizer V. 2012. How I became a relational economic sociologist and what does that mean? *Politics Soc.* 40(2):145–74
- Zelizer V, Gaydos L. 2019. Class on campus. *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Jan. 9. <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/essay-class-campus>
- Zuckerman E. 2019. Review of *Re-Imagining Economic Sociology*, edited by Patrick Aspers and Nigel Dodd. *Am. J. Sociol.* 123(3):933–36
- Zukin S, DiMaggio P. 1990. *Structures of Capital: The Social Organization of the Economy*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press