

Relationalism and Citizenship Studies: why realist relational epistemology matters for citizenship and its study

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Abstract: This paper is inspired by the question of ‘what relations matter’ (Klasche & Poopuu, 2023) and Vetik’s (2023) analysis of how differences among relational orientations shape citizenship studies. Building on these insights, the paper argues that relational approaches currently face two epistemic risks: first, a collapse into theoretical relativism rendering different accounts incommensurable; and second, debates over theoretical purity which obscures certain constitutive relations. To address these challenges, the paper recenters the question of ‘what relations matter’ and reorients the debate from ontology to epistemology through three interrelated claims. First, it argues that relational theories necessarily generate partial and selective insights into citizenship. Second, it shows that treating such partiality as a flaw produces the epistemic risks identified above. Third, it advances a relational realist and epistemically reflexive approach to illustrate how such partial normative insights can be understood cumulatively, enabling plural yet objective mapping of citizenship and its study. For citizenship scholars, this stance offers a practical way to evaluate, combine, and critically reflect on diverse relational theories by examining what relations they foreground, what they omit, and how their insights can collectively expand citizenship and its study without hierarchy or relativism. Collectively, these three arguments reposition relational citizenship studies toward a pluralist and non-relativist epistemic orientation, contributing to a democratization of the field which respects a diversity of perspectives on citizenship and its study.

Key words: Relational; Realist; Epistemic Reflexivity; Epistemic Plurality; Citizenship Studies

INTRODUCTION

The last three decades have witnessed renewed rigor in investigations of citizenship, often resonating with the larger relational turn (Moon.et.al,

2024). Such relational insights acknowledge the entangled set of relations in which meaning is ascribed and understood. Recently, Nyers (2004) has argued that this ever-expanding field requires analysis of the implications of newer conceptualizations of the citizenship itself and its study. Further, Hay (2006) argues that neither political engagement nor analysis is devoid of assumptions of epistemology. Indeed, the political and epistemic aspects of such research have been picked up by scholars working in the relational turn in IR (the field of international studies), who increasingly ask ‘what relations matter’ for social reality (Klasche & Poopuu, 2023). Klasche and Poopuu (2023) contend that relational stances reflect ethical, normative and political choices which shape how the social world is conceived, understood, studied and potentially transformed. In doing so, they highlight how methodological and ethical choice over which relations to foreground, shape which aspects of world politics are made (in)visible. Similarly, for Doucet (2018) all research orientations are inherently value laden shaping what is made (in)visible in research. While critical examinations of the implications of such research are increasingly explored in IR (Hamati-Ataya, 2018), citizenship studies remain oddly silent and/or fragmented on this front. However, Vetik’s recent engagement in citizenship studies has chipped away at this silence by exploring how differences of relational thought shape normative stances of what constitutes citizenship.

Although Vetik’s insights are insightful in showing what relations matter for citizenship, they also set the stage to explore deeper epistemic puzzles, concerning how competing and often vastly different accounts of citizenship are understood and assessed within the relational turn. This paper draws on Vetik’s (2023) engagement to outline these epistemic puzzles and pose potential pathways for overcoming the challenges his analysis brings into view. Although Vetik’s work runs through much of this paper it should not be read as a polemic. Instead, the paper aims to build on Vetik’s insights on how the relational turn shapes studies of citizenship. By extending the implications of Vetik’s analysis, the paper demonstrates how relational orientations in citizenship studies are currently burdened by two epistemic risks: epistemic relativism which renders theories incommensurable, and ontological hierarchies of relational thought which exclude certain relational insights from the academic vernacular.

This paper argues that both epistemic risks in citizenship studies stem from a misrecognition of the ontological and epistemic strengths inherent to relationalism itself. This paper develops three interrelated claims centered on the question of ‘what relations matter?’ First, it argues that relational theories inherently produce selective, partial insights into what constitutes citizenship indicating the diversity of orientations as an inherent feature of relational thought. Second, it argues that a failure to locate such partial

insights as a necessary feature of relational theorizing contributes to the two epistemic risks identified above. Third, this paper offers a deeper engagement with relational realist epistemology to overcome these challenges.

This reorientation, from ontology to epistemology, presents a solution on how partial relational accounts can be understood. It recognizes how selective insights underscores real, objective social reality. Further, it advocates Bourdieusian epistemic reflexivity to assess how these accounts collectively inform citizenship and its study. This epistemic focus allows for an interrogation of what relational theories reveal, what they omit, and how their insights can be read cumulatively rather than hierarchically. An example of this reflexivity is provided to illustrate how citizenship studies should evaluate relational insights and celebrate relational plurality.

This paper is divided into two broad sections. The first section compares substantialist and relational thought, to show that if citizenship is approached relationally, questions of “what relations matter” reveal selective foci of what become constitutive of citizenship. It demonstrates how such engagements hold ontological-normative stances on what citizenship entails. It then explores internal differences of relational thought, to explain how so far, such work contains two epistemic risks (epistemic relativism or ontological hierarchies) discussed above. Section two develops a realist relational epistemology to demonstrate how partial and normative relational insights can inform citizenship studies. It shows how such engagement requires epistemic reflexivity to understand how selective insights remain objective despite their partiality. It also presents an illustrative example of how reflexivity which acknowledges the limits of one relational theory creates epistemic space for other relational insights to collectively inform citizenship and its study, thereby overcoming issues of theoretical relativism and ontological hierarchy.

Relationalism’s Ontological Contribution to Citizenship

This section locates how relational insights differ from substantialist approaches, to show how the former necessarily hold selective and partial ontological-normative stances on what constitute citizenship. It then demonstrates how internal differences within relational thought, when assessed for what they contribute to citizenship and its study, have been misread as instances of theoretical relativism or as grounds for ontological hierarchies of relational purity.

Emirbayer (1997) contrasts relational and substantive thought. He argues that relationalism is an anti-essentialist stance emphasizing relations as the basis of social constitution. This view sees relation(s) as the locus of constitution where nothing exists without relations (Selg & Ventsel, 2020).

For Selg (2020) this ontological stance prioritizes constitutive relations which configure phenomena as opposed to causal relations among social kinds. In citizenship, this ontologically shifts the focus from seeing citizenship as a fixed status or a set of rights and duties among state and citizen(s) (Turner, 1990) towards relations which constitute it. In this context, relational theories do not just expand the conceptual scope of citizenship, they interrogate the very conditions under which citizenship is made intelligible and possible (Isin, 2019).

However, a relational approach does not automatically claim insight into which relations are constitutive. Instead, relational ontology serves as theoretical stance on how relations are understood (Donati 2017, 2018). Relational ontology does not yield a single, comprehensive account of citizenship but rather highlights selective relations which normatively shape citizenship in different situated contexts. To foreground how such selective, partial and normative orientations are part and parcel of relational theorizing, this paper draws on Dewey and Bentley's distinction between the substantive (self-actional, inter-actional) and the truly relational (trans-actional) orientation to social reality^{1,2,3}.

Implications from Relational Ontology: Ontological-Normative Stances on Which Relations Matter

Self-actional theories conceive social phenomena as things external to the social context in which they occur (Dewey & Bentley 1946). Here, social categories are pre-given, essential and exist. In citizenship, this orientation assumes existing but ontologically separate categories of the state and citizen. Consider notable studies exploring the relationship between the state and its citizens. From Plato to enlightenment scholars, the nature, role, rationale for and of the state vis-a-vie its subjects has been investigated. These approaches begin by ontologically seeing either the individual or the state as an a-priori category which structures the latter. For instance, in social contract theories (Hobbes 1651; Locke 1821; Rousseau 1987) citizens form the state as a Leviathan, or the state shape its citizens through the exercise of power. Starting from one vantage point, the ontological focus is on stable existing entities of states or citizens. Ontologically, such theories do not view the categories of state or citizen as selective concepts framing what is seen and understood as citizenship. How this differs from relational thought is clarified in relation to the inter-actional and trans-actional approaches of citizenship.

¹ For a similar mapping of how power is conceived across these approaches see: Selg, 2016.

² Of course, this theoretical mapping is subject to interpretation, critique, and contestation.

³ By Classifying such theories, the aim is neither to reduce their significance nor undermine their relevance.

Dewey & Bentley (1960) suggest that inter-actional approaches also presuppose essential a-priori social categories but allow room for change while remaining unchanged in essence. Such approaches retain their focus on an examination of cause-effect relations rather than constitutive explanations (Wendt 1998; Nōgisto & Selg 2023). In citizenship (Roche, 1995) these approaches emphasize how the state and individual interact to affect each other (Goodsell 1981; Skocpol 2014). Here diverse scholarship has examined the role of the state as an agent in society (Mann 1984; Meyer & Jepperson 2000), and citizens engagement with the state (Stivers 1990; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000; Turner & Shum 2024). Across such diversity, social categories might change in their causal relations but nevertheless exist as independent categories. Ontologically this assumes that the state and citizen are pre-existing social categories. Normatively, this removes the need to explore which relations constitute these categories. Instead, the entity of state, citizen (and any other social phenomena investigated in this configuration) are seen as permanently stable and inherently obvious to citizenship.

While inter-actional approaches share this ontologically substantive orientation towards relations, certain critical theories have blurred the distinction between substantive and relational accounts. Marxism and feminism, for instance, reveal the implicit power dynamics which structure the constitution of the state and citizen. Such theories imply a partial overlap between inter-actional and trans-actional orientations where substantialist categories are questioned for their implicit normative selectivity. These theories problematize the status quo of citizenship by emphasizing relations and structures in which states and citizens emerge. Such scholarships redirect attention towards how citizenship is structured in relation to power of capital and/or gender. As an illustration, consider Pateman's (1989, 2016) examination of the gendered dimensions of social contract theories. She contends that the social contract firstly legitimizes state's governance over its citizens, and secondly legitimizes men's authority over women, reinforcing the patriarchal modern state. While Pateman's examination carries forward the assumptions of pre-existing categories of citizens who submit to form the state, she interrogates the ontological and normative gendered hierarchy of the social and sexual contract. She blurs but does not erase the boundary between inter-actional and trans-actional thinking. She problematizes the normative implications of ontologically ignoring gendered hierarchies of citizenship but does not abandon the assumption of fixed entities such as states, social contracts and citizens. She takes these phenomena as essentially given a-priories without exploring the selective relations in which such states and citizens come to be constituted.

In contrast, trans-actional orientations ontologically view citizenship as configured in relations reflecting a relational stance. The last two decades have seen a rise in such theorizations (Caglar, 2015) emphasizing diverse relations (Stephens & Squire 2012; Donati 2016a) which constitute citizens (McCourt 2016). These theories provide newer explorations of what constitute citizens empirically and normatively. Empirically, such explorations frame citizens and others among a variety of actors, agents, institutions, and actions (Isin & Nielsen 2008). Normatively, they challenge static essentialist orientations by emphasizing dynamic relations which configure citizenship (Koster, Jaffe, & de Koning, 2017). However, these theories differ significantly on which relations they perceive as constitutive of citizenship, varying from an emphasis on civic engagement and solidarity (Donati 2016), to colonial histories and exclusion (Bhambra 2015), to the production of political subjectivities through acts and disruptions (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), to name just a few⁴.

Evidently, this relational (trans-actional) thought is best understood as a composite site of multiple competing orientations (Powell & Dépelteau, 2013) which reflect selective and normatively charged orientations social reality (Fuhse, 2020). Consider for instance the difference of how citizenship is framed (and studied) by focusing on lived experiences (Sobhy & Abdalla 2024), in contrast to theories that view citizenship as complex assemblages emphasizing the interplay between structure and agency (Koster 2015; Alldred & Fox 2019). While all relational approaches theoretically widen the scope of citizenship beyond a fixed set of rights or status, they also reveal how relational ontology includes a selective normative angle determined by the sort of relations identified as constitutive. This raises the question of how to understand and evaluate such theoretical diversity.

Often, the internal diversity of relational thought is mapped in a distinction between two meta-theoretical camps of deep process relationalism (PR) and a milder field relationalism (FR) (Vandenberghe, 2018). Various scholars contend that the former focuses on a flat ontology based on Dewey-Bentley's pragmatism (Kivinen & Piironen, 2024) while the latter stems from Bourdieusian field theory⁵ (Bourdieu, 1992), emphasizing structured relations of power, position, and struggle in constitution (Vandenberghe 1999; Mohr 2013). However, scholars differ over which camp is truly relational. For Selg (2016) PR is truly relational while FR presupposes entities. Whereas, for Powell (2013) FR presents radical relationalism and PR retains its substance first orientation. This ongoing impasse causes each side to accuse the other of reproducing an entity-first orientation which deviates

⁴ The scholars cited here are explicitly selected because they either refer to themselves as relational theorists or have been described as such in academia.

⁵ For a discussion on inherent relationality of Bourdieusian thought see Mohr (2013).

from relational thought. In the light of such differences, Selg (2016) acknowledges that these two camps contain their own ontological commitments.

This internal debate also extends to relational orientations in citizenship studies, the implications of which are best illustrated in Vetik's (2023) identification of how the meta-theory of PR/FR inform citizenship. Implicitly, his identification sets the ground for seemingly distinct and incommensurable accounts, where citizenship can only be evaluated within its own meta-theoretical school. Indeed, Fuhse (2022) argues that among theoretical diversity, theories can only be evaluated for their internal coherence when they correctly map empirical relations to their analytical constructs. Theories then neither speak to each other nor map the breadth of social reality, instead, the truth of theory is limited to its own perspective. This closes off the possibility to assess different relational theories in dialogue with each other, setting the stage for epistemic relativism, where a theory can only be assessed for its internal consistency.

To overcome this incommensurability, Vetik creates hierarchies among relational thought in a quest for theoretical purity elevating certain theories as more relational and dismisses others as being substantive. To make this case, Vetik maps the work of three relational scholars (Somers, Bhambra, and Isin) onto the differences between PR and FR and argues for the theoretical superiority of FR as the truly relational perspective. A summary of the three scholars is presented at this stage to facilitate the context in which this argument is constructed.

All three scholars depart from the traditional view of seeing citizenship as a fixed set of rights or status. For Somers (1994) citizenship emerges in relations where citizens, states and markets exercise rights (relational rights). For Bhambra (2014) citizenship is a relational product of the connected histories of the West and East that shaped national inclusion and exclusion of certain races and groups in modernity. For Isin (2002) citizenship emerges out of struggles to define the self in relation to alterity (an immediate internal other). Notably, the point of departure from seeing citizenship as fixed status or set of rights varies across these scholars. For Vetik, these differences relate to the meta-theoretical choice between PR and FR. He argues that 'While Somers and Bhambra frame their research object via the metaphor of process, Isin does so through the metaphor of the asymmetric field.' (p.381). This clearly identifies two incommensurable meta-theoretical orientations. Vetik's (2023) mapping of scholars to the meta-theory of PR and FR clearly illustrates how differences of theoretical orientations shape which relations are prioritized.

In efforts to overcome such incommensurability, Vetik explores the ontological purity of relational thought which dismisses insights from PR on citizenship. For Vetik PR simply inverts the dynamics of substantialist categories while FR overcomes it. In this context, Vetik argues that Somer's focus on relational rights retains a substantialist core of state, citizens and civic society. In a somewhat similar lens, Bhambra's focus of international history retains a substantialist core of citizenship's connection to the state. For Vetik, this substantialism is overcome by Isin who follows the FR tradition seeing relations as fields of difference without a substantialist core. For Vetik, this creates a conceptual space that... '..., triggers the formation of multiple, overlapping, and conflicting wills' (Isin 2002, p.33 as cited in Vetik 2023, p.379). Further for Vetik, the difference between PR and FR reflects the strength of FR. He argues '..., Isin's approach involves a higher level of abstraction. ... which is not the case in the PR type approach that Somers and Bhambra represent.' (Vetik, 2023, p.377). This hierarchy of relational purity risks the dismissal of certain insights as truly relational.

Instead, this paper advocates an epistemic reorientation to overcome these risks and question how various selective and normatively charged relational accounts of citizenship should be understood and evaluated. This reorientation allows for two inter-related engagements. First, it allows the possibility of dialogue among selective insights on what relations matter in constituting citizenship and informing studies of citizenship. Second, this allows for in-depth engagement with relational epistemology that acknowledges partiality and plurality without collapsing into epistemic relativism and debates of ontological purity. Further, such epistemic engagement necessitates epistemic reflexivity to make sense of what relational theorizing contributes to citizenship. The following section develops these arguments in detail.

Epistemically Relational; Real Plural, Reflexive

As section above illustrates, the relational claim that citizenship is constituted through relations does not indicate a single theoretical stance but reflects different orientations. This section demonstrates how such epistemic differences can be considered part and parcel of a realist relational epistemology which allows for plurality without collapse into relativism or debates over the hierarchies of relational purity. To do so, it maps relational epistemology as realist, partial and inherently pluralistic where different 'constitutive relations of citizenship' serve as commensurable insights on what constitutes citizenship and how it should be studied. Further, this section demonstrates how accepting such an epistemic stance mandates epistemic reflexivity to question what relations matter in the constitution of citizenship. This reflexivity serves to evaluate relational

accounts of citizenship by celebrating plurality without epistemic relativism or hierarchy.

Many contend that relationalism's epistemic insights are best aligned with a realist orientation to social reality (Gergen & Walter 1998; Vandenberghe 1999). Most notably, Donati develops this case by distinguishing between relationalist theories derived from constructivist and or relativist assumptions and relational theories based on critical and analytical realism (2017). For Donati (2025) only the relational orientation allows one to observe and engage with social reality that recognizes social relations are objective, real social facts. Seen in this light, relational insights disclose different aspects of the same social reality (Doucet, 2021). This epistemic position of how relational orientations reflect realist objective reality (Archer 1995; Burnett 2017) is most clearly articulated in Bourdieusian thought. He argues "the point of view is a perspective, a partial subjective vision (subjectivist moment); but it is at the same time a view, a perspective, taken from a point, from a determinate position in an objective social space (objectivist moment)" (1987, pg.2). This insight reflects how a partial view reflects objective existing reality albeit from partial perspectives. Noticing this epistemic insight, allows partiality to appear as a core feature of relational analysis without collapse into 'everything goes' relativism that can only speak to subjective free-floating stances (Ozumba, 2017). Building on these insights, scholars have urged for a critical examination of how knowledge is produced and the relations which shape it (Albert et.al 2020; Saramago 2019). Such critical insights urge scholars to acknowledge how knowledge itself can be partial and limited (Code 2006; Quraishi et.al 2022).

Inherent to this realist, relational gaze is a recognition of plurality. Such pluralism stands in contrast to relativism. This epistemic question allows one to move away from the ontological relativist view that a theory can only be judged by its internal consistency without external commensurability (Sankey 2013; McKenna 2017) and allows one to bypass debates of ontological hierarchies. Plurality hinges on the recognition that different epistemic accounts reflect the differentiated structure of social reality not epistemic arbitrariness (Carter, 2017). Hence, plurality emerges because of the different vantage points from which social reality is observed and through the configuration of social relations which shape it. At stake is an epistemic possibility that enables a pluralism of concepts which collectively reflect social reality. Indeed, scholars increasingly emphasize this pluralistic nature of relational thought by proposing stances which deny epistemic hegemony to any one stance in global theory building (Nordin et.al 2019). Querejazu (2022) argues that such pluralistic insight open discussions about plural worlds which contribute to greater epistemic and political diversity of

thought. In citizenship studies, it means a recognition that no single relational theory exhausts citizenship, while maintaining that each relational framing reveals certain real and objective insights of citizenship. Carrying forward the earlier example of meta-theoretical differences between PR and FR, this orientation rejects ontological debates of which meta-theory is more relational. Instead, it draws attention to what each insight informs citizenship. Extending the ideas of Somers, Bhambra and Isin discussed above, citizenship then becomes simultaneously a process of inclusion and exclusion, and a field mediated relations of belonging, identity and alterity.

Further, this relational realist epistemic stance encumbers researchers with the need to examine how knowledge is generated and evaluated. (Kurki 2020). In this light, epistemic investigations become a criterion of ontological coherence (Bouzanis, 2017) demanding an evaluation of which relations matter. Such engagement requires relational theories to be assessed in terms of what they disclose and how far their explanatory reach extends (Donati and Archer (2015). For Doucet (2018) this partial and necessarily selective insight imbues all investigations with epistemic responsibilities in which certain concepts (relations over entities), orientations (which relations are constitutive) shape knowledge. As Pillows (2015) argues, reflexivity contributes to genealogical and interpretive framing of the research object.

In this paper, epistemic reflexivity serves as an analytical orientation guiding how relational theories of citizenship are evaluated. Analytically, epistemic reflexivity operates through three interrelated steps. First, it requires making explicit the analytical categories through which citizenship is constituted by asking which relations a given theory treats as constitutive. This shifts evaluation away from ontological hierarchy toward an examination of the normative and epistemic consequences of relational selection. Second, epistemic reflexivity treats relational theories as partial mappings of a shared social reality. Rather than assessing theories in isolation or ranking them by relational purity; it interrogates what each theory makes visible, and what it obscures based on the relations it deems constitutive. Third, epistemic reflexivity opens space for relational plurality by acknowledging the limits of any single relational account. Reflexive analysis thus creates space for other relational perspectives to address such omissions.

This paper proposes that such reflexivity is best envisioned as a type of Bourdieusian Epistemic reflexivity. This section now turns to a deeper engagement with what this entails, how it can help citizenship studies overcome the two epistemic risks identified above, and instead, celebrate its partial, selective and plural insights.

Epistemic Reflexivity; Theoretical Plurality Over Relativism and/or Closure

It is crucial to note that the field has burgeoned with a call for reflexivity which usually retains a reflective and methodological examination of researcher engagement in knowledge production. For instance, the reflective turn (Archer, 2009) encourages scholars to reflect on the implications of their socio-cultural position, privilege and power when engaging in research (Faria & Mollett 2016; D’Arcangelis 2018). These reflections encourage inclusive methodologies of research with rather than on subjects (England 1994; Brannelly & Barnes, 2022). However, these reflections do not underscore how delineating relations that constitute citizenship reflect partial, selective, ontologically and epistemically loaded choices.

In contrast to such positional and methodological reflectivity, epistemic reflexivity demands an interrogation of what relations are prioritized in research, in this case, the constitution of citizenship. Epistemic reflexivity is best understood as a critical reflection of the categories through which the research object is constituted (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992; Bourdieu 2004). This allows for the historicization and socio-temporal embedding of social fact while avoiding the relativism of post-modern deconstruction (Wacquant & Bourdieu 1992). In generating knowledge, it aims to not only reject relativism, but also ‘...reject the formalism and fixism of a single indivisible reason ...’ (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991, p.81). For citizenship studies, the implication is the rejection of a single ontologically pure standpoint that shows which relations constitute citizenship. Instead, at stake is a quest for knowledge that is context specific, situated, and pluralistic in its mapping.

Epistemic reflexivity does not claim to reveal a universal exhaustive truth. Instead, aligning with relational realist insights, it acknowledges that knowledge is necessarily partial and situated, while maintaining that such partiality does not preclude objectivity. Epistemic Reflexivity focusses on knowledge’s validity in mapping social reality (Susen 2016). For relational approaches to citizenship, this implies acceptance of how different relational frameworks generate valid yet limited mappings of the relations which constitute citizenship. Here, the diversity of relational approaches becomes commensurable by questioning what relations matter in citizenship. This diversity enables analysis of what relations theory make visible and what it necessarily leaves unexplored. This epistemic reorientation allows for an expansion to the citizenship studies across scale, time, space, and form rather than epistemic closure.

Such epistemic reflexivity has already been implicitly put into practice by Roy and Neveu (2023) in their critique of Isin’s orientation to citizenship as

being constituted through acts of people. Their intervention examines the assumptions behind the relational category of acts. Rather than taking acts as a core set of relations which constitute citizenship, they highlight how certain acts are selected by scholars as being constitutive of citizenship at the expense of others. They argue that the ways in which the concept of acts is used establishes a normative hierarchy privileging intentionality and rupture while marginalizing ordinary, routine, mundane activities which constitute citizenship. They show how the category teaches researchers to recognize certain activist, purposive and disruptive practices as constitutive of citizenship, and how such selective focus obscures the ordinary, mundane and daily aspects of doing citizenship (Staehele et.al 2012; Biglin 2022).

This move exemplifies epistemic reflexivity. Their analysis neither dismisses relational diversity nor ranks the relational purity of other theoretical insights versus the theory of acts. Instead, by analyzing relational category of acts they expose the concept's limits while preserving its analytical value. Acts of citizenship emerge as one powerful but partial and selective lens among others for capturing the full complexity of citizenship. This enables room for conceptual plurality rather than conceptual closure while remaining rigorous, aware and reflexive about the relations prioritized in social constitution.

This section demonstrates how a relational realist stance understands partiality as inherent conditions of knowledge production. It shows that once such partiality is acknowledged as reflecting part of the same social reality, then neither epistemic relativism nor ontological hierarchies of relationalism offer a coherent response on what relations matter in constitution. This section further develops epistemic reflexivity of the form implicitly used by Roy and Neveu to treat theoretical diversity as an analytical tool celebrating the plurality of relational orientations.

CONCLUSION

Inspired by the recent examination of what relations matter in IR, this article has developed three interrelated claims for what relational theories contribute to citizenship studies.

It has demonstrated how relational orientations to citizenship and its study necessarily hold selective, partial and normative insights on what constitutes citizenship. It has mapped how such diversity has been open to two epistemic risks, both of which occlude relational theorizing. The first epistemic risk is the production of competing theoretical orientations which are seemingly incommensurate with each other and can only be assessed for internal validity (the extent to which theory describes the phenomena of citizenship). The second epistemic risk (sometimes occurring in an attempt

to move beyond this incommensurability) has been the hierarchical classification of relational thought in quests for relational purity.

By foregrounding the question of what relations matter and by reorientating from ontology to epistemology, this paper has proposed a realist relational epistemology to overcome these epistemic risks. It has presented a way to treat partial, selective, normative insights of relational thought as objective attempts to map the same social reality albeit from different vantage points. In this context the paper advocates for a relational epistemology that celebrates plurality without epistemic relativism or hierarchy.

Lastly, this paper has advocated for a Bourdieusian reflexivity to understand how such plurality still informs objective reality, where theories can be critically interrogated for what they allow us to see and know about citizenship and what they necessarily omit in their orientations. In this context, citizenship studies require not just engagement with questions of what relations constitute citizenship but also pose the question of ‘what relations are omitted in such framings?’. This reflexive mapping facilitates insights on how diverse relations and theories can speak to each other on what constitutes citizenship. Drawing on various and often competing relational orientations towards citizenship, the question shifts from ‘is citizenship performative or a complex assemblage?’ towards how ‘does performative citizenship relate to citizenship as a complex assemblage?’.

Hence, the primary purpose of this paper has been to reorient relational scholars in citizenship studies towards such epistemic questions and epistemic reflexivity. Of course, in making this case, the complex relations between theoretical and scholarly (positional and personal) reflexivity (Donati & Archer, 2015) have not been examined and should be evaluated for a deeper grounding of ‘what relations matter in citizenship’. This paper concludes by urging future research to explore these connections.

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