

Nuances of Social Relations in Everyday Life

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Abstract: There are complex and critical and also unconscious nuances of social relations which cannot be captured by conventional anthropological terms such as HW, BZ, FM, FS, MD and so on. The micro sociological theoretical tradition tells us to go deeper into the mind, self and the social ambience to get to the strategies individuals deploy in managing their relations and in presentation of self and in management of impression in the public, in both the front stage and back stage.

By applying the autobiographical reflexive method the author of the present paper explores the close and proximate relations and the relations that are not so intimate in the family, in the extended kinship network, people in the friendship network, and the “significant others” who leave a lasting impact on the shaping up of a self. It highlights the tensions and stresses in the relations and the strategies the actors deploy in maintaining the relations in a “desired way”. The paper also discusses the core and the periphery of social relations and explains the logic behind locating the social relations in terms of priorities.

Methodologically the paper argues that language is a highly inadequate means to capture the complexity of thoughts about even more complex social relations, yet the social scientists apply strategies of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology in order to construct narratives on social relations from the participants’ points of view.

Keywords: self, relations, boundaries in social relations, impression management.

Introduction

Going by the existing theoretical standards, social relations can be taken as both structurally (determined by the conventions or institutions) and subjectively determined by the individual agency. In the structural approach,

social conventions, backed by power, would always want to typify the relations in set patterns in a hegemonic fashion, not allowing the individuals in the relations any autonomy to reinterpret and redefine the relations, deviating from the set patterns. The structural approach fails to acknowledge the fact that there is an active mind in the individual interpreting and reinterpreting all information in a new and critical light and there could be a “rebel” in all individual active to redefine the social relations and the world around her/him. There is also a third angle to the problem which is rooted in a wide mental space called unconscious, which both the structure and the subject try to conquer yet fail to conquer since the penetration of both these forces could be partial at the most. While responding to these “compulsive forces” the individual or the subject is under stress and it responds by drawing and redrawing boundaries in social relations, defining and redefining “I” or “we” and “they” and the “other” or whatever social situations they encounter. This drawing and redrawing of boundaries are partially a social act (collective) along the line of social conventions and partially an individual act since the agency in the subject gets a space to act autonomously, consciously and unconsciously, displaying a universal urge to maintain the distinctiveness of the self.

Methodology

Each social relation has a time-space and cultural-mental-practical context, which evolves with changing times. Therefore every relation in perception is relative, subjective and temporal. Only the participating subjects in a particular social relation can reflexively and phenomenologically draw an account of such relations. The external researchers/ observers have to depend on the mediated versions of social relations given to them by the participants in social relations (or the actors), which may not be “authentic”. Again, the understanding of two persons involved in a particular relation can be substantially different as they approach their relation from two different levels of cognition and even two subjective-cultural standpoints.

The Marxist idea of praxis (the existence-consciousness-action axis), structuralism, structuration theory, symbolic interactionism and reflexive methods can provide us with the methodological foundation to approaching the micro-sociology of social relations. Marx has outlined the dialectical and circular relation between the given body of ideological knowledge (or social conventions) (1), the experiences (where the actor is dialectically engaged with the conventions and lived experiences) (2), consciousness

drawn on the basis of the dialectics between these two forces (3), and action (4) ('Theses on Feuerbach' and *For Marx* by Althusser 1969). All these four components of knowledge formation and social action are dynamic as they keep changing with changing time and space and the key to this dynamics is the ever thinking and acting individual, operating at the subjective as well as collective levels. In the Marxist method cognition and action, at the individual and collective levels, cannot be separated. The Marxist method has been subjected to criticism for its class-determined holistic man, which does not talk much about the individual and her/his creative agency. The post-structuralist and post-modernist thinkers reject all forms of foundationalism, meta-narratives and over emphasis on the one-dimensional modernist man (and woman). Structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984) has made an effort to strike a balance between the idea of given hegemonic structure and methodological individualism arguing that there could be a sense of structure which is not the given structure but a cognitive frame drawn out of the dialectics between conventions and lived experiences (something close to Bourdeau's idea of *habitus*). Bourdeau's (1990) "reflexivity" has placed in focus the process of cognition, which is essentially a subjective act (echo of Weber) which can be elevated to the level of "inter-subjective construct" (and echo of Durkheim 1895 and Schutz 1967).

The reality of social relations is that much as they find reflection in the consciousness of the participating actors, although with all its limitations. Therefore, introspection or reflexive method is the only method (which help construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the perception of "truth") that would be useful in unfolding the layers and complexities of social relations we live in, where one can uphold the sovereignty of experience, both in terms of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. The problem in this method is that in following the autobiographical tract there is a possibility of being personal thus making "objectivist distancing" impossible. One can also risk being strategic and not being frank and honest enough with his/her narrative for salvaging the image or impression in public. The idea that has prompted this otherwise unconventional paper is that sociologists largely talk about others drawing from secondary sources while they are shy of exploring the treasure of their own "unmediated" experiences which could be the source of more authentic social narratives.

Evolution of social relations

All social relations evolve since the individuals participate in a relation are thinking, creative, dialogical agencies and the relation passes through

changing times and spaces. I would examine how some of my family relations have evolved over the years drawing from the way they have been recorded in my conscious, vigilant mind.

My parents: I do not remember moving round the village streets riding on my father's shoulder nor a moment in my father's lap or a moment from my early childhood of being cared and loved by my father. He was a dreaded primary school headmaster, beating me up left and right, every morning and evening whenever I sat down to study. Continuous thrashing day after day guided me to draw a self image of being absolutely worthless; it took all my confidence away, and loaded me with inferiority complex, and I started making silly mistakes, already suffering from forgetfulness, crazy for love and care. But I was not all that worthless. I was an average looking boy who had some virtues as well – good in mathematics and ranked among the top students in the early primary classes, good in village sports, good in swimming, good in climbing trees; a kind-hearted boy ready to help starving people and people in distress, a boy who used to sob profusely reading story books and novels. It was a matter of shock that my father did not notice any of the virtues in me. The torture and a sense of injustice rose to such an extent that I often thought life would have so beautiful had my father not been there. His frustration with me has remained a mystery, largely un-decoded.

However, this version of my father, which my tender mind had captured, turned out to be one-sided as I grew up. My mother told me that once, in my early childhood, I was about to die of chronic diarrhea and my father called a specialist doctor from the town and saved me spending beyond his means. On another occasion, I had meningitis and the doctors had given up hope of saving me. I was on and off with my consciousness and saw my father along with other members of my family crying. I saw my father being happy and appreciative when I started topping my class in class IX-XI stage, and then in college and university. He was one of the happiest persons around when I got admission for my M. Phil. – PhD. in Delhi School of Economics or when I received the C'wealth Post-Doctoral Fellowship. He was ecstatic when I got my teaching job, my first job, in the university. He was the one who backed my inter-religious marriage and was happy to see his granddaughter. He kept concerned about me because I lived away from him for many months first in England and then in Australia. My Australia visit in 2003 scared him a lot and I have gathered from my family members that he kept saying something wrong might have happened to me. He was desperate to talk to me but we did not have a telephone in

our Raiganj house. Because of such worries he had a cerebral attack in his sleep and had his lower part paralyzed. He was bed-ridden for about six months before crossing over on 15 January 2004. In the last months of his life he always wanted me, along with his other children, to be by his side and longed for my physical warmth. My family and professional obligations kept me away from him. Because of the “childhood” distance, which lingered for many years, I never felt easy touching him, massaging his head, hands or legs. He demanded the company of all his children and dear ones in his otherwise lonely bed room. After his death I had one of his photos laminated and kept in my drawing room for a couple of months but I felt terribly uneasy looking at his eyes. I felt, he was saying to me ‘you have not done enough for me’. As a means to avoid the uneasiness I gave away the photo to my elder brother, who has been one of his dearest children. A sense of regret of being shying away from him haunts me even years after he has crossed over.

Despite having studied only up to class III, my mother was an enlightened, caring, soft, and kind person. When I starved of my father’s love my mother doubled her love and affection for me to make up for my father’s hostile treatment. I was a part of her body for nine months, and then attached to her body for many months in my neo-natal and post natal stages and even when I was a boy I was close to her body and mind; she was the most loving person around. I used to cry with my mother when she suffered labour pain at the time of birth of my younger siblings (I remember at least two such occasions). During our worst days when we were fighting poverty and starvation I used to stand by my mother, helping her buying things cheap from the market, collecting firewood from the trees in our backyard, helping her doing domestic chores, sending her money on regular basis since I started earning (right from my fellowship days in early 1980s), being with her whenever she needed me. On the occasions of her ailments I massaged her head and legs. I always loved her company and shared all my personal problems with her being sure that she would stand by me. She loved being with me in my rented house close to university or in my university quarters for days and months. She loved my wife and daughter with equal intensity and always wanted to see me happy. After her departure in March 2012 I had her photo laminated and kept it in my drawing room and I draw inspiration looking at kind eyes every morning and every evening. I miss her badly although I have a full family to care for; I cannot forget her for a moment. I remember her with great fondness and admiration. Many of her qualities, particularly the one to help the needy, have strongly survived in me.

Wife: I fell in love with one of my students the very first day I saw her and she subsequently became my wife. She was not so stunning to be fallen for at the first sight but her sweet, caring, simple nature which had its overwhelming presence on her face and in her appearance carried me away. We have been in conjugal relation for the last 29 years and our relationship has become stronger and closer to total every passing year. While her surrender to me and love for me is total I have tried to be a caring husband all through, although, I doubt, my surrender to her has not been total. I have looked beyond her once although, fortunately, I did not progress much. In these years I have seen her as passionate wife, caring wife, a good friend ever present with her counsel at times of my personal crisis; she has been there with me with all her kindness and forgiveness when I committed mistakes. The phases in our relation and transformations have been distinct - from mad lovers, to loving-caring couple, to responsible parents and finally to caring aging friends. The last phase which we are presently in is most interesting and enjoyable. With aging, health worries are increasing and so is our interdependence; we have become more caring now than ever before. Ailments on either side make us more compassionate. I feel helpless in crisis but she comes forward to take me out of crisis. I take her as the last straw knowing full well that and she will never desert me even when everybody else might hide in comfort. She probably thinks the same way about me. The relation has turned jocular and we pull each other's legs all day long and express our mutual love through fake quarrels. Unlike me she has been less expressive all through but these days when I go out for a few days alone she misses me badly often saying 'I see darkness without you'. The raw passion is long gone but we care for each other with great sense of "pity" and compassion (Rousseau 2008). It has been something like good by Mr. Freud, welcome Mr. Rousseau. Now that our daughter lives away we have rediscovered our love and friendship and our everyday life is full of jokes and demonstration of how much we care for each other. I have become home-sick and love spending time with her. I realize this attachment for her particularly when I live away from her for weeks and months.

Daughter: Our daughter, now 26 years, is our only child. Because of constant prodding from my mother my wife and I briefly thought of having a second child, a son preferably, but my wife backtracked. She was not ready to go through the ordeal of bearing and rearing a child second time and we soon dropped the idea. Our daughter was already 9-10 years that time and she had stamped her complete authority over her parents. We thought, sharing parental love with another child would depress her and we

were not prepared to see her in any kind of mental stress. We would also have felt awkward sharing our love and care.

Both of us (me and my wife) are tender in heart and brought our daughter up with utmost care and love. We hardly ever scolded her or thrashed her. I have cautioned my wife many a times thinking that her careless or insensitive use of words might leave her hurt. Once in her late primary level I gave her a mild slap, losing cool, while helping her solve mathematics and I cried afterwards and cursed me for my act; it took days to restore the relation to normal smiling order. My daughter had serious ailments on two occasions. Sad and nervous I was feeling empty; it was like end of the world for me. I cried many a times and being in tension I picked up hypertension and blood sugar. In seeing her suffer and taking her to doctors and medical tests I felt the same emptiness, as if death was fast approaching me. A feeling of nothingness grasped me and I suffered from both physical and intellectual immobility.

Now she is grown up, teaching in a college, she has a fully grown persona. She understands her duties and responsibilities; always ready to stand by her parents and near and dear ones and friends. She is sensitive to the sufferings of the people around her and ready to help them out in her limited capacity. She has never given us trouble nor did anything to embarrass us. We feel proud at her achievements and happy to be her parents. On a selfish note it appears that we live for her alone. Our daughter-all life has seen us withdrawing to our selfish core to a large extent. This had an alienating effect on us particularly in terms of our relations with close kin outside our nuclear family.

Siblings: We are three brothers and five sisters, all married, and well-settled in life with their respective families. We grew up in a healthy family ambience exchanging care and love and at the same time quarreling, exchanging slaps and blows, and fighting over sharing of food and dress and yet sharing the same bed for many years in our childhood. As we were growing up we were given separate beds and rooms thus creating a physical distance. There was competition among us trying to outperform one another in school and board examinations and establish ourselves as the star or hero in the family and neighbourhood. Then there was a long phase of dispersal, starting with our sisters; they were married out one by one and the brothers too dispersed because they had different work places. The break in physical proximity over the years freed everyone from the everyday care and mutual responsibilities. The economic interdependence is no more and everybody is busy with their life and respective families and varied

problems. We do not usually seek help from each other when in problems. Now each of my siblings has the closer ones to care for and to be concerned about (e.g., the members of their own family). We still live on our memories of being together for so many years, sharing our sufferings, problems and moments of joy and achievements. Once in a while we call each other and gather in family functions and rites. Sometimes we do not see each other for months and years. We get sad to hear a bad news about any one of us. We still exchange festive gifts to remind ourselves about our relations. But the warmth has largely faded and also faded the functionality of the siblings. We are happy when somebody's child is doing well but unconcerned if their children are not doing so well. We are no longer indispensable for one another; nobody is going to breakdown when we start crossing over. The relation with the children of my siblings is not as strong as with the siblings and the relation and the attachment among the cousins and their children (the next generation) is even thinner.

Other kin: The blood relations two or three generation back have dispersed to faraway places and there is near complete absence of regular contacts. I have my father's younger sister and her family in my parental village in present Bangladesh with whom we have lost all contacts. Earlier, some 20 years back, we used to write to them postcards and inlands informing about the important incidents and occasions like birth, death, marriage and so on but the practice has discontinued; our relations too have stopped writing to us almost around the same time. The incidents that infuse happiness and sadness are not exchanged or shared. We also have blood relations who live not too far, even within 10 minutes walk. We have our FFBSs and their families within the district and in the neighbouring district. We have our MB's and BZ's families, also in the neighbouring district. But the relations, interactions, mutual visits, even emotional attachments have thinned out with the progress of time. The children of our blood relations do not even know each other and having no emotional bondage.

The "significant" others

We come in contact with so many people directly or indirectly in different phases of our life and most of them go "un-noticed" but some of them, may be very few, leave a lasting impact with their affection, love and care or with their ideas and I call them the "significant others"; they help shape our personality to a significant extent. They are the unsung heroes of our lives. I honestly feel that I have in me many of the ideas and attributes of my parents (like our approach to things that matter in our everyday life like,

caste, religion, friends, people who surround us, politics, social problems, superstitions, and many other things); I carry the legacy and pass it on to the next generation (our own child, niece and nephew, students and so on). Besides, I had my one grandfather (my father's youngest uncle), my father's sister, one of my mother's sister) and some of my friends, teachers, my idols (the world famous thinkers), who collectively contribute to the shaping of what I am. It's not that that I am always conscious of their influence but I strongly feel their presence in my perceptions and actions. It's not that I follow them blindly; I am, in fact, in an endless dialogue with them in shaping and reshaping myself; the formation of self is thus an endless process.

Concluding observations

The conventional way of framing and expressing social relations as HW, FM, FS, MD, or BZ and so on in social anthropology or sociology does not express the uniqueness and micro-social aspects of social relations. Relations can be studied only applying phenomenological-reflexive method (and not the structural method of Radcliffe-Brown 1940) since in social relations experiences of the participants, which are bound to vary, reigns supreme, although the influence of "conventions" (socially structured forms which are at the same time legitimized by culture) and "language" cannot be totally ruled out.

Since we are dealing with our private space the account of the relations could be under-expressed, mediated to suit a particular image as a part of impression management strategy. This is a methodological problem which is difficult, if not impossible, to overcome.

Every relationship is unique as they are dynamic; a lot of creativity and dialogue go into building and evolving a social relation. The traditions and the dialogical and dialectical participation contribute to the evolution of the social relations. The conventional consciousness, practical consciousness and the unconscious guide social relations while practical consciousness and may be the unconscious together bring about changes in the patterns.

Theoretically, the subjective understanding (Weber 1949), impression management (Goffman 1956), the idea of agency (Giddens 1984) the *habitus* (Bourdeu 1990), *sociological imagination* (Mills 1959) could be handy in drawing a sociological understanding of social relations.

So far as the boundaries are concerned, I or me constitute the irreducible core; in the second layer closest to the core is the nuclear family usually consisting of child/children and wife. In the third layer there are brothers

and their children; in the fourth layer there are my sisters and in the sixth layer are the children of the sisters. The altruistic attachment in the core-relations is likely to have a thinning effect on the relations in the outer layers. There is a possibility that some from the outer layer would find a place in the core while someone from the core would only have a peripheral presence, depending on the cultural time and space and how practical consciousness responds to the relational situation.

Why this selective proximity and distancing is difficult to explain. However, the principle of physical and mental proximity, the principle of reciprocity, the principle of quality, the principle of deficiency, and the unconscious could come handy in explaining the relational puzzle.

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