P136 / Culture and Relational Public Policy: Examining Cross-Cultural Understandings of Relationality

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Relationality has emerged as an important perspective for understanding public policy, challenging approaches that privilege discrete actors and linear accounts of policy processes. By foregrounding interdependence, interaction, and the relationships through which public problems are understood and addressed, relational approaches offer new ways of conceptualising governance, public service provision, and collective action (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). Over the past decade, a growing body of scholarship has sought to establish the conceptual and methodological foundations of relational public administration and relational public policy, while exploring their implications for research and practice (Lejano & Kan, 2022).

Although relational approaches challenge the assumption that social and political life can be adequately understood through independent actors and bounded entities, the meaning of relationships cannot be assumed to be universal. Cultural understandings of personhood, community, authority, and interdependence may inform what counts as relationships, which relationships matter, and how relational practices are interpreted in public life. Consequently, relationality may take different forms across contexts, carrying distinct normative expectations and implications for public action.

Research in relational sociology and cultural theory has already drawn attention to the relationship between networks, culture, and agency (Mische, 2011), the intersections between social networks and cultural processes (Pachucki & Breiger, 2010), Western and non-Western forms of relational thought (Kwak & Cheng, 2024) and the significance of relationality for understanding cultural difference and global cooperation (Brigg, 2014). Work examining relationality across Western and non-Western cultural contexts further invites questions about the cultural assumptions embedded in prevailing understandings of interdependence and relationships. These conversations ask how culturally situated understandings of relationality might challenge, or extend the current conceptual foundations of relational public policy to be reinterpreted through the contexts in which relationships acquire meaning. The panel therefore seeks to advance a culturally attentive and critically reflexive conversation about relationality in public policy and administration. It aims to bring together scholars working across different theoretical traditions, cultural contexts, and empirical settings to compare and contrast how culturally situated understandings of relationships shape the conceptualisation and practice of public policy. In doing so, it seeks not merely to extend the geographical reach of relational scholarship, but to explore whether and how cultural difference can challenge its assumptions, expand its analytical vocabulary, and generate new directions for theory and practice.

The aims of this panel are to:

1. Interrogate the cultural assumptions of relational theory;
2. Develop cross-cultural dialogue by bringing diverse conceptual, methodological, and empirical perspectives into conversation;
3. Explore the cultural situatedness of relational practices and establish an agenda for culturally attentive relational scholarship.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Building on existing conversations about relational public policy and administration (Bartels et al., 2024), the panel seeks to move beyond the recognition that relationships matter towards a deeper examination of how their meanings are culturally constituted. It will create space for conceptual and empirical contributions that consider what a culturally informed relational perspective might contribute to public policy research and

practice.

Given the diversity of relational approaches and cultural understandings of social and political life, we adopt a broad and inclusive view of contributions that engage with relationality at conceptual, methodological, or empirical levels. We invite papers that explore, but are not limited to, the cultural interpretations of relationality and relationalism, as well as those that investigate cultural variation within particular societies, institutions, and policy settings, especially non-Western and Global South scholarship.

Interested scholars can contact Nick Turnbull (nick.turnbull@manchester.ac.uk), and Eeshita Dubey (phd23eeshitad@iima.ac.in) prior to submitting paper proposals.