

# The Behavior of Organizations: A Relational and Institutional Account

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Editorial note. This article presents the original theoretical framework, structure, ideas, and argumentation of Panayotis Zamaros, developed in the context of personal research on organizational behavior and institutional theory. Preliminary academic editing, including prose refinement, structural organization of the four-strand architecture, integration of the institutional sources the diagram, and development of the behavior of organizations distinction was carried out by Claude (Anthropic, claude-sonnet-4-6), acting as editorial assistant. The final editing was performed by the author. All theoretical claims, scholarly judgements, and analytical conclusions are the author's own, grounded in and supported by the referenced sources.

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## Abstract

Most organizational behavior studies focus on the behavior in organizations: how individuals lead, how teams cohere, how culture forms, how power operates inside the firm. The Relational Approach (Zamaros, 2011a, 2017) proposes a different primary object: the behavior *of* organizations, that is, the organization as a legal and economic unit acting outward, presenting itself to stakeholders, and making itself visible as an institutional whole. This is *institutional behavior* in the sense developed by Allport (1933) and Meadows (1970): the patterned, outward-facing action of the organization as a going concern. The behavior of organizations operates on two levels simultaneously: it shapes the behaviors of people and teams inside the organization by setting the conditions under which leaders lead, managers manage, structures form, and cultures emerge; and it informs stakeholder behavior by providing the visible, interpretable act to which consumers, employees, investors, and communities respond. The article develops this argument in four parts. Part I establishes the fundamental concepts — trust, individuals, organizations, language, and behavior — on which the analysis rests. Part II builds the account of the behavior of organizations, including its four-strand research architecture and the Zara illustration. Part III draws the consequences of this account for eight classical OB concepts, showing how each must be reframed when the behavior of organizations is taken as primary rather than derived. Part IV presents the research tools that follow from the framework.

**Keywords:** *behavior of organizations, relational approach, institutional behavior, organizational behavior, trust, language, stakeholder behavior, organizational identity, leadership, management concerns, organizational culture, discourse analysis*

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## Part I: Fundamental Concepts

The Relational Approach rests on five foundational concepts. Together they reframe what it means for an organization to act, to present itself, and to be recognized by those it acts upon.

### 1. Trust

Trust is the first and foundational concept because without it no organizational action is possible. Three views are in play, each necessary, none sufficient alone.

The existential view begins with the simplest fact. Drawing on Zamaros (2011b: 113, 49), existential trust is *aletheia*, the certainty that things are as they are and will be as they have been: *trieuwe*, trust as the steadfastness of an oak. This is the trust of *eon*, being. The Odysseus figure is exemplary: he returned home under the assumption that Ithaca was still in place, that his wife was still there. The mutual trust he and Penelope maintained throughout twenty years of absence was precisely this certainty that things were, even under conditions of *apousia*, absence. When this certainty fails, what remains is *me eon*, non-being. Without trust, there is no point in revealing anything at all, let alone in organizing. Existential trust is the ontological ground on which all organizational activity rests.

The interpersonal view, following Lewicki et al. (2006), approaches trust through its psychological and behavioral elements. Trust has cognitive elements, beliefs and judgments about another's trustworthiness; emotional elements, the feelings one experiences in a trusting relationship; and behavioral-intention elements, the willingness to undertake risky action based on the confident expectation that the other will honor trust (Lewicki et al., 2006: 993, 997-998). Extending trust engenders reciprocity: when we trust others, they become more likely to behave in a trustworthy manner and to trust us in return (ibid.: 998). *Distrust* arises from cultural or

psychological factors biasing toward initial distrust, from untrustworthy reputation information, or from situational factors (ibid.: 1000).

The functional view, following Pucetaite et al. (2010: 198), treats organizational trust as the positive attitude held by an organization's member toward another, that the other party will act by fair-play rules and will not take advantage of one's vulnerability. Organizational trust depends on the tools of ethics management (ibid.).

The Relational Approach holds that existential trust is the condition of possibility of the other two: interpersonal and functional trust presuppose that there is something held in common that makes the risk of trust worth taking.

## **2. Individuals**

An individual is a non-divisible entity as far as its biology is concerned, but not psychically and socially: a person is *transductively* constituted (Zamaros, 2011a: 14). Following Simondon, transduction is a relation in which the terms are constituted by the relation. Self and other are interrelated in such a way that a change in the self brings about a change in the other (ibid.: 15). This mutual constitution involves two flows: from other to self, the centeredness of the other shaping who the self becomes; and from self to other, where the self seeks to discursively influence its environment. Flows are premised on difference: *indifference* precludes any flow, any relationship, any relational perception of time (ibid.: 17); *difference is not an obstacle to relation; it is its condition*.

## **3. Organizations**

From the relational standpoint, an organization is a legal and economic unit in constant interaction with some other, be it other organizations, suppliers, customers, or official organizations (Zamaros, 2011a: 18). *Organizations are legally autonomous but socially transduced*: they depend on resources from their environment and are simultaneously transformed by that dependence.

Two types of interaction structure organizational life (Zamaros, 2017: 14-15). Transformational interactions involve resource flows: inbound flows from supply chains, outbound flows through distribution chains and sales outlets. Transference interactions involve information flows: an organization is made up by the stakeholders present in its environment, including investors, competitor organizations, states, labor, financial companies, and consumers. The direction and power of these flows

determine the organization's competitive posture. Where inbound flows dominate, the organization is passively competitive. Where outbound flows dominate, it is dynamically competitive. Where flows are indeterminate, it is non-competitive (Zamaros, 2017: 15; online 2017).

#### **4. Language**

*If trust is about making possible, what enables this possibility is language* (Zamaros, 2017: 18). A description is any signifier that speaks on behalf of the signified; a descriptive system is a selected set of signifiers and signifieds composing a unique relational whole (Zamaros, online 2004: 7). The descriptive signature is the chosen set of signifiers and qualifiers for generating descriptive meaning (ibid.: 9). We mean for a reason, for an action, a performance, with the expectation that an event will take place relative to the meaning chosen (ibid.: 11). Realized purposes are the outcomes of description (Zamaros, 2012: 17).

Language achieves two outcomes (Zamaros, 2012: 41): the inscription of self and other as identities of a coherent order; and the persuasion of others to consider and sense their surrounding in one way rather than another. Selective persuasion rests on three qualities: authority, credibility, and constancy, which constitute the power base of any descriptive system (ibid.: 46). The logics through which a descriptive system is enacted, are functional, discursive, paradigmatic, and hyper-rational (ibid.: 67). Language is the instrument by which the behavior of organizations constructs and maintains its identity in the eyes of stakeholders.

#### **5. Behavior**

Schutz (1967/1932: 39) distinguishes two senses of doing. Action (*actio*) is the doing in the very course of being constituted: a flow, an ongoing sequence, a process of bringing something forth. Act (*actum*) is the already constituted doing, considered as a completed unit. Applied to management, Zamaros (2003: 133) notes that *management as action presents itself as a series of existing and present experiences, while management as act consists in terminated, completed acts sedimented in memory and therefore mythified, idealized*. Time here is dynamic, not static.

*Behavior is therefore an enacted thought or desire: an act (actum), a what, which presupposes action (actio), a how. The act is publicly observable; the action is not.* Since the act is public and therefore contextual, it may trigger a performance by

another: any behavior is constituted in the relation one has with another, a relationship of acts in relation with ways of thinking (Zamaros, 2017). This distinction between act and action is the basis for distinguishing the behavior of organizations, which is visible and outward-facing, from the behavior in organizations, which is the internal action that generates it.

## Part II: The Behavior of Organizations

### 1. *The Primary Object: Behavior OF, Not Behavior IN*

Conventional organizational behavior focuses on what happens inside organizations: the study of individuals, teams, and organizational systems with the purpose of rendering employees more productive (Zamaros, 2017: 6). Even when the open systems mythology acknowledges environmental dependency, the firm remains the unique center for managing, describing, and defining processes and identities: there is one point of view; the other side is left unaccounted for, despite all the consumer and stakeholder behavior studies which are organization-centered (Zamaros, 2017: 10). This is the behavior *in* organizations, and it is *not* the Relational Approach's primary object.

The primary object is the behavior *of* organizations: *the organization as a unit acting outward, presenting itself to stakeholders, making itself visible and identifiable*. This is *institutional behavior* in Allport's (1933) sense: the uniform and reciprocal responses of a vast number of individuals constituting a common-segment of behavior. Allport insists that institutions can be treated either as super-individual entities with a reality of their own, or as phases of human behavior. The Relational Approach takes a third position: the behavior *of* organizations is neither a super-individual entity nor reducible to individual behaviors. *It is the patterned, institutional expression of the relational field that constitutes the organization as a unit*.

Meadows (1970: 213-215) describes institutional behavior as clustering and clumping of collective adjustments forming persisting nodes of social behavior, characterized by accumulation, legitimation, conversion, and reification. This is exactly what the behavior *of* organizations does: it accumulates through repetition of the descriptive signature; it legitimates through normative claims embedded in language; it converts as it adapts; and it tends toward reification as the organization seeks to fix its identity.

## 2. The Four-Strand Architecture

The Relational Approach's research architecture captures the full relational loop between the behavior of organizations and stakeholder behavior (Zamaros, 2011a: 24-26). The diagram below represents this structure.

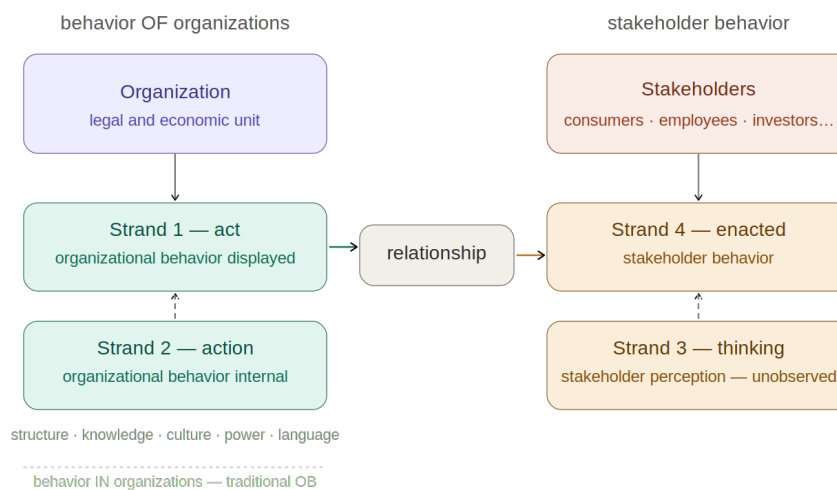


Figure 1. The Relational Approach: behavior of organizations (left), relationship (centre), stakeholder behavior (right). Strand 2 generates Strand 1 as act; Strand 3 generates Strand 4 as enacted behavior.

Strand 1 is the behavior *of* the organization as displayed act: advertising, official communiques, websites, public documents. Strand 2 is the behavior of the organization as internally driven action: value descriptions, structure, leadership and management styles, cohesion tactics. Strand 3 is the way stakeholders and wider communities think of the organization in terms of its behavior, activities, and products: this thinking is not yet expressed and has no behavioral indicators, but it mediates between what the organization projects and what stakeholders do. Strand 4 is the way stakeholders and wider communities behave, as a result of thinking and relative to having interpreted organizational acts: opinion polls, AGM behaviors, press reports, investor confidence, consumer attitudinal research (Zamaros, 2011a: 25-26).

The relationship between organization and stakeholder can be qualified as positive, close, durable, resilient, or strong; problematic, brittle, dysfunctional, fragile, rocky, or unstable; or inexistent, broken, estranged, or shattered (Zamaros, 2017: 88). The relational approach's central tenet is that *organizations and their stakeholders relate behaviorally in an interdependent manner that is mutually beneficial*: a situation

devoid of a center for identity construction that is also a center of power to impose on the other the constructed identity and its materialization (ibid.: 87).

### ***3. How Behavior OF Organizations Shapes Behavior IN Organizations***

The behavior *of* organizations is not the product of internal dynamics alone. It is also their condition. The institutional posture the organization adopts outwardly sets the framework within which leaders lead, managers manage, structures form, cultures emerge, and power operates inside the organization. A prospector organization does not merely happen to employ innovative, risk-tolerant leaders. Its institutional posture as a prospector requires those internal behaviors: the behavior of the organization selects, rewards, and reproduces the behaviors in the organization that are consistent with its outward-facing identity. The cohesion forces of structure, knowledge, culture, power, and language (Zamaros, 2011a: 23-24) are the internal expression of the institutional behavior the organization projects outward.

### ***4. How Behavior OF Organizations Informs Stakeholder Behavior: Zara***

Zara illustrates the architecture precisely. Zara's institutional behavior is that of an analyzer-prospector: it maintains core positions while remaining alert to new opportunities, and it projects a dynamic, fashionable, stimulating identity. Relative to shoppers, Zara's institutional behavior attracts deliberate shoppers, and the relationship is strong. Relative to employees, the same institutional behavior, with its demand for speed, flexibility, and relentless responsiveness to market change, meets calculating employee behaviors shaped by the power asymmetries of fast-fashion employment, producing a rocky relationship. The same behavior of the organization lands differently depending on which relational position the stakeholder occupies. This is the asymmetry that the relational approach makes visible and that traditional OB, focused on behavior in the organization, systematically misses.

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## **Part III: Consequences for Other Concepts**

Once the behavior *of* organizations is established as the primary object of analysis, eight classical concepts of organizational behavior require reframing. In each case the movement is from essentialism to un-essentialism: from the view that concepts name

fixed properties of things to the view that they name positions in relational fields shaped by and shaping the institutional behavior of the organization.

### ***1. Organizational Identities: Not Essential but Un-essential***

Essentialist identities are constructed through discourses that highlight fixed features considered unchanged in time: the assumption is that one simply is (*être*). Un-essential identities are premised on difference and change: they are constantly becoming (*devenir*). Situational and contingency accounts exemplify this: a leader's role evolves according to the follower one is related to; a manager copes with market turbulence. *The Relational Approach adopts un-essentialism.* Organizational identities are not fixed properties of persons or organizations; *they are outcomes of relational processes sustained by language, disputed by power, and shaped by the institutional behavior the organization projects outward.* Identity is a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall, in Zamaros, 2011a).

### ***2. Leadership: Not Traditionally Conceived, but Multitype and Un-essentialist***

Leadership is typically studied under three guises (Zamaros, 2017: 23): as it pertains to individuals proper, person leaders, through trait, information processing, and style theories; between individuals, juridical and discursive leaders, through transactional, transformational, and followership approaches; and as individuals behave under particular circumstances, contingent leaders, through contingency and path-goal approaches. Hede's (2001: 2) Integrated Multi-Style Model recognizes that real-life managers exercise leadership across multiple behavioral dimensions simultaneously. Mollazadeh et al. (2018) confirm the proliferation of new leadership theories resisting reduction to any single type.

From the relational standpoint, the relevant question is not which leadership style is most effective in general, but which leadership behaviors are required by the institutional behavior of the organization. A prospector organization requires innovative, risk-tolerant, horizon-scanning leaders. A defender organization requires protective, process-oriented, consolidating leaders. Leadership effectiveness depends on whether the relational conditions exist for the discourse to summon followers: whether authority, credibility, and constancy are in place in the eyes of those one seeks to lead (Zamaros, 2012: 46).

### **3. Management: Not as Praxis, but as Concern in Weak and Strong Forms**

Understanding management requires examining what management is about: summarizing arguments made about management into key concerns, the unifying theme underpinning their discursive signature (Zamaros, 2003: 131). A concern is understood in its weak form as the focus of management activity as daily business, and in its strong form as worry, the prime attention of the manager in situations of crisis or hyper-turbulence (Zamaros, 2017). Six types of concern are identifiable (Zamaros, 2003: 138-152; 2017: 36-44): rational, focusing on processes, figures, and tasks; turbulent, focusing on the business environment; cultural, focusing on unity and uniformity; emotional, focusing on people's perceptions; power, focusing on politics; and discursive, focusing on describing and imaging. Each concern is conditioned by the institutional behavior of the organization. Management as concern is the internal expression of the organizational institutional posture.

### **4. Structure: Not Linear as in a Chart, but Fluid as Relationships Are**

Organizational structure is the legal and formal pattern of interactions and coordination designed to link the tasks of individuals and groups in achieving organizational goals (Zamaros, 2011a: 43). Legal constraints determine what governance structure is required. Functional constraints determine coordination through formalization, span of control, number of hierarchical levels, and degree of centralization versus delegation (ibid.: 44). But under the relational approach, organizational structures premised on organizational autonomy are fluid and changing in the manner that relationships evolve on a daily basis: a dynamic that organizes relationships in an incomplete manner, bringing individuals to seek ways to find common threads, to communicate in a *mise-en-commun* (ibid.: 48). The organizational chart is the act, the crystallized form of the institutional behavior; the relational process is the action, the ongoing dynamic that the institutional behavior both enables and constrains.

### **5. Knowledge: Not Summative, but Acquaintative and Experiential**

The summative view gathers and collects information in the manner of piling up encyclopedias: the more an organization knows, the more successful it (thinks it) can be (Zamaros, 2011a: 48). Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance, being directly aware of a thing as it is, and knowledge by description, a thing given by

means of a description independently of its presence (in Zamaros, 2011a: 49), points toward a more adequate account. With it, the Relational Approach goes further: the very fact of forgetting attests to the non-complete nature of knowledge. Knowledge is more appropriately viewed as action in the process of completion but never complete. The relevant question is not what one knows but how one knows, how one comes to know, and how to deal with the flow of changing knowledge (ibid.: 49-50). The knowledge regime in the organization is shaped by what the behavior of the organization as a unit demands to know.

### ***6. Power: Not as Source for Subordination, but as Constructive and Creating Opportunities***

The classical views treat power as the ability to get others to do what they would not otherwise do (Dahl, in Lukes, 2005) or as control over decision-making that affects others (Bachrach and Baratz, in Lukes, 2005). Both treat power as primarily a mechanism of subordination. The Relational Approach proposes that power is the perceived manner of doing that attests to a way of thinking: it is at the essence of a relation (Zamaros, online 2021: 4). Unlike cultural aspects of power, which are contextual, relational power is trans-contextual, it crosses and reshapes contextual delimitations. *Power in this relational sense is generative, not merely restrictive.* The behavior of the organization exercises power over behavior in the organization by setting the institutional frame within which internal power relations play out.

### ***7. Culture: Not Corporate and Imposed, but an Emergent Way of Thinking and Doing***

The structural-functionalist mythology of culture treats it as a managerial tool: fix the culture, and performance follows. Top-down imposition of a desirable culture makes collaboration contrived and values imposed from above. Empirical findings consistently confirm that corporate culture as a management tool has not been as impressive as one has been led to think. Cultures cannot be created by management decree: personnel resist subjectification, alternative subcultures emerge, and the gap between management-encoded and employee-decoded culture is rarely bridged (Zamaros, 2011a). *Culture should be seen as a variable way of perceiving, thinking, and doing*, hence open, plural, changing, mobile, and contextual. Organizational culture is an emergent outcome of the relational encounters that the behavior of the organization as an institutional unit makes possible and constrains.

### **8. Communication: Not as Exchange, but as Mise-en-Commun**

The transmission model places undue emphasis on what is exchanged rather than what meanings are exchanged, treating communication as the exchange of words and sentences whose meaning is assumed to be known beforehand. Communication should be seen as *the attempt to find or establish a commonality*, that is a *mise-en-commun*. Communication occurs if and only if the organization and its stakeholders have something in common and this is not only known but also understood as such (Zamaros, 2017). The behavior of the organization as a unit is always already a communicative act: it stakes a claim to identity and legitimacy by means of its descriptive signature. Whether stakeholders share the common ground the organization attempts to establish, or contest it, or ignore it, determines the nature of the relationship between them.

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## **Part IV: Consequences for Research**

The research architecture of the Relational Approach follows directly from the distinction between behavior of and behavior in organizations. Its four strands define what is to be studied; its six data tools define how. The two are not sequential but paired: each tool is calibrated to one or more strands, and the choice of tool is already a theoretical commitment about what kind of organizational behavior is being approached.

**Strand 1** concerns the behavior of the organization as displayed act — the publicly observable institutional presentation of the organization to its stakeholders. Its sources are advertising, official communiques, websites, and public documents. Data Tool 1, organizational discourse analysis (Grant and Iedema, 2004: 8), is its primary instrument: the study of how language becomes manifest as talk, language, or semiosis. Documents to be analyzed include mission statements, vision and value descriptions, registers of commerce, memos, correspondence, official communiques, websites, and advertisements. Linguistic aspects to be analyzed include dominant discourses linked to organizational priorities and linguistic idiosyncrasies particular to the organization by culture, history, or law. Discourse analysis of Strand 1 material captures the descriptive signature the organization projects outward — the act as institutional claim to identity.

**Strand 2** concerns the behavior of the organization as internally driven action — the cohesion forces, leadership and management styles, structure, and knowledge practices that generate the outward act. Its sources are value descriptions and quality systems, organizational structure, leadership and management styles, and cohesion tactics. Data Tools 2 through 6 all serve Strand 2, each targeting a specific cohesion force or internal behavioral dimension. Data Tool 2, the self-directed and other-directed research approach (Zamaros, 2003: 39, 55), provides the foundational methodological orientation. The self-directed approach captures the researcher's own experience as part of the phenomenon — inner arcs of attention — making experience itself the object of inquiry. The other-directed approach studies the behavior of others as a series of acts from which action is deduced — outer arcs of attention — placing the researcher at a cognitive and physical distance from the object. All subsequent tools operate under the other-directed orientation. Data Tool 3 establishes leadership behaviors by choosing the guise of research, the associated leadership theories, and the associated data collection tools: for example, contingency guise, path-goal theory, path-goal survey (Zamaros, 2017: 32). Data Tool 4 establishes management behaviors by identifying dominant concerns through the management concerns survey (Zamaros, 2017: 44ff), combined with the related leadership survey indicated by the dominant concern identified. Data Tool 5 captures organizational structure — who is who in the organization, how members relate to one another and to those outside — and organizational knowledge — how the organization comes to know, how it processes information, and how it deals with changing knowledge. Data Tool 6 captures organizational culture and power through the open-self framework survey (Zamaros and Zamaros, 2003: 33), identifying the ideal and actual conceptualizations of occupational identities, examining how employers and employees use power resources to close the gap between ideal and actual identities, and identifying antagonism as the visible aspect of discursive exchange. Together, Tools 3 through 6 map the internal action that Strand 2 is concerned with: they make observable, through structured data collection, the cohesion forces that drive the institutional behavior the organization presents outward.

**Strand 3** concerns the way stakeholders and wider communities think of the organization in terms of its behavior, activities, and products. This thinking is not yet expressed or may never be expressed. It has no behavioral indicators and therefore no data tool can directly capture it. Strand 3 is the perceptual process that mediates

between what the organization projects and what stakeholders do: it is the unobservable link in the relational loop. Its analytical function is to remind the researcher that between the act the organization displays and the behavior the stakeholder enacts, there is a process of interpretation that is real but inaccessible to direct observation.

**Strand 4** concerns the way stakeholders and wider communities behave as a result of having interpreted organizational acts. Its sources are secondary data — opinion polls, press reports, investor confidence indicators, statistical measures — and primary data, including AGM behaviors and consumer attitudinal research. Data Tool 2 returns here in its other-directed mode: stakeholder behavior is studied as a series of enacted acts from which the underlying interpretation — Strand 3 thinking — is deduced. The researcher observes, surveys, and analyzes stakeholder behaviors as publicly observable acts, inferring from them the perceptual processes that generated them.

The architecture as a whole is not sequential but simultaneous. Strands 1 and 2 concern the organization as actor; Strands 3 and 4 concern the stakeholder as respondent. The relationship between them — the center of the relational diagram — is what the full deployment of all six tools, across all four strands, seeks to qualify: whether the behavior of the organization and the behavior of its stakeholders constitute a positive, problematic, or inexistent relationship, and what the internal and discursive conditions of that relationship are.

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## Conclusion

*The behavior of organizations is institutional behavior:* the uniform, patterned, outward-facing action of the organization as a unit that simultaneously shapes the behaviors of people and teams inside the organization and informs the behaviors of stakeholders who interact with it from outside. This three-level structure, the behavior of organizations shaping behavior in organizations and triggering stakeholder behavior, is the distinctive contribution of the Relational Approach to the study of organizational behavior.

From this starting point, eight classical concepts are reframed. Organizational identities are not essential being but un-essential becoming. Leadership is not a heroic

property of persons but a multitype relational position shaped by the institutional behavior of the organization. Management is not universal praxis but concern in weak and strong forms conditioned by the institutional posture. Structure is not a linear chart but a fluid relational dynamic crystallized at a given moment. Knowledge is not summative accumulation but acquaintative and experiential action in process. Power is not primarily a source of subordination but a generative, trans-contextual relational force. Culture is not a corporate monoculture to be imposed but an emergent way of thinking and doing that resonates with or contests the institutional behavior of the organization. Communication is not exchange but *mise-en-commun*.

The research architecture generated by this framework studies all four strands simultaneously, using six data tools that capture the behavior of the organization as act and as action, the perceptual processes of stakeholders, and the behavioral outcomes those processes generate.

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