Towards Relational Spatiality: Space, Relation and Simmel’s Modernity

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Abstract
By reconsidering Simmel’s concept of space, this article introduces space into the epistemological field of relational sociology to construct a relational spatiality based on relational sociology, demonstrating the continuity between spatial and relational approaches in the study of modernity. It first explains Simmel’s relational epistemology and the metropolis, and then constructs the relational spatiality vis-a-vis the two main viewpoints of contemporary relational sociology. Space is relational in nature because it is defined by iterative interactions between actors, which go beyond visible geographical cognition to sociologically express the living process people experience in fragmentary forms of social space. Furthermore, this relational spatiality, combined with Michel Foucault’s discourse, reveals the process attribute of space from the perspective of relational sociology, showing the possibility of a spatial epistemology based on relational sociology.

Keywords
Georg Simmel, metropolis, modernity, relation, relational sociology, space

Introduction
A persistent theme in Georg Simmel’s theory of modernity is the significance of space in social and cultural life. As Frisby (1985: 71) notes, Simmel was the first sociologist to explicitly reveal ‘the social significance of spatial contexts for human interaction’ – an insight increasingly emphasised in urban studies and feminist scholarship over the past two decades. Space, as ‘a fundamental dimension of society’, not only reflects but also expresses society, and is ‘inseparable from the overall process of social organisation and social change’ (Castells, 2002: 11). Borden (1997: 313) traces the relationship between geographical space and modernity in Simmel’s writings, arguing that space is ‘embedded in the continual reproduction of society and cities’ and ‘beyond the physical’. Massey
Hopkins (2019: 937), reviewing the feminist concept of intersectionality, suggests using ‘mutually constitutive forms’ to study social oppression in geography, rather than only ‘single axes of difference’, and embraces the contribution of Black feminists. Today’s social geography connects spatial analysis with multiple identities, relationality, social context, power relations, gender, complexity, social justice and inequalities (e.g. Hancock, 2016; Hopkins, 2019; Noble, 2009) and is becoming a central issue in the field (e.g. Browne et al., 2009; Harding and Blokland-Potters, 2014: 183–196; Oswin, 2008: 90; Watson, 2010: 237).

However, the space concept remains incompletely developed by contemporary relational sociology, despite its rapid recent development. Notwithstanding criticism of traditional epistemology of sociology, a relational spatial epistemology informed by relational sociology has remained elusive. Research has focused more on Simmel’s concepts of social form, number and exchange (e.g. Crossley, 2011; Emirbayer, 1997; Liu, 2021), rather than space. Nevertheless, diverse relational sociology scholars have absorbed Simmel’s views and traced the development of his relational approach (e.g. Crossley, 2011; Dépelteau, 2018; Papilloud, 2018; Pyyhtinen, 2010, 2018). Relational sociology reflects a close theoretical affinity with Simmel’s understanding of society as a relational interaction and network(s) between human actors (Crossley, 2011; Dépelteau and Powell, 2013a, 2013b) and as ‘always in process – always in a state of becoming’ (Crossley, 2018: 482), in fluid processes rather than static substances.

This article fills the theoretical gap in spatial study connecting relational sociology to classical sociologists. Simmel (1903) delineated five aspects of space. Exclusivity is the process of transforming physical space into sociological space, shaping the empty external environment as an active living space imbued with specific meaning for people and thereby producing a social form within the exclusive scope of their space. Boundaries connect space and social interactions: ‘The reciprocal unity and functional relationship of every element to every other one gains its spatial expression in the enclosing boundary’ (Simmel, 1997a: 141). The boundary creates and excludes the other while simultaneously enclosing itself. Fixing the content of social forms, or manifesting the content of people’s real lives as stabilisation, is achieved by physically defining the space of activity; fixity is also expressed by the ‘pivot-point’ at which ‘an object of interest’ is fixed, creating ‘certain forms of relationships that group around it’ (Simmel 1997a: 146). Distance reveals the tension of a relationship in a space – one ‘dependent upon the amount of capacity for abstraction’ (Simmel, 1997a: 152). Physical and social distance exacerbate each other, and the boundary between inner and outer spheres cannot be clearly delimited – it ‘never loses its relativity’ (Simmel, 1997a: 163, emphasis added). Boundaries thus can also be considered as constantly changing and mutually defined relationships rather than absolute judgements. Movement gives space a dynamic character: ‘A deeply grounded relationship exists between movement in space and the differentiation of social and personal elements of existence’ (Simmel, 1997a: 161). This facilitates the mutual definition of people and spaces.

This article suggests a preliminary research agenda for the concept of space in contemporary relational sociology. It first briefly explains Simmel’s relational epistemology of society and then analyses in detail modernity and the metropolis in Simmel’s work, thereby constructing relational spatiality from the two main viewpoints of relational sociology.
Space is then a sociological concept constantly produced through iterative relational interaction rather than a static or objective entity or geographical premise. Reconsidering Simmel’s work on space helps understand the continuity between spatial and relational approaches to modernity and helps theorists study social spaces via relational sociology.¹

**Simmel’s Relational Epistemology**

Simmel maintains that society is fundamentally relational. Early, in 1890, Simmel insisted that ‘society is not an entity fully enclosed within itself, an absolute entity, any more than the human individual. Compared with the real interactions of the parts, it is only secondary, only the result’ (see Frisby, 1985: 54). In *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2007a), he refers to this sociological approach as a ‘relativism’ – that is, a relationalism reflecting that social reality is made up of relations and their interactions, resting on the process of attraction/repulsion between social actors. As he explains,

Relativism strives to dissolve into a relation every absolute that presents itself, and proceeds in the same way with the absolute that offers itself as the ground for this new relation. This is a never-ending process whose heuristic eliminates the alternative: either to deny or to accept the absolute. (Simmel, 2007a: 168)

This reflects the epistemological basis of Simmel’s conception of modernity: the social world is characterised by plurality, difference, reference and variation. In society, everything interacts with everything else, in a perpetually changing relationship between every point and every other force in the world. This impressively resonates with the fundamental view of contemporary relational sociology. Simmel believes society is formed not by people merely adjacent to each other, but only when people enter a mutual relationship of reciprocal effects, directly or indirectly: in this ongoing process of interactions, people live ‘with each other or against each other or through each other’ (Simmel, 1992: 18; also see Frisby, 1990). Society is either relational or nothing.

The relational approach also centres on the processual characteristic of social conceptualisation, wherein subtle social threads connect actors dynamically and diversely. Society, ‘as its life is constantly being realised, always signifies that individuals are connected by mutual influence and determination’ (Simmel, 1950b: 10). The continuous process of socialisation – social formation – produces society. Society is ‘not a “substance,” nothing concrete, but an event: it is the function of receiving and effecting the fate and development of one individual by the other’ (Simmel, 1950b: 11). Therefore, *society* constitutes a complex web of associated actors – ‘socially formed human material’ – and the relational sum of forms by virtue, by which society indeed becomes possible (Simmel, 1909: 301; also see Frisby, 1990: 44–45). This determines Simmel’s understanding of modernity: only through the social interactions and experiences of social actors can we accurately grasp modernity.

**Place of Modernity: Metropolis**

Based on his relational epistemology, Simmel’s emphasis, especially on metropolises, reflects the mutual construction of modernity and space. He did not seek to observe the operating
mechanism of society top–down but to delve into it from every sensory experience, street, metropolis and mentality in an effort to interpret the life condition – the space modern people inhabit (Frisby, 1985, 1994; Pyyhtinen, 2018: 52, 182). In this spatial picture, the psychological foundation of the metropolis’s spiritual life is constituted by rapid, continuous tension between the inner impression of ‘the subjective spirit’ and the external pressure of ‘the objective spirit’. The former refers to ‘the ability to embrace, use, and feel culture’ (Allan, 2013: 241); the latter, contrariwise, separates elements of culture from the individuals and groups who create them, giving them their own life (see also Habermas and Deflem, 1996). Simmel conceives the metropolis sociologically as a space comprising complex networks of relations and interactions, suffused with the nervous tension of modern life.

The metropolis accelerates the division of labour: production, specialisation and differentiation of work processes, separating individuals from their produce and endowing it with objective independence (Simmel, 2007a: 1248). Simmel (1997d) provides a vivid spatial expression that the architecture of the trade exhibition, as a transitional space, expresses the denial of eternity pursued by traditional architecture, epitomising the fleeting transience of the monetary economy and its processes of production and consumption. Through space, the architect’s building design – an end-to-end cycle reflecting modernity’s treatment of money as an end – transforms the ephemeral, fragmentary goods in the exhibition into an eternity of forms:

they have taken the point last reached in architecture as their starting-point, as if only this arrangement would allow its meaning to emerge fully against a differently coloured background and yet be seen as part of a single tradition. (Simmel, 1997d: 257)

In short, the metropolis is a space that connects workers to all commodities while separating them from any one product.

Second, the metropolis represents the extreme concentration of the mature monetary economy. As an intermediary, money is deeply embedded in the relational content of the metropolitan space: ‘the common denominator of all value [and relationships], and their in-comparability’ (Simmel, 1997b: 178). Thus, Simmel (1997b: 176) concludes, ‘the metropolis has always been the seat of the money economy’. Metropolitans ‘share a matter-of-fact attitude in dealing with men and with things’ due to their intrinsic connection of the ‘money economy and the dominance of intellect’ (Simmel, 1997b: 176):

The contents of life – as they become more and more expressible in money which is absolutely continuous, rhythmical and indifferent to any distinctive form – are, at it were, split up into so many small parts; their rounded totalities are so shattered that any arbitrary synthesis and formation of them is possible. It is this process that provides the material for modern individualism and the abundance of its products. (Simmel, 2007a: 664)

The emphasis on intellect and reason creates an inevitable distance between individuals and ‘the jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication’ (Simmel, 2007a: 1308), much as money separates producer and product. Urban residents increasingly use rationality to protect themselves from the constant shock produced by rapid changes in the metropolis. As Simmel (1997b: 176) explains,
the metropolitan type of man – which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants – develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. […] He reacts with his head instead of his heart.

*Intellectualism* and a blasé attitude are the two strategies of modern life based on the spatial characteristics of the metropolis. Their direct mental result is indifference and unbearable neurasthenia, such as agoraphobia – excessive anxiety and insecurity, and fear of leaving the familiar. Simmel views such behaviour as a psychological response to over-stimulation on one hand and a response to the insignificance of meaning and value in the monetary economy on the other. Together, expansion of the monetary economy and dominance of rationality produce an exaggerated subjectivism – the psychological expression of the excessive objectiveness of modern culture.

Another consequence of this complicity between metropolis and monetary economy is the construction of the modern concept of time – defined by its computability, which requires ‘the strictest punctuality’ to combat the ‘inextricable chaos’ produced by the densely populated and confined space of the metropolis. In the past, work schedules were linked to events, and life was regarded as an ongoing process of daily occurrences. In contrast, the modern concept is of time-transformed life divided into carefully calibrated numbers – a transition facilitated by ‘the universal diffusion of pocket watches’ (Simmel, 1997b: 177). Thus, the process of daily life is transformed into a static sequence of numeric scales, enmeshing people in the scale of money. Simmel (2007a: 1212) argues that numerical calculation enables money to ‘accomplish in a much sharper and more exact manner in which commercial transactions contributed to the accuracy of values and demands’ – ‘the relationship of the elements of life with a precision, a reliability in the determination of parity and disparity, an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements’. Thus, the chaos of the crowded metropolis is precisely a testament to the thick density of relationships in a space controlled by intellect and calculation. The logic of individual time criss-crosses in ‘the busy space of urban streetscape’ (Frisby, 2012: 8). The events constituting the inner meaning of people’s lives disappear, replaced by fleeting moments of modern time organised as one numerical scale after another, rather than a continuum.

Third, with large numbers of people concentrated in the same space, the metropolis provides the locus of modernity; its population density qualitatively changes how people experience and interact with one another. Simmel (2007a: 620) articulates this principle through the threshold:

The increase has an upper limit with regard to this effect, so that the simple continuation of an increase in the stimulus beyond this threshold results in the disappearance of the sensation. This points to the most extreme form of discrepancy between cause and effect which is brought about by the mere quantitative increase of the cause, namely, the direct transformation of the effect into its opposite.

Division of labour and specialisation force metropolitans to make vast functional connections with more and more people (see Deflem, 2003). They are spatially concentrated
in a complex, dense network of relationships, dealing with constant ‘rapid crowding’ of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’ (Simmel, 1997b: 175, emphasis added). In contrast to rural life, confronted with potential interaction, metropolitans protect themselves by choosing indifference. This involves more than avoiding eye contact with strangers; the urban eye is both ‘highly mobile and yet motionless’, ‘alert but not disturbed’, ‘encompassing everything, but itself never grasped’ (Frisby, 2001: 146; Mattenklott, 1983: 147).

Originally reflected by the spatial concentration of relational density, the expansion of metropolitan space indicates the potential concentration of more complex relationships (see also Borden, 1997: 320). Under these conditions, Simmel (1997b: 179–180) proposes that the ‘bodily proximity and narrowness’ of life in metropolitan space produces a spatial understanding of mental distance, resulting in social isolation, through which individuals attempt to protect themselves from the shocks of modern life. In other words, the development of the metropolis involves both the continuous expansion of social circles and the intensification of negative over-individualism and loneliness. This supports Scott’s argument about Simmel’s intersecting social circles: that with increasing social differentiation, moderns have memberships in diverse groups and ranks, facilitating their liberation through migration between intersecting circles; on the other hand, they are more and more trapped by blasé indifference at the level of personality and individualism at that of ideas (Scott, 2009: 271–274). Although metropolitans increasingly integrate remote spaces, they also increasingly physically and spiritually separate from the close space in which they live: ‘We frequently do not even know by sight those who have been our neighbours for years’ (Simmel, 1997b: 179). Physically, metropolitan life is marked by the gradual disappearance of medium distance: urbanites travel between and learn about major cities and learn much about them but little about the spaces between. This is especially apparent in contemporary information society, where cyberspace has transcended geographic space; people attach intense emotions to distant events but can be indifferent to or fearful of what is nearby. The relationships that once surrounded nearby spaces are dissolved and reorganised as calculation problems, solvable by rational calculation.

The division between workers, products and consumers requires constant stimuli and entertainment to combat the tedium of metropolitan life: modern individuals can only produce this kind of stimulation and happiness by themselves: ‘Modern man’s one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labour will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous impressions, and the ever faster and more colourful change of excitement’ (Simmel 1997d: 256). This stimulus ‘does not at all lie in the contents of such behaviour, but rather in its form of “being different”, of standing out in a striking manner and thereby attracting attention’ (Simmel, 1997b: 183). The confined space containing a plethora of objects and people – its proximity, its intensity, its boundaries and its entrance fees demarcating each display space – results in a disorientating cycle of stimulus, tension and mental fatigue – a mass effect on perception which Simmel (1997c: 244) calls ‘a true hypnosis’, which creates ‘a new synthesis between the principles of external stimulus and the practical functions of objects, and thereby tak[ing] this aesthetic superadditum to its highest level’ (Simmel, 1997d: 257). Finally, ‘where only one message gets through to one’s consciousness: the
idea that one is here to amuse oneself’ (Simmel, 1997d: 255, emphasis added; see also Simmel, 1997h). Money and fashion become the central pursuit of modern life (Simmel, 1923, 1997b: 179, 1997g: 192), as a psychological result of the space; and this widening gap between subjective and objective cultures expresses the close relationship between the metropolitan spatial form and modernity. The metropolis is not simply a spatial entity with sociological consequences, but a sociological entity formed in space.

Therefore, the metropolis constitutes the spatial expression of the internal operation of the highly developed division of labour and money economy in the field of consumption, providing fleeting, superficial, but stimulating excitement through its spatial form. In other words, modernity can be understood psychologically as a relational social experience by combining the spatial experience of the metropolis with inner life. Simmel (1911: 34–35, emphases added) defines modernity as the reactions of our inner life, by which we experience and interpret the social world, and ‘as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of motion’. This reflects Baudelaire’s (2010: 17) definition of modernity as ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable’. These explanations, based on the sensitive spatial distance in the mental and social dimensions of how the spatiality of the inner and outer world is shaped, show variations in the gap between subjective and objective culture, which are both the cause and result of the psychology of modernity. As the birthplace of modernity, the metropolis constitutes an interactive space of social relations, crystallised and digitised by the monetary economy. The interaction between metropolitan residents and the spatial concentration of people with different interests are intertwined, forming a multifaceted, complex network of relationships.

**Relational Spatiality (I): Beyond Physical Boundaries**

Relational spatiality benefits from Simmel’s positioning of metropolitan space, which reveals the first result of combining space and the epistemology of contemporary relational sociology. Relational spatiality refers to the structural focus of the psychological and behavioural interactions of modern people in the metropolis. The concentration of people in metropolitan spaces entails the concentration of relationships, with direct interaction between two people replaced by more complex networks of relationships and reciprocity. Metropolitan is dependent ‘not only on each other, but also on the whole society’ (Pyyhtinen, 2018: 80). This is both the cause and the result of modernity:

The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is this functional extension beyond its physical boundaries. [. . .] Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area, comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially. [. . .] a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its immediate confines. (Simmel, 1997b: 182)

First, the space of a city is not limited to its actual, perceivable size and density, but is the synthesis of relationships in a reciprocal process. This conceptualisation of space requires breaking through the physical objectivity of sensory impression – of seeing is believing
– and recognising the abstract, dynamic arrangement of production and interaction, and the spatial image of the metropolitan mental life driven by the psychological distancing of objective and subjective culture. Through ‘intellectual, economic, and political waves’, the spatiality of the city can transcend its geographic boundaries to extend across the whole country, so that local forces and interests become mutually related and ‘grow together with those of the whole’ (Simmel, 1908: 462, 1997a: 139). The socioeconomic conditions of metropolises also spill over the physical definition of their limits, transcend this visible expanse, convert quantitative measurement to relational analysis and greatly expand the scope of understanding and identification. The decisive nature of the metropolis, according to Simmel (1997b: 181–182), is the overflow of its inner life by waves into a more far-flung area and field.

Based on this, the world can be concentrated in a single point that reflects the entire world: for instance, world fairs ‘form a momentary centre of world civilisation, assembling the products of the entire world in a confined space as if in a single picture’ (Simmel, 1997d: 256). This spatial form shows how a metropolis represents itself as a model of ‘the manufacturing forces of world culture’ through its own production, and broadens to ‘the totality of cultural production’ (Simmel, 1997d: 256). In other words, urban space needs to be defined in the wider context of world space and its more diverse and heterogeneous cultural context; any delimited place is actually a more obvious form of the abstract social space and discourse.

Simmel associates the trader with the mobility of space and the characteristics of relational intention in the context of social exchange (Tausch). This modern form of commodity exchange highlights the influence of visual possibilities on the social conditions of modernity. A mature monetary economy requires an exchange process that transcends vision and compensates for this loss by continually increasing stimuli in a limited area. The metropolis’s spatial size enables specialisation and division of labour based on monetary economy. In this space, the qualitative differences in personality are pushed to ‘an arithmetic problem, to fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas’ (Simmel, 1997b: 177).

According to this, Simmel shows how space constitutes the creative product of human interaction and reciprocity in relation to the surrounding environment. This interaction involves both physical movement and the spiritual perception of the outside world, existing between the inner and outer worlds. As the concentration-point of modern social relations, the metropolis is both a symbolic and substantive site of modernity itself. Simmel (1997c) illustrates how metropolitan individuals cycle between nervousness and neurasthenia due to vertigo induced by display of goods. More importantly, this form of exchange infers a spatial condition based not on direct proximity and vision but on an abstract, extensive relational spatiality.

Relational sociology understands society as ‘processes, constituted by flows of action or interaction, which operate immanently to the life of individuals rather than on a separate order of reality’ (Dépelteau and Powell, 2013a: 2). This is also how Simmel understands society and its consequences for modernity. The relation-based spatial perspective identified by this article therefore refers to the understanding of space as the expression of relations rather than as a purely objective entity. Spatiality then implies the spatial experience of modernity, not just physical qualities of space that emerge in modern society.
The Stranger

To visualise relational spatiality, we can combine the *betweenness* of monetary economics and the flowing characteristic of space in ‘The Stranger’ (Simmel, 1950a). The ‘stranger’ belongs to a system or group but is not strongly attached to it: his position is both in *between* and the unity of the two, as the ‘stranger’ has not belonged to the group from the beginning, but brings new meaning to the group, forming an interdependent, interactive relationship with it (Simmel, 1950a: 402). This reflects Simmel’s belief that spatial relations are both the condition and symbol of human relations. Situated in a group, the stranger retains a *distance* from it that reveals a ‘specific form of interaction’, showing the relationship between social actors and the positioning of groups:

The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. (Simmel: 1950a: 402)

The stranger first possesses relativity: exclusion and alienation on one hand, and close association and interaction on the other. The trader settles in a certain place, satisfying the needs of those in that space and promoting the self-positioning of the group. Nonetheless, as a stranger, the trader is always positioned spatially as an intermediary, and can expand boundaries and accommodate more people (Simmel, 1950a: 403). The metropolis becomes the centre of the monetary economy via ‘the multiplicity and concentration’ (Simmel, 1997b: 176) of commercial activities, giving significance to exchange agents. At the same time, the metropolis ‘is supplied almost entirely by production for the market, that is, for entirely unknown purchasers who never personally enter the producer’s actual field of vision’ (Simmel, 1997b: 176). Money ‘fosters a distance between personality and property by mediating between the two’ (Simmel, 1997c: 244). Consequently, commercial trade greatly expands the boundary of this interactive relationship, removing the intimate relationship between people and making possible greater socioeconomic interaction.3 Simmel’s ‘stranger’ is then also a spatial analysis of relationality in a monetary economy.

Second, relational spatiality implies the sociological connotation of space. The stranger possesses a *social* rather than purely physical spatiality: ‘The stranger is by the figurative sense of a life-substance which is fixed [. . .] in an ideal point of the social environment’ (Simmel, 1950a: 403). In other words, the stranger is not necessarily the ‘owner of soil’ (Simmel, 1950a: 403). On the contrary, reliance on ‘intermediary trade’ and ‘pure finance’ gives strangers a spatial fluidity, namely, *mobility*, tightening the connection between the monetary economy and space. Mobility lets strangers form connections with anyone, without the close relationships required by traditional economies (Simmel, 1950a: 403–404). This mobility provides the stranger with an ‘objective’ stance in ‘a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement’ (Simmel, 1950a: 404). This is the objectivity of a *position* given by social distance; it is active rather than passive (Simmel, 1950a: 404). Thus, the boundary of space is loosened further. As Simmel (1997c: 245) explains, ‘this has allowed both a new possibility of development and a new independence from one another’, thereby enabling the
plurality of economic dependencies and individualisation of the modern simultaneously (Simmel, 2007a: 722).

Through relational spatiality, we problematise individual existence as a result of modernity: the epistemological challenge confronting the individual is the experience of the world as a set of spatial events without knowing their precise meaning to the self. Despite ‘the feeling of being surrounded by an immense number of cultural elements’, these cultural elements are ‘not profoundly meaningful to the individual’ (Simmel, 1997e: 73). Essentially, the understanding of space is not a matter of measurement but of social experience. Space is the sociological coordinate of the relations. In modernity, there is a tension between life experience and space as objective cultural forms. Relationships and objects accumulate such that they can no longer be absorbed by the inner individual. As Simmel (1997a: 150) explains, ‘The individuality, the character of personal uniqueness, as it were, which the location of certain people or groups possesses, hinders or favours in the broadest combinations, the establishment of far-reaching relationships to a variety of other elements.’ From that, we arrive at the relational spatial concept of the individual’s being surrounded by countless cultural events.

**Relational Spatiality (2): Space as Discursive Knowledge**

Most scholars who have connected Simmel and Foucault have not focused on space from a sociological perspective (e.g. Dörr-Backes and Nieder, 1995; Pyyhtinen, 2010; Weinstein and Weinstein, 2013). Given this shortcoming, this section shows that the discursive power of Foucault can benefit relational spatiality to reveal the process attribute of space in relational sociology. This also coincides with the idea of ‘theorising’ as a creative and fruitful ‘method’ for developing sociological concepts discussed by Swedberg (2014). Foucault (1966) argues that only ‘a number of problems and a certain form of knowledge and thoughts’ – but not ‘Man’ – existed before the 19th century. The study of Man is actually ‘a question of nature, truth, movement, order, or representation’, and the production of knowledge results in ‘what has been and still are called the human science’ (Foucault, 1966), which constitutes the theoretical premise of Foucault’s analysis of modern governance of people through the confinement of space. He points out the crucial role of creating and structuring space in body control and visual surveillance. This space is permeated by complex networks of power with various potential and obvious intentions – not a neutral entity, but ‘a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using’ (Foucault, 1977: 143). Therefore, the space in social research is different but specific living worlds constantly in the process of being constructed and produced: only through the construction of interactions of people can space be understood. The essence of space is not simple physical or geographical but more sociological.

According to Foucault (1977), a space is first understood as the dynamic composition of positions occupied by various factors in a series and ‘by the gap that separates it from the other [spaces]’. It constitutes ‘the rank’, not ‘the territory’ (unit of domination) or ‘the place’ (unit of residence), that is, ‘the place one occupies in a classification, the point at which a line and a column intersect, the interval in a series of intervals that one may traverse one after the other’ (1977: 145–146). The spatial locations social actors perceive are not fixed or static, but circulated in a processual network of relations. Here, relational
spatiality can be combined with a similar view to Simmel’s (1977) criticism of historical realism; that is, that historical knowledge does not come from copying what happened in the past, but from some degree of abstraction. There must be as many different perspectives as there are logical premises, each possessing its own explanatory advantages and blind spots. This notion ‘rejects all conclusive forms and complete systems’ (Oakes, 1980: 84; see also Cooper, 2010: 71). Simmel recognises that some sort of re-creation is a necessary condition for the possibility of history (see also Oakes, 1977: 12–14). In other words, the nature of abstraction is distance – a spatial metaphor that forms different perspectives and positions. The definiteness of reality in knowledge is thus relational and heterogeneous, and is relative to the distance from which people observe, understand and experience it. This view supports Foucault’s (1966) criticism that the human sciences do not look for the concrete essence of the individual; absolute knowledge and authenticity are firmly rejected by Simmel, and change to ‘a matter of playfully experimenting with what is known and what is not known’ (Gross, 2012: 426). ‘Experimenting’ means continually trying in a process of betweenness – in becoming rather than being (see also Crossley, 1996).

The question of identity is a suitable example to show the characteristics of relational spatiality. People understand themselves and their relationship with the Other by delineating clear boundaries between themselves and others, just as the existence of a door constructs and communicates the relationship between the inside and the outside. This spatial metaphor that Simmel used, whether physical or psychological, involves both aggression and resistance: ‘Every boundary of this type signifies both a defensive and an offensive stance, or, more correctly perhaps, it is the spatial expression of that uniform relationship between two neighbours for which we have no completely uniform expression’ (Simmel, 1997a: 142). For example, given the metropolitan preoccupation with time and the fixity of space, the metropolis is rarely able to create appropriate jobs or roles for wanderers, resulting in their being considered parasitic by metropolitan settlers (Simmel, 1997a: 168). The city is dominated by settlers, who are also the most direct bearers and defenders of existing metropolitan modernity: ‘Through the calculative nature of money, a new precision, a certainty in the definition of identities and difference, an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements has been brought about in the relations of life elements’ (Simmel, 1997b: 177). In other words, modern objective culture is built on homogenisation and functionally unifying elements. Modern society ‘holds all portions of a highly cultivated state together’ through a combination of education, institutions, and associations, and ‘a tangle of threads leading to absolute or partial centres’ (Simmel, 1997a: 165). In this way, the settlers, with their precise and practical space–time view, colonise the metropolitan space and expel wanderers from the central discourse. As Silver and Brocic (2019: 120–121) argue, rather than a free-floating description of the schematic configuration of ‘the poor person’, we have ‘poor people’ integrated into consciousness as a recognisable social role. At the same time, metropolitan settlers map the wanderers in the interest of ‘their own self-preservation’ (Simmel, 1997a: 168). Essentially, the fixed group tries to remove – or, as Foucault (1971) argues, silence – any instance in which individuals are spatially out of place due to ‘the travel back and forth of its individual elements’ (Simmel, 1997a: 168). The rebellion of the wanderer against modern society is based precisely on the fact that they are excluded from the central discourse of modern society.
For this reason, relational spatiality focuses more on the mutual interaction of various spatial forms, rather than static structuration. ‘The sociology of space’ (Simmel, 1997a) emphasises that human beings are so diverse in form and motive that they cannot be treated as sharing the same origin or series of extensions. Similarly, Foucault (1966) also claims that the ‘human is but a kind of glittering surface on the top of large formal systems, and our thought must now rebuild those formal systems on which floats every so often the foam and image of man’s own existence’. Foucault’s ‘glittering surface’ can be considered the knowledge-discourse version of Simmel’s analysis of modernity. In Foucault’s case, the grand philosophical concept is no longer the focus of study, but a more real and concrete operation of the ideas embodied in institutional spaces, such as prisons, schools and hospitals. This closely resembles Simmel, who did not intend to study space as a grand transcendental subject, focusing instead on various forms of space to illustrate the characteristics of modernity, such as the metropolis, trade exhibition, bridge and door. As Simmel (1997b: 177) explains,

From each point on the surface of existence – however closely attached to the surface alone – one may drop a sounding into the depth of the psyche so that all the most banal externalities of life finally are connected with the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life.

As such, the process of interaction between social actors is experienced in different ways of forming space. If Foucault’s analysis of modern disciplinary society is realised through the constructive process of using each kind of area of confinement (Deleuze, 2001), then Simmel expresses the view of space as an ongoing relational interaction along with its various sociological consequences. In other words, by focusing on the various qualities of spatial forms confronted in social interaction, Simmel demonstrates that it is the social interaction that transforms what was previously empty and negative into meaningful space. Space is not inert; rather, the social relationship between different actors and its dynamic process makes space active. This avoids the risk of environmental determinism by transcending a purely geographic paradigm, and thereby contributes to the spatial construction of contemporary relational sociology.

Simmel (1997f: 171) further illustrates this duality of space in the process of being defined through the metaphor of a bridge:

Only to humanity, in contrast to nature, has the right to connect and separate been granted, and in the distinctive manner that one of these activities is always the presupposition of the other. [. . .] things must first be separated from one another in order to be together.

According to this, the concept of separation only makes sense if people want to communicate with each other: ‘If we did not first connect them in our practical thoughts, in our needs and in our fantasy, then the concept of separation would have no meaning’ (Simmel, 1997f: 171). Bridges are ‘a specific human achievement’ (Simmel, 1997f: 171) – an expression of human will. The bridge also extends the use of connection into the incorporeity of space: a bridge exists between the banks of a river. As a spatial metaphor, the bridge reflects the ability of human agency to understand and integrate different fields. On the surface, places such as prisons, cemeteries and mental hospitals are buildings
composed of interrelated substances, their names merely a means of labelling entities in physical space. However, like a mirror, the named place maps the specific intentions of the people who named it (Foucault, 1986: 24). This implies a special relationship between the ‘labelling person’ and ‘place’ – the process by which observation, acceptance, accession, alienation or rejection result in a space becoming a carrier and expression of discourse imagination. The purpose of imagining the construction of a ‘place’ is not to find a reliable registration for the place, but to adjust, confirm and strengthen the dominant position of the labelling person in power relations. Although sociological space is related to natural space, it goes beyond and retains a distance from natural space – ‘above an aggregate of separate natural objects’ (Simmel, 2007b: 25).

In this respect, it is important to recognise that space is constantly in the process of being created relationally. In ‘Bridge and Door’, the door shows that ‘separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act’ (Simmel, 1997f: 172). The door presupposes a finite space, such as a house, which is located in an area selected from infinite space. As a spatial metaphor, the door shows that ‘a piece of space was brought together’ and ‘separated from the whole remaining world’ (Simmel, 1997f: 172). People can open and close the door and choose the side of the boundary to place themselves on. The social actor thus ‘flows forth out of the door from the limitation of isolated separate existence into limitlessness of all possible directions’ (Simmel, 1997a: 168). The space within the boundary and the space outside the boundary intersect via the door. They do not intersect ‘in the dead geometric form of a mere separating wall, but rather as the possibility of a permanent interchange’ (Simmel, 1997f: 172–173). The act of opening or closing a door reflects the will of human beings, and the door, therefore, is the dynamic boundary rather than just a static entrance of the wall. Instead of enclosing walls, people are surrounded by countless intersecting doors, which can also be understood as a spatial manifestation of the omnipresent interactive state of power relations in Foucault’s works.

Accordingly, the various relationships of space are fluid and are mutually defined. This ongoing process involves a multi-level open network of relationships, that is, the relationality of space, and is the life path of iterative interaction. The bridge and door, as Simmel (1997f: 174) emphasises, ‘do not support the merely functional and teleological aspect of our movements as tools; rather, in their form it solidifies, as it were, into immediately convincing plasticity’.

**Conclusion**

Simmel’s space integrates the metropolis with the psychosocial experiences of individuals and is constantly produced and maintained by the interaction of social actors, providing an appropriate epistemological framework for spatial research in contemporary relational sociology. As nearby spaces disappear, the division of labour and the monetary economy diffuse and penetrate all aspects of social space, thereby shaping the spatial nature of modern society as embedded in the complex network of relations between and among individuals and cultures. This study develops the above analysis into the concept of *relational* spatiality. Based on this idea, space in relational sociology cannot be located in a static point as an epistemological premise of geography, but instead in the *betweenness* of social relations; it is a pluralistic, heterogeneous, and interactive network of
relationships produced by human interaction, exceeding the perceptible geographical boundary to express the living process of social life experienced by individuals in the fragmentary form of social space.

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Notes
1. Erving Goffman’s ‘frame’ and Alfred Schutz’s ‘multiple realities’ also potentially illuminate Simmel’s concepts, as an anonymous reviewer mentioned. Due to length limits, this topic is left for further research.
2. See Frisby (1985) and Pyyhtinen (2018) for further discussion of fashion in Simmel.
3. Crossley (2018: 481) argues that the exchange of ‘goods’ provides positive interactions for agents which ‘incentivizes future contact between them’.

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