Structuring a thesis / dissertation
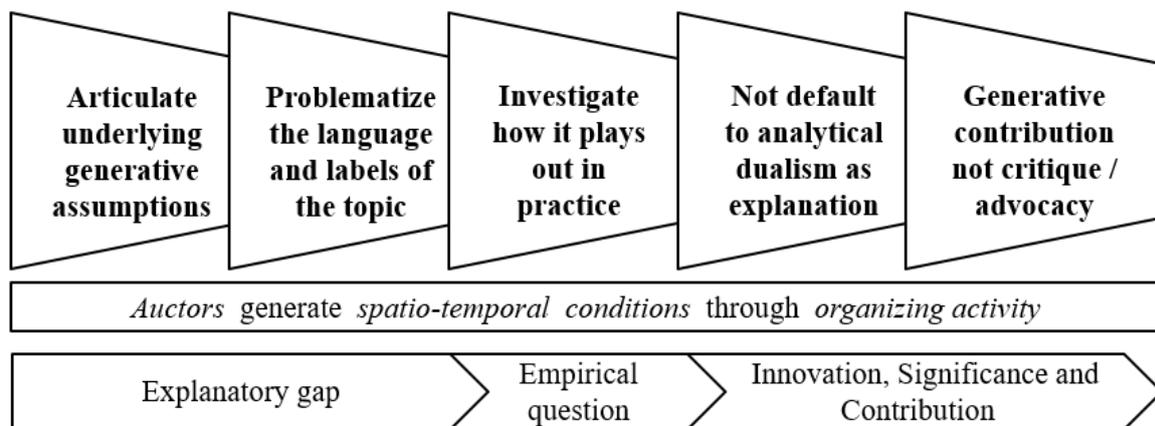
The *relational* approach works as **_both theory and methodology_**. In doing so, it frames both the thesis structure as well as the analytical work. This short guide mobilises the *relational* approach as articulated in *Beyond Leadership* (2018, Springer) and taught in the *Relational Inquiry in the Social Sciences* seminar by A/Prof Scott Eacott.

Figure 1 below is a diagram displaying the five *relational* moves as a methodology (the top row), the logic of the *relational* as a theory (the second row) and how it maps onto the various aspects of a thesis (the third row). When mobilised in a specific project, it is possible to add further mapping of chapter, studies, or similar to reflect the coherence of a project through theory, methodology and design.

Fig. 1. The *relational* approach as theory and method

Below is an overview of how the *relational* approach is embedded in a thesis / dissertation structure.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This initial chapter needs to set-up the scale of the problem (statistics are always helpful here), the importance of the problem (both locally but also internationally), some statement on what we know (locating in the literature), what we do not know (the explanatory gap and empirical question for the thesis), and how best to find it out (in this case, the *relational* approach). It also needs to do a brief intro to the *relational* approach (e.g., the diagram above) as both a theory and methodology, and the structure of the thesis (it is possible to add to the diagram mapping chapters, studies). While this comes first in the thesis, it is a working document and does not necessarily need to be written first. As a general rule, this chapter should be no more than 10% of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Teasing out your underlying assumptions of the topic

This is the first chapter you write. It needs to tease out what you see as the topic, its core ideas (concepts, discourses, etc), and how you are at stake in this version of things. Basically, this chapter lays out why the topic is of interest to you, why it matters, and it explicit articulates the underlying generative assumptions you hold with regards to the topic. This is hard work, requires a lot of reflection and serious thought. In *relational* terms, this sets up how you are embedded and embodied in discourses of the topic. It is the first part of establishing the *organising activity* of the topic, how it is understood and your role as an *auctor*. This chapter may call on personal narrative and experiences as the basis for building its argument.

Chapter 3: Using literature to problematise assumptions of the topic

This chapter needs to build on the underlying assumptions you identified in the previous chapter to discuss the nature of the literature on the topic (not just the content, but the actual understanding of the topic). It is a meta-commentary on the topic not an editorial. This has two key tasks: i) problematizing the topic (the plurality of understanding on the topic); and ii) the coherence of the knowledge. This is a systematic approach (not the editorialising you usually see in research papers in education) and can take many forms (e.g., systematic review, scoping study, philosophical review). In *relational* terms, this solidifies the *organising activity* of the topic and our roles as *auctors* (generating contexts through *organising activity*). My default approach is that this chapter establishes the 'explanatory gap' and 'empirical question' for the thesis. The former is the basis for the theoretical / explanatory contribution of the work and the latter sets up the empirical work of the project.

Chapter 4: An empirical study

Flowing from the previous two chapters, this chapter describes and reports on the empirical study aligned with the thesis. It is possible that this may become two chapter (one outlining the methodology and one reporting on the data). Paralleling the work of the thesis, this chapter (or chapters) needs to trace the *organising activity* of the topic, and how participants (as *auctors*) are embedded and embodying of this *organising activity*, and in doing so generate *spatio-temporal conditions*. The test for internal validity in the thesis is how the theory can explain what is taking place in practice (mindful that in *relational* terms, theory and practice are not separate). The primary focus of this chapter is description – one of the two key goals of social science – as the basis for explanation (taken up in the next chapter – and the second goal of social science research).

Chapter 5: An analysis of the previous work to re-cast what we know about the topic

This chapter does the deceptively difficult task on bringing the previous three chapters (2-4) into conversation to discuss how what we have learnt re-casts (or not) what we have come to know as the topic. It is difficult to predict this in advance, but it is useful to think through how *relational* theory enables over-coming analytical dualisms that exist in orthodox social science research such as structure and agency, individualism and collectivism, and universalism and particularism. In *relational* terms, the dualisms are overcome by denying their existence in the first place, and the analysis so far needs to demonstrate this. In the context of the thesis, this is a significant chapter as the rigor and robustness brought to building its claims are foundational to the contribution of the project.

Chapter 6: A contribution to the theory, methodology, or practice

This chapter is the primary chance to systematically spell out the contribution of the thesis. There will arguably be an explanatory contribution (how the *relational* approach has enabled an understanding of the topic not previously possible), an empirical contribution (responding to the empirical question established in Chapter 3), and practical / policy implications. This chapter explicitly closes the loop with the explanatory gap and empirical question identified in Chapter 3 and brings the thesis together in a coherent argument making it clear what the contribution of the work is for the reader. Most importantly, it is not a critique, but a generative contribution for advancing knowledge and moving the topic forward.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

If needed, and depends substantially on the previous chapter, this chapter can be shorter and bookends the thesis with the introduction. Once again it needs to state the importance of the problem, what this thesis has contributed – both from an explanatory and empirical standpoint – and what this means for the topic. This can include implications for policy, practice or even just for conceptualising the topic going forward.

This is just one approach, but draws on the core assumptions of the *relational* approach.