

**The Unexpected Legacy of Charles Tilly:  
Relational Work, Inequality and Economic Sociology<sup>1</sup>**

Nina Bandelj

Professor of Sociology

Department of Sociology

University of California, Irvine

3151 Social Science Plaza

Irvine, CA 92617

e-mail: [nbandelj@uci.edu](mailto:nbandelj@uci.edu)

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## **The Unexpected Legacy of Charles Tilly: Relational Work, Inequality and Economic Sociology**

Charles Tilly is known mostly for his masterful historical and comparative work in political sociology and social movements. Fewer Tilly readers know of his tiny book, *Why? What Happens When People Give Reasons and Why* (2006), and especially of this book's legacy for advancing economic sociology. This short essay will first summarize the main argument of *Why?*, and then discuss how the book's concept of relational work connects with economic sociology as advanced by Viviana Zelizer (2005, 2012). In the second part, I will briefly imagine a continuation of the conversation between Tilly and Zelizer to advocate that economic sociologists leverage our conceptual tools to better address economic inequality. Before I turn to my first point, I should acknowledge that there likely would be no legacy of Charles Tilly for relational economic sociology for me to extol if it weren't for a concrete social relationship, a meaningful intellectual and friendship connection between Charles Tilly and the preeminent economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer. As Zelizer (2012: 146) remembers, "much of [her] conversion [to relational sociology] occurred during enlightening conversations with Charles Tilly, a brilliant relational advocate." As such, Tilly's unexpected legacy for economic sociology is a happy serendipity (Merton and Barber 2004).

### **Reasons Why and Relational Work**

*Why?* (Tilly 2006) was in many ways an unexpected book, completed only a few years before Tilly's death and published by Princeton University Press. In a text of 180 reader-friendly pages,

Tilly shifts the scale as well as the style of his more widely known scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In *Why?*, he focuses on small-scale social processes of conversations and interactions, and he writes about them in a broadly accessible manner that includes stories and anecdotes from his own life.

The book, as the title states, is about the reasons people give to why questions. Tilly cataloged these reasons into four categories<sup>3</sup>: conventions, codes, technical accounts, and stories. A *convention* is a traditionally expected explanation, trite and short. A *code* is a high-level convention, a formula that invokes procedural rules and categories. A *technical account* is a narrative informed by specialized knowledge and authority. Finally, and among the most powerful of ways to give reasons, according to Tilly, is a *story*. A story is a personal account, but nevertheless a telling of a cause and effect relationship. Stories are located in a specific time and space, focus on actors and actions, and emphasize the personal over the institutional.

Beyond cataloging the reasons, Tilly focuses on what reasons do. Let me illustrate with an example drawn from Malcolm Gladwell's (2006) admiring *New Yorker* review of *Why?*.

The husband who uses a story to explain his unhappiness to his wife—"Ever since I got my new job, I feel like I've just been so busy that I haven't had time for us"—is attempting to salvage their relationship [with a personal story]. But when he wants out of the marriage, he'll say, 'It's not you—it's me.' He switches to a convention. As his wife realizes, it's not the content of what he has said that matters [or the kind of reason he

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<sup>2</sup> Astute readers will find *Why?* to be consistent with Tilly's deep interest in "the social fabric, or how human relations are negotiated" (Funes 2016:83–91) and a part of a "fundamental shift in Tilly's ontology" (Tarrow 2018: 519) in his later part of life.

<sup>3</sup> The categories of reasons fall into a two-by-two matrix, characteristic of Tilly's thinking devices, along two dimensions: 1) being formulaic as opposed to providing cause and effect accounts, and 2) being more popular compared to more specialized. In this vein, conventions are formulaic and popular, while codes are formulaic and specialized. Technical accounts are specialized cause-effect accounts and stories are popular cause-effect accounts.

gave]. It's his shift from the kind of reason-giving that signals commitment to the kind that signals disengagement. Marriages thrive on stories. They die on conventions.

Effective reason-giving involves matching the kind of reason we give to the particular relationship at hand. As such, reason giving does, what Tilly calls, “relational work” (2006: 19): “Whatever else they are doing when they give reasons, people are clearly negotiating their social lives. They are saying something about relations between themselves and those who hear their reasons. Giver and receiver are confirming, negotiating, or repairing their proper connection” (p. 15). Tilly suggests that there exist four different kinds of relational work: “*creation* of new relations, *confirmation* of existing relations, *negotiating* shared definitions of the relations at hand, and *repairing* damaged relations” (2006: 50, emphasis added).

But how did Tilly come to use the concept of relational work? In *Why?* he does not attribute it to a source but if we follow his own remark that all good ideas he had were “already abroad in his network” (reported in Krinsky and Mische 2013: 2), it seems inevitable to connect Tilly’s thinking to conversations he had with Viviana Zelizer (2012: 146). Zelizer introduced the relational work concept in an article on “The Purchase of Intimacy” (later developed into a book by the same title), in which she argued that “[t]he intersection of money and intimacy provides a remarkable opportunity to examine how people carry on relational work” (2000: 820). Zelizer developed the concept further in subsequent years and defined it explicitly in her 2012 article in *Politics & Society* in which she credits Tilly’s influence on her relational economic sociology (2012: 147).

Still, there is a very important distinction in the two scholars’ conceptualizations. Importantly, for Zelizer (2012), relational work is not just sociality of creating, confirming,

negotiating and repairing social relationships, which is Tilly's focus. Rather, for Zelizer, the connection to the economic activity is paramount and relational work refers to the negotiation of combinations between distinctive social ties, economic transactions, media of exchange for those transactions, and negotiated meanings (Zelizer 2012: 151). Actors are not just individuals in interpersonal interactions, which is Tilly's focus, but also organizations and institutions, such as the law (Zelizer 2005, 2012). Within Zelizer's framework, relational work, whereby actors match economic transactions with social relations and media of exchange, can explain the earmarking of money, how actors walk the terrain of morally problematic economic exchange, how social relations are reconfigured through economic activity, and how using social relations helps negotiate economic interactions (for review see Bandelj 2020).

### **Relational Work and Economic Sociologists' Analysis of Inequality**

Let me now imagine a continuation of the conversation between Charles Tilly and Viviana Zelizer. There is, I believe, a further legacy of Tilly for economic sociologists, and that is to urge us to pay attention to relations of equality and inequality in economic exchange. This, I note, links not only to *Why?* but also to Tilly's (1998) path-breaking book, *Durable Inequality*.

Focusing on the matching of meaningful social relations with economic transactions and media of exchange, Zelizer's (2012) definition of relational work does not make it immediately clear that elements of power are integral to any relational work. It is Tilly's formulation that helps us concentrate on that aspect. As he claims, “whatever else happens in the giving of reasons [and relational work], givers and receivers are negotiating definitions of their equality or inequality” (2006: 25).

Following this idea, I have argued (Bandelj 2012, 2020) that explicating better the role of power and relational work's consequences for inequality in the economy is a fruitful and needed direction of future research in economic sociology. How do actors negotiate equality and inequality in economic exchanges? How could a focus on relational work be useful in this regard? Let us consider an example of the care giver and care receiver relationship. As feminist scholars have argued, the prevalent understanding of this relationship as the exchange of gifts of time and love, rather than providing adequate monetary compensation, has reinforced economic marginalization of care work. This means that relational work through which we institute a particular medium of exchange as appropriate or not for certain social relations, is a reflection of, and consequential for, distributions of power.

Similarly, in my recent project on the economy of parenting, I am finding that different media of exchange, which parents use to mark their supportive relationship to college-bound children, have implications for economic inequality. For some parents, the earmarking of money for their children's college is done through 529 college savings plans. This is mostly the case for wealthy White families, who put tens of thousands of dollars into these funds that yield them tax advantages. On the other hand, increasingly more parents respond to the imperative to invest in their children by taking on college loans for them, such as PLUS federal parent loans. These loans have relatively high interest rates, do not allow for postponement of repayment, or possibility to discharge in bankruptcy. Notably, they are disproportionately taken on by Black families. Recognizing that much relational work in the economy reproduces or augments existing social hierarchies, I hope economic sociologists will take up the challenge to identify how – at both the interactional and institutional level – relational work can nevertheless reconfigure or

subvert existing (racial, class, gender, age, etc.) inequalities in economic exchanges (Bandelj 2020).

Indeed, Viviana Zelizer's most recent work anticipates the continuation of the Tilly/Zelizer conversation and applies relational work to the management of inequality. It focuses on how students' interactions across socio-economic class are negotiated on a college campus through their exchange of various monies, including gifts, loans, and payments (Zelizer and Gaydosh 2019). What do those exchanges do? How do they possibly challenge the structures of inequality? Asking these questions, we come full circle, from Tilly's *Why?* to relational work in economic sociology today. So I close with gratitude to Charles Tilly for giving us a tiny but mighty *Why?*, for shifting his focus from large-scale historical processes to both present history and personal history, including writing poignantly about his own illness and mortality. I am heartened to know that the Tilly/Zelizer conversation will continue, even if in a configuration of different meaningful social relations.

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