

Relational Models Theory

Relational models theory posits that people use four elementary models to generate, interpret, coordinate, contest, plan, remember, evaluate, and think about most aspects of most social interaction in all societies. These models are Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching, and Market Pricing. Scores of studies have demonstrated that people in all cultures use these models to organize much of their everyday social cognition.

Communal Sharing (CS) is a relationship in which people treat some dyad or group as equivalent and undifferentiated with respect to the social domain in question. Examples are people using a commons (CS with respect to utilization of the particular resource), people intensely in love (CS with respect to their social selves), people who “ask not for whom the bell tolls, for it tolls for thee” (CS with respect to shared suffering and common well-being), or people who kill any member of an enemy group indiscriminately in retaliation for an attack (CS with respect to collective responsibility).

In **Authority Ranking** (AR) people have asymmetric positions in a linear hierarchy in which subordinates defer, respect, and (perhaps) obey, while superiors take precedence and take pastoral responsibility for subordinates. Examples are military hierarchies (AR in decisions, control, and many other matters), ancestor worship (AR in offerings of filial piety and expectations of protection and enforcement of norms), monotheistic religious moralities (AR for the definition of right and wrong by commandments or will of God), social status systems such as class or ethnic rankings (AR with respect to social value of identities), and rankings such as sports team standings (AR with respect to prestige). AR relationships are based on perceptions of legitimate asymmetries, not coercive power; they are not inherently exploitative (although they may involve power or cause harm).

In **Equality Matching** (EM) relationships people keep track of the balance or difference among participants and know what would be required to restore balance. Common manifestations are turn-taking, one-person one-vote elections, equal share distributions, and vengeance based on an-eye-for-an-eye, a-tooth-for-a-tooth. Examples include sports and games (EM with respect to the rules, procedures, equipment and terrain), baby-sitting coops (EM with respect to the exchange of child care), and restitution in-kind (EM with respect to righting a wrong).

Market Pricing (MP) relationships are oriented to socially meaningful ratios or rates such as prices, wages, interest, rents, tithes, or cost-benefit analyses. Money need not be the medium, and MP relationships need not be selfish, competitive, maximizing, or materialistic -- any of the four models may exhibit any of these features. MP relationships are not necessarily individualistic; a family may be the CS or AR unit running a business that operates in an MP mode with respect to other enterprises. Examples are property that can be bought, sold, or treated as investment capital (land or objects as MP), marriages organized contractually or implicitly in terms of costs and benefits to the partners, prostitution (sex as MP), bureaucratic cost-effectiveness

standards (resource allocation as MP), utilitarian judgments about the greatest good for the greatest number, or standards of equity in judging entitlements in proportion to contributions (two forms of morality as MP), considerations of spending time efficiently, and estimates of expected kill ratios (aggression as MP).

To learn more, go to this readable, [non-technical introduction](#) to relational models theory.

For social scientists, this 2005 chapter is an [overview of relational models theory and research](#).

Here is a fairly complete [bibliography](#) of research on relational models theory, updated fairly regularly.

Relational models international Skype [lab meeting schedule](#).

The original creator of relational models theory (and of this page) is [Alan Fiske](#), Professor of Anthropology at UCLA.