

RELATIONAL CITIZENSHIP¹

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SHAPED BY SIGNIFICANT developments regarding intimate, sexual, and reproductive citizenship, the complex arrangements in relation to care and choice in present times continuously push decision-makers and theorists to change the ways in which citizenship is framed and enacted by law, social policy, and sociocultural outlets. Faced with that challenge, the framework of (non-monogamous) relational citizenship is advanced to capture both the disjunctions and possibilities for reframing how we perceive, represent, and manage our intimate lives. The notions of intimate, sexual, and reproductive citizenship have been crucial in shifting the focus of dignity and rights to spheres previously excluded from the relation between individuals and the state, highlighting how political the personal was. Relational citizenship proceeds in this line, placing the spotlight on the multiple, often simultaneous, consensual intimate relations developed between citizens. Attached to the development of multiple, often simultaneous, consensual intimate relations there is the need for socio-legal recognition and protection, parallel to that which is conferred to spouses or kin. Relational citizenship enables a gradual detachment from the strictly monogamous underpinnings of citizenship studies, hence offering an opportunity for further intellectual engagement with intimacy and diversity in the 21st century.

Highlighting the diversity in the way intimate biographies are constructed through partnering and friendship, the notion of relational citizenship (Santos 2019) describes the ways in which we self-perceive

and are perceived by others as being partnered. These perceptions are informed by a hierarchy of value, which differs depending on the degree of legal and/or sociocultural recognition achieved by any particular model of intimate relationship. Relational citizenship is two-pronged. On the one hand, it engages the state by placing consensual non-monogamy at the core for demands of formal recognition and protection in the sphere of law and social policy. On the other, it focuses on informal recognition, addressing questions of identity and social validation, cultural norms and expectations, opportunities and obstacles that stem from the relational status of each individual. By engaging with both aspects of relational citizenship – the legal and the sociocultural – the emphasis is placed on the possibilities entailed or obstructed in present and future times regarding the right to individual's relational self-determination. It includes significant relationships; intimate, but not necessarily sexual or romantic. It can include co-habitation (or not), formally recognised coupledness (or not), monogamous or more-than-one relationships. Relational citizenship shows the doing and undoing of coupledness and how that ever changing experience clashes with laws and social policy, exposing flaws and inconsistencies, and placing networks of friendship and care at the central core of queer relationality (Roseneil 2004).

The framework of relational citizenship might be one step forward in the complex endeavour of detaching citizenship from its mononormative underpinnings. Furthermore, recognising relational citizenship entails welcoming relational diversity as an asset, hence inscribing the legal and cultural recognition of multiple partners in the everydayness of human relationality. As such, relational citizenship also entails a queer reading of existing laws, pushing its boundaries by making use of ambiguous legal frames and creating case law. Importantly, advancing the notion of relational citizenship does not imply constructing the state and the legal pathway as the only source of valid kinship – or, as Judith Butler (2004) aptly puts it, desiring the state's desire. Conversely, it simply underlines the right to expect that both the state and the sociocultural context recognises diversity and relational self-determination by accommodating

the different institutional settings – including health care, education and family law – to an array of consensual relational models.

Closely connected to the framework of relational citizenship – and consensual non-monogamies in particular – the performative character of partnering, emerges as a central feature of narratives about coupledness. As such, relational citizenship comprehends the understanding about the doing of coupledness as highly performative and culturally situated – partnering needs rituals, expects opponents, and relies on allies. This conjures up what elsewhere I suggested to call relational performativity (Santos 2019), which, amongst other requirements, is expected to be visibly monogamous. The notion of relational performativity describes the practices through which intimate relations are socially displayed; its point of departure is that intimate relationships are not sustainable in the void, but rather depend upon rehearsed scripts that guide interaction and become constitutive of the relational encounter. The performative character of intimate relationships draws on the Butlerian (1990) premise that gender is an act that requires both repetition and an audience in order to be recognised. Therefore, in the same way as heterosexuality is not sustainable without the public (i.e., visible) performative practices that ascribe meaning to an otherwise empty signifier, so do relationships require relational scripts and rituals through which they become socially recognisable, even when rejecting them. The concept of relational performativity is also strongly connected to dominant sociocultural expectations which, at any given geopolitical context, frame what an intimate relationship should or should not be (Ahmed 2006; Roseneil et al. forthcoming). The glorification of a specific relational setting at the expense of a variety of others results in the further endorsement of oppressive regimes such as heteronormativity and mononormativity, with direct impact in the way intimacy is performed.

Arguably, the notion of relational performativity functions as an analytical tool for interpreting cultural norms and expectations around partnering and, as such, is an important aspect of the conceptual framework of relational citizenship. Examples of relational performativity in operation might include the identification of multiple family homes, the

decision to present joint taxation for three or more people in one constellation or the celebration of civil partnership for three or more partners. These examples, which are at the core of the relation between citizens and the state, bring together issues of recognition and protection, pointing to future resignifications of care and choice across the life span.

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NOTE

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