Relational State Capacity: Conceiving of Relationships as a Core Component of Society's Ability to Achieve Collective Ends

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Abstract

> We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, held in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.
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> – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Alabama, USA, 1963

Relational state capacity (RSC) integrates the quality of citizen-state relationships into the concept of state capacity, emphasizing mutual recognition between citizens and state agents as foundational for societal problem-solving. Traditional state capacity definitions overemphasize technical and institutional elements, overlooking relational dynamics. RSC is a latent societal resource activated through mutual recognition in citizen-state exchanges with potential to improve outcomes across diverse domains, from public health to social cohesion. We have for too long transactionalized governance; we need instead to collectively invest in intentional structures and practices that foster relationality. Drawing on insights from existing literature, the paper explores how RSC is built, intermediated, and shaped by broader societal norms and organizational dynamics. By making RSC legible as an object of inquiry, the paper lays the groundwork for empirical investigation into RSC's causal pathways, spillover effects, and resilience to disruption. There are many pathways for theoretical and empirical development in this emergent field; focusing on the relational in understanding state performance has the potential to enhance citizens' welfare, strengthen democratic resilience, and improve public sector performance.

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Introduction

We are wrong—or at the very least, incomplete—in our mainstream conception of state capacity. Society's ability to achieve ends is not just a function of technical and institutional capacities of the state, such as the tionships between citizens and state agents are also an essential component of state capacity. We call this relational element of capacity relational state capacity. And once one starts to look for it, it appears to have been hiding in plain sight.

This is not to say that state capacity is only relational. When the global pandemic arrived in 2020, our varied forms of communal society—nations, cities, villages, communities of faith, extended families—responded as best we variously could. That 'ability to respond' – that stock of capacity—included the scientific and institutional ability to synthesize vaccines and to distribute those vaccines to citizens.

When we think of the state's capacity to implement, we often think exclusively about this logistical, organizational capacity. This is what Michael Mann (1984) terms infrastructural power, the state's physical infrastructure to deliver.[2] A contact-tracing operation requires trained personnel capable of making calls to those who test positive; a data system for gathering and funneling to those personnel the phone numbers they ought to call; a database to collate that information. A good contact-tracing system, like a vaccine delivery system, requires infrastructural capacity.

But achieving an effective pandemic response does not end when the right contact tracer makes the right call; to get the data entered into the database, the state needs the participation of the person whom they are calling. Another necessary condition for a contact-tracing system to achieve its ends is that the person who picks up the phone is willing to talk and provides accurate information to be entered into that database.

Let's pause for just a moment on that human who picks up the phone. As Jane Mansbridge (2018) reminds us in her work on recursive representation, all state interaction with citizens involves some level of coercion. But the legitimacy of that coercion depends on the prior reciprocal communications, understandings, and relations between citizens and state agents. This history is particularly important when the state can coerce *some* response (e.g., forcing the citizen to respond to the contact tracer) but cannot in fact fully coerce what it seeks from the citizen—in this case, accurate and complete information about contacts likely infected with COVID-19. While we could imagine formal or informal sanctions that might be linked to non-response, there is virtually no way that the state can know whether the information provided is truthful at the point of receipt. As such, any attempt to compel the provision of information runs the risk that citizens provided inaccurate information, an uncertainty that undermines the larger collective end of public health and pandemic response the state is pursuing. The state's best strategy—really its only strategy—is to go with the expectation that most citizens will want to be truthful.

When the citizen provides accurate information to the contact tracer, it is because the citizen has made a judgment that is in effect unmonitorable, uncontrollable, and incoercible. That judgment depends on the individual citizen and the broader collective noun of society or the public's expectations of the collective noun of government. The behavior of state agents, in turn, depends on the individual state agent and the broader organization's expectations of the collective noun of citizens. In both directions, these expectations are surely shaped by past interactions between citizens and representatives of the state.

[2] See Suryanarayan (2021) and Suryanarayan (2024) for in-depth reviews of the definitions, dimensions, and drivers of state capacity.

As COVID-19 recedes from public debate there is much to laud in our societies' responses. We were successful in developing a cure and vaccinating billions of people, displaying not just the innovation and capacity of the private sector and government but also the willingness of citizens to cooperate with governments and with each other. But we were often very, very wrong about which states would be particularly successful. The 2019 Global Health Security Index (a product of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and the Economist Intelligence Unit) ranked the U.S. first and the U.K. second in state capacity for "rapid response to and mitigation of the spread of an epidemic." Neither country performed particularly well in the face of COVID-19; indeed, considering the countries' high levels of technical and infrastructural capacities, many perceive both countries to have been substantial under-performers.

How could the experts have been so wrong? In its composition and computation, the index made the same mistake as policymakers and scholars often do—they conceived of and assessed capacity as a function of technical abilities, not relational ones; hospital beds available and specialized disease facilities, not the connections between the state and citizens that would facilitate response and creation of common purpose and better collective outcomes.

This lack of recognition of the critical role that relationships play in creating and maintaining good outcomes—and the consequent privileging and mis-attribution of success to factors that enhance state control and authority—is rather common and even understandable. But perhaps precisely for this reason, it is all the more perilous.

This paper makes the case for greater conceptual and empirical attention to the character and quality of the quotidian relationship between the humans known as citizens and their fellow citizens who, by dint of the role they occupy in these moments, serve as human agents of the state. The name we give to the aggregate of these interactions, exchanges, and relationships is relational state capacity (RSC): a stock, a societal resource, and a core element of state capacity that exists and is activated, expressed, enhanced, or diminished over time. In making relational state capacity an object of inquiry and encouraging it as a legible and legitimate part of the discourse in academic and policy circles, we hope to provide a path forward. If our theorizing is right, there are intentional actions by civic organizations, government agents, politicians, and citizens themselves that can strengthen relational state capacity. Doing so can lead to stronger societies, better welfare, and greater human flourishing.

In the pages that follow, we first discuss what relational state capacity "is" as we conceive it. Section 2 dives into the existing canon, applying the concept to excavate literature and findings that, while not conceived of or framed with RSC in mind, provide structure to what we already collectively know and understand regarding RSC. Section 3 turns to the frontier of knowledge, as we understand it—developing an agenda, or agendas, for further empirical exploration.

Part 1:
What Relational State Capacity "Is" as We Conceive It

Relational state capacity (RSC)[3] is a stock of capacity that can be deployed collectively in the pursuit of a common purpose and better outcomes for all. It is built through the ongoing interactions, exchanges, and relationships between state actors and citizens at the individual level, and it aggregates into stocks and flows of RSC.

The Foundation: Mutual recognition in interactions

State agents' and citizens' interactions reciprocally shape expectations and ultimately society's ability to organize to achieve collective goals. Relational state capacity is generated, sustained and strengthened when state agents and citizens approach one another as humans first and as individuals and groups of people who can and do exercise agency. It is formed and forged in the quotidian relations between citizens and state agents, that is, in the everyday, human-to-human interactions between individual citizens and their fellow citizens who at that time and place happen to serve as state agents and act in the name of the state.

Of course, citizens and state agents are human beings and cannot be anything other than human. In this sense all the interactions between citizens and state agents are human-to- human interactions. But being human is not the same as approaching one another in a way that acknowledges an essential and shared recognition of one another's humanness, especially in exchanges involving the social power exercised by forces referred to as "citizens" and "state." This has echoes of Kant's distinction between "means to an end" and "end in itself" —in the fundamental recognition of seeing another human as a full, flourishing being rather than an instrument.

While this may sound quite lofty and abstract on its face, we believe most readers will have had interactions where they can recall feeling "unseen," instrumentalized, and un- or underrecognized as fully and equally human. For the vast majority, there will be interactions with the state that have had this very character.

Ordinary interactions between citizens and state agents are by necessity intentional, interested, and purposeful. In this sense, for both citizen and state agent, the other person involved in the exchange ***is*** in fact a means to an end. Indeed, many of the ways in which our societies currently seek to improve governance is to make them ***more*** transactional and instrumental; online portals or strict protocols that eliminate judgment and ensure every case is adjudicated on its (observable and documentable) facts.

The "transactionalizing" approach is not without merit; making citizens and bureaucrats more "faceless" to each other eliminates opportunities for the wrongful exercise of power, malfeasance, or inequitable treatment borne of shared (or unshared) status—favouritism based on ethnicity, class, caste, etc. But it also eliminates the possibility of citizens and state agents interacting in ways that enable them to mutually recognize each other as fellow humans where achieving their own individual ends also contributes to a larger shared and collective purpose. It is these interactions, however fleeting, that build relational state capacity at the societal scale.

[3] Late in our writing of this paper we learned of the term relational state capacity's previous usage in the context of civil conflict as a mode of state control over subjects, operationalized as the state's access to citizens and subnational areas through road networks (Müller-Crepon, Hunziker, and Cederman 2021). There is certainly some overlap between this conception and our (distinct and independent) use of the term, inasmuch as relations are impossible when contact is precluded.

It is entirely possible that the benefits of the potential harm avoided by adopting a more transactional approach outweigh the benefits of the relational state capacity forgone by enabling greater human interaction in specific kinds of public service delivery. We do not suggest that all dis-intermediation is a net loss for state capacity. But interactions are the micro-foundations of RSC, and therefore having myriad opportunities for interactions between citizens and state agents is, ***on the whole***, vital. In that context, the failure to recognize and value the relational aspects of state capacity and the speed with which we seek to replace human interactions with nonhuman interfaces over time and across public sectors and interventions do have serious consequences.

Moreover, the mutual recognition we identify as the essential quality of RSC-building interactions and exchanges is not premised on acknowledging and responding to personal social ties or status to get the job done, even when such ties are obviously present. Instead, it is the active acknowledgment of one's shared humanness (both its strengths and frailties) that makes this particular interaction—that between citizen and an agent of the state (often a fundamentally uncomfortable interaction)—worth undertaking and, in doing so, contributes to its possible success. Indeed, in this regard, even a failed attempt at achieving an individual end might well end up strengthening the stock of RSC, if the interaction draws upon and expresses mutual recognition of this kind.

Spillovers: From individual interactions to collective expectations

Many think of a relationship as necessarily a dyad, involving repeated interactions between the same two individuals. What then does it mean to conceive and assess the relationship (not only the encounter) between the nurse with a vaccine and an individual coming to the clinic to be vaccinated when the two have never met before and may very well not meet again?

We can use the term relationship here because learning and updating occur not just at the individual level but around the collective noun of "citizens" and "the state." Put more formally, the interaction between community member C1 and health worker B1 could be a one-time event in which C1 receives a vaccine administered by B1. It could also be one of a set of (past or expected future) repeated interactions in which B1 provides C1 with postnatal care. In either case, what happens in the C1:B1 dyad is conditioned by the past experiences of both individuals and in turn shapes their future interactions. Not all interactions are of equal consequence, or equal benefit, in shaping the future.

In the narrowest sense citizen C1 and health worker B1 are in a repeated game only if they have interacted before or expect to do so in the future. But even if it is clear to both actors that they will never see one another again, they are nonetheless in a repeated game as representatives of a broader category of actors—citizens, state agents, health workers, etc.

Imagine that the U.K. National Health Service (NHS) has set up a table at a public event to encourage the public to be vaccinated. A citizen walks over; they are genuinely unsure whether to get vaccinated against COVID. An NHS nurse smiles and asks how they can help. The nurse's body language and genuineness in this one-off interaction are surely informed by whether they have developed oppositional, conflictual relations with the many patients with whom they interact repeatedly over time or, instead, relations of respect and recognition.

So too will the citizen's approach and disposition be, at least in part, a function of how their prior interactions with "the state" have gone. Exactly who and what the state is will differ for different individuals. Some will draw judgments about the NHS nurse from their interactions with police officers; others will not think of police officers as "the same as" or "similar to" the NHS nurse and constrain the prior experience which informs them to their interactions with the NHS, or NHS nurses, or NHS nurses working in this particular community. But even as the source of data will differ for each citizen, their prior experiences with the "idea" of the NHS nurse will inform their conduct at this moment. This in turn will alter the interaction itself, and the results of that interaction. And ultimately whether jab meets arm, spreadsheet does meet data.

The interaction and exchange between citizen C1 and health worker B1 can be a source of updating by the citizen and the clinic staff about the generalized other. Other spillovers can also occur; for example, we can imagine citizen C2's expectations about the generalized state or some part of it (e.g., public school teachers or the education ministry) altering in response to the improved relationship between citizen C1 and health worker B1, or not. Further, health worker B1's updated beliefs might influence their peer B2; citizen C2's updated beliefs might influence their peer C3; and so on.

Intermediation in RSC formation: Organizations and imaginaries

The complex and heterogenous pathways by which interactions between citizens and state agents come to form relational state capacity are intermediated by state and civic institutions and structured and shaped significantly by organizational, associational, and political life.

This structures the spillovers discussed above; it is not just an individual citizen's or bureaucrat's past interactions that shape their behavior, expectations, and interpretations. When citizen C1 and health worker B1 interact, their interaction is preceded and succeeded by a range of other interactions between, for example, citizen C1 and C2 or between citizen C1 and police constable B2; health worker B1 and citizen C2. Just as the interaction between C1 and B1 is influenced by more than just the individual's experiences, so too will their interaction ripple "out" in changing the expectations of others. The social networks of formally and informally organized associations intermediate and structure these beyond-dyad updatings.

This points toward the broader notion that state/public organizations (departments, offices, clinics and schools, trains, courts, etc.) are not just common sites (i.e., the physical, situational contexts) of citizen-state agent interactions but also organizations that structure the behavior and understandings of their members. As Mangla (2022) makes clear that they are far more than locations, an individual citizen or state agent acts in the shadow of broader norms, structures, and understandings, even when acting in unobserved and unobservable settings. The bureaucracy itself is not the only source of those norms, structures, and understandings; they are also shaped by elected leaders and the broader state system (Bertelli 2021).

The manner in which bureaucrats are appointed can also impact their effectiveness and accountability, often in unexpected ways (e.g., Toral's (2024) finding that in some contexts patronage appointees work harder and produce better outcomes, in this case owing to their relational contracts with those who appointed them). Further, organizational design features that foster and direct the agency of bureaucrats toward their mission can lead to the formation of better relationships between citizens and bureaucrats (Honig 2024; McDonnell 2020) and produce better bureaucratic performance and productivity (Aiyar et al. 2021; DiIulio and DiIulio 1994; Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks 2017).

A broader organizational infrastructure—community organizations, religious institutions, sports teams, voluntary associations, etc.—also intermediates civil life by shaping the views and expectations of participants. Moreover, unlike in state organizations where state agents and citizens will occupy distinct positions and roles vis-à-vis each other within and in relation to the organization (employees/public officials or citizen/client), when it comes to their participation in civic associations, the state agent/citizen relation is likely to be dissolved, or at least displaced, by other ties and relations of shared membership and belonging. There is a very real sense in which a community organization can hold trust (or mistrust) with the state and its agents, in addition to shaping the updating of beliefs/spillovers in response to new information and experiences by members of the group.

To return to our NHS vaccination center: The nature of the interaction between citizen and state agent depends not *just* on the prior interactions each have had with other citizens and state agents; nor would a magical ability to know all possible things about the history and orientation of citizen C1 and bureaucrat B1 allow us a perfect prediction of the interaction between them. What happens when C1 and B1 meet depends additionally on the organizational norms and nature of the NHS as a national organization; the local organizational environment of the NHS for which B1 works; the organizations in which B1 is embedded; and much, much more.

Just as is true for bureaucratic units, not all community organizations are created equal, of course. Han teaches us in her recent work exploring evangelical Christian faith communities in America wrestling with racial injustice (2024) that it is not only the mere presence of associational ties and identification as members that matters for outcomes. Attempts to organize can differ in the extent to which they enable the genuine, agentic participation that drives a sense of belonging, meaning-making, and attachment to a collective. As Han puts it, we need to think much more about "the difference between people who do a thing, versus those who become the kind of people who do what needs to be done."

The organizational structure of bureaucracies, as well as religious, community, family, and other associations, is important not just for the dyadic formation and maintenance of RSC but also for how it spreads. The organizations our NHS nurse B1 and citizen C1 are part of will influence not just how ***they*** interact but also who beyond the dyad (B2, C2, etc.) has their expectations and understandings altered by B1 and C1's interaction.

Further, broader social understandings—what we, following Banerjee (2022), will call the "social imaginaries" that citizens and state agents bring to their interactions—are particularly "sticky"; meaningfully altering them will not occur by a few "positive deviant" interactions. That is not to say these understandings cannot change; indeed Banerjee (2022) herself writes about "cultivating democracy" in agrarian Bengali villages dominated for years by Communist Party politics in ways attentive to what Han (2024) refers to as the "adjacent possible."[4]

Social imaginaries remind us that human beings do not only act and interact in everyday life but they also imagine in, quotidian ways. Every conversation, perception, etc., is at some level both filtered through and a source of information that may alter a given individual's imaginary. They make clear that exercising one's imagination is one of the most important ways of exercising one's agency; the imagination is agentic. One's imaginaries are a way of holding interpretive power over one's life, a power that shapes understandings of what occurs. The same act may mean a wide variety of things to different individuals with distinct imaginaries.

Ultimately, the interaction between our NHS nurse B1 and citizen C1 "is" what it means to B1 and C1. If C1 interprets the NHS nurse's genuine interest as condescension, the interaction will not build relational state capacity to the same degree as would the observably identical interaction between a hypothetical B1 and C2 (or B2 and C1), who would experience more mutual recognition in their interaction. Even if our magical powers of perception were enhanced such that we were to know all the observable features of the organizations in which B1 and C1 are embedded, we ***still*** would have an incomplete understanding of what the interaction between B1 and C1 will mean both to B1 and C1 themselves ***and*** the way that interaction will change understandings beyond B1 and C1. An identical interaction between two separate dyads is in fact impossible; we all live in worlds of our unique construction, built from perceptual lenses in some sense broadly shared; in another sense unique; and in any case in the constant (slow) process of change.

Social imaginaries underscore that humans don't imagine only individually but also socially and collectively. Social imaginaries then shape expectations and orient individual and collective action toward meeting them. Social imaginaries structure experience and perceptions and are in turn updated (if slowly) by interactions. Unlike community group membership lists or organizational organograms, social imaginaries are not easily observed; organizational norms are also much more challenging than membership lists to observe and analyze. They are both nonetheless critical to parties' understandings, expectations, and behaviors, and thus to RSC. Figure 1 depicts graphically our model of relational state capacity.

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[4] Borrowing from Charles Taylor (2007, 119), Banerjee develops the term social imaginaries to mean "the ways in which people imagine their social existence—how they fit together with others and how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." Social imaginaries are not the preserve of an elite few; "they are widely shared by the majority of people in any society," but equally important "are not always clearly articulated but are nevertheless understood and reproduced by most members in a society (Banerjee 2022, 6). Drawing on Calhoun (2012, 161), she further explains: Social imaginaries "refer to the ways of understanding of how the world works that orient people in their action." Han credits Stuart Kaufmann with the "adjacent possible" on which she draws.

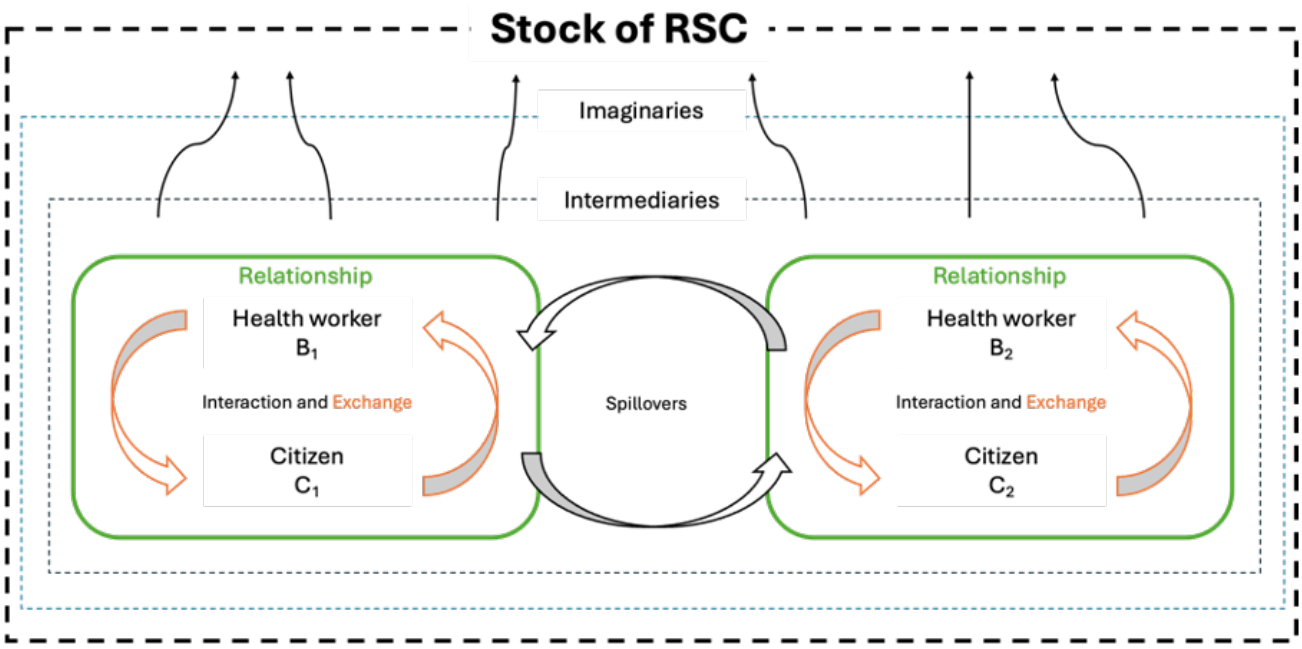

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Relational State Capacity

Relational state capacity: A stock fed by the flows of interactions

Interactions are not themselves relational state capacity; they are rather the flow by which relational state capacity is built, much as water flows into a container. The container itself—the stock of RSC—is very difficult to observe directly. RSC is a potential—and thus latent—concept. Just as a compressed spring contains latent energy that can be released to achieve productive ends, so too does a society with greater relational state capacity have the increased ability to respond to collective challenges. The latency of state capacity is not unique to RSC and has long been recognized as a central challenge in assessing many forms of state capacity (e.g., Hanson and Sigman 2021 and Fukuyama 2013); we return to these assessment challenges in Section 3 below.

Much as a hospital's physical infrastructure needs maintenance to enable its use in response to emergent needs, so too does relational state capacity need to be maintained. RSC may be a latent potential, but it is agentically produced and maintained. The stock of relational state capacity atrophies in the absence of interactions that maintain it. If relational state capacity is the stock of liquid in a container, it is a liquid that evaporates and is also actively drawn upon; inward flow is necessary to maintain a constant level.

This is not to imply there are no conceptual distinctions between the stock of latent relational state capacity and that of other latent conceptions of capacity. There are a few unique features of relational state capacity as a stock relative to, for example, traditional "infrastructural" capacity. The potential uses for a hospital bed (or a hospital) can be, with some degree of certainty, enumerated in advance. Hospital beds may be useful in treating patients affected by a pandemic; they are unlikely to be useful in enhancing agricultural crop yields in response to climate change. Relational state capacity is more amorphous, more general.

In addition, if tangible components of state capacity fall into disrepair, the destruction can be observed. The crumbling hospital ward, or road, is observable. Crumbling relational state capacity is not so easily observed and assessed. The nonacademic meaning of "latent" includes the notion of dormancy; something that is possible but not yet fully developed. State capacity is generally underinvested in precisely because it is difficult to observe; too often it simply lies dormant.

Above we noted that precisely the same interaction can differentially contribute to RSC (either within-dyad or more generally) in different settings, as actors begin with different social imaginaries and embedded understandings and expectations in different contexts. This is because the stock of RSC ***is*** the collective expectations and understandings of the complex network that is a society. The existing stock, in turn, structures—intermediates—understandings of the interaction. For relational state capacity ultimately, the current stock influences the future flow. This is distinct from many other conceptions of capacity, in which the observable flow (e.g., maintaining hospital beds) and latent stock (e.g., pandemic response ability) are related but more clearly delineable from one another. There is not so much a single stock of relational state capacity as deeply embedded societal ***capacities***.

Relational state capacity is a complement, not a substitute, to traditional notions of state capacity (Mann 1984).[5] The state's ***actual*** capacity to respond to pandemics, for instance, is not solely determined by its infrastructural capacity; neither is it solely determined by its relational state capacity. Both are necessary, but not sufficient, components; indeed, they are not so much distinct components as complementary ingredients that are not separable in the final product.

RSC, welfare, and opportunities for further theoretical development

High RSC does not require that every task and every step of the process of producing outcomes involve a human-human interaction and relationship. Certainly, there are many occasions when we rightly would prefer a simple automated procedure that bypasses the time, energy, and other transaction costs associated with engaging another person on the other side. Facelessness might also reduce opportunities for discrimination. Some domains of action such as health care might require more interactions while others, such as the issuance of tickets for routine violations, might require less interaction, and we might prefer fewer interactions if the transaction costs of doing so outweigh the upsides to relationality. That said, some form of relationship may be required even in domains that largely do not require a great deal of interaction While routine tickets require no human exchange, the process of judging exceptional cases (e.g., speeding tickets issued when rushing to the hospital, say) does.[6] It is in this moment that the system must recognize that there is a human on each side of the exchange, that the quality of the outcomes does, in part, depend on the relationship between citizens and state actors.

All actions, whether taken by citizens or state agents, occur in the context of some conception of the relational contract, the exchange of mutual understanding, the norms and values and social imaginaries held by citizens and state actors that make them act in particular ways. In some cases, like frontline health care work, the relationship is built and sustained throughout the process of care work, over multiple interactions and exchanges. In some sense the question is not ***whether*** but ***when, where,*** and ***how*** some form of relational understanding is necessary. That said, the precise dimensions of normatively optimal relationality, and thus what "parts" of mutual understanding and recognition of human-ness are relevant and appropriate and in which context, is an important theoretical frontier that we believe worthy of deeper theoretical exploration but one that is beyond the scope of this paper. The appropriate place of relationality in different tasks, domains, societies is far from the only important frontier of RSC this paper will not address.

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[5] Indeed, we believe in the absence of this fuller conception that the very term "state capacity" can often obscure more than it illuminates as and where our aim is to actually improve state functioning. As Williams (2021) puts it, the term "capacity" tends to "abstract away from such conceptual nuances and contextual specificities and at the same time claim(s) to be responsive to them." (p. 352). We share Williams' (2021) concerns, and think the incorporation of the relational—and thus necessarily contextual specificities—helps to alleviate this tension.

[6] While editing this section, one of us (Honig) witnessed a lovely case in point: a fare inspector on a Berlin train (S9) not issuing a fine to a Turkish-speaking tourist who had not understood that in addition to purchasing a ticket to ride, the ticket needed to be validated (stamped by machine) prior to boarding the train.

If RSC is a collective capacity that begs the question of the bounds of that collective—who is included and who is not, in what Margaret Levi (2020) calls an "expanded community of fate." The boundaries of the collective are porous. Some versions of "us" may include all citizens, but not noncitizens.[7] Other versions will include some individuals from a given region, but not others. The boundaries of the collective are an extremely important question; it is plausible that things that contribute to high RSC may well also shift these boundaries at the edge, the extrinsic margin, in ways some will laud and others find suspect. We focus our attention on the simpler case—the "intensive" margin of how those who already believe themselves to be in a legitimate, intersubjectively legible shared community come to build collective relational state capacity.

Similarly, we do not explore here important questions of whether RSC can help us to understand the resolution of cases of disagreement over what the state ought do. Where government and (some) members of the collective are in active disagreement over the general direction of policy (e.g., should we stop immigration or welcome immigrants; should we have a public education system or not), we imagine it is likely that higher RSC can help allow collectives to resolve these tensions. We focus on cases where there is broad agreement over the direction the administrative state ought to take, e.g., (often) educating children, improving health care, providing safety. This need not mean there is no disagreement or tension over how to achieve these goals (e.g., should content on civics or on diversity, equity, and inclusion be required; should medical care be focused more on regional health centers or community interventions, etc.), but this is distinct from disagreement over what the goals are.

Our conceptual focus on cases of broad agreement on goals within the bounds of an understood community is in part because understanding this simpler (and still far from simple!) type of case will provide an important (necessary but not sufficient) input to explore more complex theoretical and normative cases. It is also because we are personally motivated to explore RSC primarily not by an interest in fully exploring all its possible theoretical implications for the study of society or existing social science theory but by our shared belief that thinking in RSC terms can help improve human welfare.

We believe that the most tractable and translatable element for that improvement is to focus on what an academic might consider the public policy or public management dimensions of RSC: the ways in which, within existing societal arrangements, greater RSC can enhance welfare. RSC does not need to be taken simply as a given; it can be actively built. Interventions that, for example, seek to alter the behaviors of and autonomy granted to state agents or the types and nature of venues created for citizen interaction and engagement can help to build RSC.

This does not mean ignoring any and all thorny questions, or potential downsides, of RSC.[8] There is a dark side of relationality; the possibility that a centering of human exchange yields positive exchange for some (e.g., those with shared ethnicity or religion, or supporters of government but not its opponents) but not others. This may be because the government explicitly wishes to help some but not others; it may be because some state agents or citizens hold discriminatory views or wish to engage in malfeasance; it may simply be because some dyads (e.g., B1-C1 interactions where B1 and C1 are from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds) begin with greater clarity and credibility, and thus can yield meaningful exchanges that contribute to C1's welfare and greater RSC than others. The environment that nurtures RSC can also nurture malfeasance (Lameke et al. 2023) and unequal treatment.

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[7] The term "citizen" can be problematic when welfare ought to be extended owing to residence or presence. We recognize this and use it here over "beneficiary" or "resident" as it allows us to connect an individual person to a particular society and social contract, and distinguish them from the human who is in a given interaction serving as an agent of the state.

[8] We are advocating for greater understanding of the upsides of nonstandardized interactions; of state agent-citizen exchanges that are not wholly determined by externally observable, verifiable features of the environment. This is because we believe engineering out all discretion from state agent–citizen exchanges is undermining our collective capacity to achieve the best outcomes for all. It is not because we believe discretion is unambiguously positive.

These are very real consequences of the socially differentiated and unequal societies we inhabit and the power relations between groups with different identities. In this sense, we think RSC is not strengthened/produced when exchange leads to short-term gains by one or both parties in the dyad at the expense of acknowledging the humanity of others in the collective. That kind of recognition may or may not strengthen other kinds of social relationships and ties (for good or for ill), but it does not produce relational state capacity. Our focus here instead is on a particular kind of relationality between citizens and state agents: the stock of relational state capacity that forms and the ways in which the capacity improves welfare and enhances human flourishing.

Building relational state capacity is in our view not merely about implementing state programs; it is also a potential answer (and its absence a partial explanation) to democratic backsliding and rising populism. In countries around the world, our social contract is fraying. RSC is, in our view, a useful lens for understanding—and perhaps addressing—that fraying.

None of this is to suggest that relational state capacity comes into being with our coining of the term. Like social capital, relational state capacity only gives a name, construction, and operationalization to something already to some degree present both in modern-day society and all past and future societies.

In the case of both social capital and relational state capacity, naming the concept does not in and of itself yield better answers but rather allows us to ask better questions. Where and when is more relational state capacity present? What leads to its formation? Is its presence or absence associated with better welfare outcomes? Is that relationship causal? If that relationship is in fact causal, can we induce more relational state capacity to form, to improve outcomes of interest?

In the next section we attempt a synthesis of what we've learned from looking for and asking questions about relational state capacity by reading and rereading the rich literature on state-society relations and state capacity.

Part 2: Literature as Fieldwork: What We Already (Think) We Know About RSC

If relational state capacity has been hiding in plain sight, one of the most interesting features of trying to uncover and better understand it in the literature is the sense that it is everywhere and nowhere at once. Everywhere because there has been a great deal of thinking and writing about building and strengthening relationships between citizens and state agents in ways that improve participation, collaboration, and accountability. But also nowhere, or certainly less there, because in many disciplines' tensions between the "top down" and the "bottom up" it is the rare scholar who has centered the "middle" that connects them: the quotidian relationships between state agents and citizens.

Over six months, our research team reviewed more than 150 papers, books, and reports across different topics where we thought it possible RSC could be found, including both stateside and citizenside perspectives.[9] Specifically, the review focused on questions of interactions between state and citizen actors, social networks and peer ties, norms, values, and moral dispositions, trust, organizational design, citizen monitoring, accountability relations, and participation; across the disciplines of public administration, economics, political science, public policy, sociology, development studies, anthropology, and psychology. Within each study, we sought to identify evidence of RSC (either direct evidence or hidden RSC) and facilitative conditions under which RSC can emerge, in order to articulate summary insights and develop hypotheses. A subset of these papers that include cases or other empirical evidence has been codified to produce a publicly available archive of studies which include elements of RSC. This archive and a full (30 page) review of the literature are available online.[10]

Key insights from this work are, in our view:

1. The framing of (administrative) state-society relations overdetermines the distinction between state and society; indeed, the quest for "participation" in state intervention suggests the weakness of underlying relationships.

Explorations of greater citizen participation, citizen claim-making, deliberative systems, co-production, and co-governance have elements of RSC. These ideas have often been linked to a common set of challenges in state-society relations: the limited scope for citizen participation in policymaking, the absence of the voice of marginalized groups, or the deterioration or active dismantling of administrative capacity. In this work, there is usually an (administrative) state side and a citizen side to the analysis, even when the boundaries are challenged by both state agents and by citizens.

[9] We do not mean to imply that this prior literature is "really" all about RSC; each study is primarily about the focal points, outcomes, hypotheses, etc., originally specified in our view. We simply think these studies also provide evidence from which we ought to draw in understanding RSC. Depending on the focal points adopted by different scholars, this evidence might either be explicit, implicit, or absent from the scholarly work's discussion. We seek not to contest the immense value of the ideas already out there or suggest that prior work was focused in wrong directions but rather draw from the broadest (and thus most intellectually varied and fertile) possible soil in establishing the roots of RSC across disciplines and decades.

[10] Please see the relational state capacity project website: https://relationalstatecapacity.com/rsc-outputs. Also available on the Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KKCMJL.

In some ways the phrase "state-society relations" may contain the seed of what we see as the core problem in using these frameworks to understand the relations we see as so critical to delivery. That is because the term "state-society relations" specifies two distinct and separate entities: an administrative state and a (separate) society, engaging in transactions. Some innovative work challenges this binary. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), for instance, contrast the dominant academic view that sees street-level workers as state agents, against the workers' own sense of identity as citizen agents. Through a number of cases, the authors show that the decisions taken at the front lines by street-level workers are informed less by laws, policies, or superiors in the bureaucracy and more by the workers' beliefs and training, their peers, and the relationships they build with citizens. "In the human services the ability for street-level workers to do their jobs depends in large measure on the cooperation and compliance of clients" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 352). Here, Maynard-Moody and Musheno suggest that the view that street-level workers are state agents operating within a principal-agent framework should be read alongside, and not in opposition to, the citizen-agent perspective they offer. Both views reflect the reality of public administration and, more broadly, of citizen-state relations.

The language of "service delivery" underscores the implicit division between state and citizen, with the state as service provider and citizen as consumer/recipient/customer. RSC imagines the "state" to be stronger when it is not just ***for*** society, but ***of*** society. When the humans who work for the state and those who don't, both see one another as humans in a common collective, rather than as belonging to fundamentally different entities that need to be artificially induced to interact with one another.

Take one common lens on state-society failings: a lack of civic participation. That we frame the problem so frequently as a lack of "participation" points to the lack of underlying relationships. Participation may be limited to schematic interventions taking place in or originating from government buildings, hospital departments, or the offices of multilateral development agencies, characterized by citizens being invited into the space of the state, induced to participate at one end of a pre-designed power structure to fulfill mandates of participation or citizen-involvement (Miraftab 2004; Renedo and Marston 2015; Cornwall 2002; Fox, Hossain, and Robinson 2023). Rather, the literature suggests that participation should be a normal feature of everyday citizenship; it could be citizen-state interactions within and close to people's home (Tendler and Freedheim 1994; Jupp 2008) or their village (Kruks-Wisner 2018), and interactions that happen at sites that are familiar, where citizens feel comfortable and equal to the state agents with whom they are working.

In a world of high RSC, what we normally call co-production would be called implementation; co-design would be called planning. The need for the adjective "co-" or "participatory" points to our need to schematize, to induce in the "spot market" of a particular policy what we have failed to develop at a more fundamental level, in the substrate state agent-citizen relationships. This problem, our "fieldwork" in the literature suggests, is better solved not by inducing more participation in particular forums but by changing the underlying institutional and organizational structures in ways that facilitate the formation of relationships and relationality long before that moment of participation is called for.[11]
RSC is located at the juncture between public administration and state-society relations. Sometimes it ap-

[11] A perhaps parallel phenomenon can be seen in the albeit smaller body of literature on "pockets of effectiveness" in public administration—limited parts of states that function particularly effectively. Where these pockets of effectiveness flourish, it is often because of positive deviants in terms of relational state capacity. At the very least, these pockets often thrive because of different sorts of relationships among state agents (McDonnell 2020; Hickey 2019). But they also thrive because of stronger RSC, with different relationships between state agents and citizens (e.g., Tendler and Freedheim 1994). Where generalized relational state capacity was higher, we would see fewer of these pockets, or perhaps none at all. RSC does not so much "diffuse" from some central core as "propagate" throughout a network. In some sense, making RSC legible is an attempt to take the "pocket" and make it the full "garment."

pears to be a feature of both at the same time. This is because RSC is a collective capacity held by both state agents and citizens. It is our view that this juncture has been given less attention in the literature and instead, the focus has primarily been on either state-led initiatives to enhance participation and co-production by citizens, or citizen-led claim-making and accountability mechanisms to ensure responsiveness from the state. Without discounting the immense importance of these strategies for building and strengthening state-citizen relations, we believe this literature suggests it is equally crucial to look closely at the junctures in which the identities of state actors and citizens blur and are redefined by the relationships they build with each other.

2. Coercion and weak enforcement are the dual conditions of the state in all societies; given the inevitability of incompleteness, relational contracts are a useful grounding for thinking about state-society relations and RSC.

At the same time, for all the blurring of boundaries, the relationship between state agents and citizens is also always a ***contract*** between parties, whether or not it is understood by the actors as such. Beyond its particular conditions, each individual interaction and exchange between state agents and citizens also draws on and engages with that most widely available and elusive of contracts, the social contract. Even when societies rely on foundational written/constitutional texts that establish their state institutions and arrangements, the social contract is itself never completely written down. In this sense, it is a contract in broad concept, a mutually understood conception citizens share with one another and with their fellow citizens who serve in positions of authority, exercising the powers of legitimate coercion vested in them as they do the work of governing the collective. The human instinct and affinity toward reciprocity also operationalizes these informal contracts that guide citizen-state cooperation in matters such as taxation (Besley 2021). If RSC forms in the interactions between state agents and citizen actors, it therefore can be thought of as occurring in the context of similarly unwritten and incomplete contracts. Further, while citizens might have overarching ideas about their entitlements and what a state agent might do in a given situation, and state agents are bound by broad policy directives, we know that most of these interactions occur in spaces in which both parties exercise significant discretion. This is especially so because ultimately weak or, at the very least, inadequate enforcement capabilities are just as much a condition of being a state as is the exercise of its incontrovertibly coercive powers.

Similar in nature to international markets or markets where there are "weak contract enforcement institutions" (Macchiavello 2022), we know that informal contracts can and do enable and regulate exchange. It is in this sense that relations between states and citizens might be best framed as relational contracts; "informal arrangements sustained by the value of future relationships" (Baker, Gibbons, and Murphy 2002). These can be understood as informal understandings that help improve performance within firms (Gibbons and Henderson 2012).

Gibbons and Henderson (2012) identify two key problems in building relational contracts: the problem of credibility and the problem of clarity. The problem of credibility entails "the problem of persuading others that one is likely to keep one's promises." While credibility could be based in trust, for RSC, we follow Gibbons and Henderson's (2012) "strictly consequentialist logic," where credibility is achieved as "one keeps one's promises because things will go badly otherwise." This logic, they write, is better understood as "assurance" rather than "trust."

The problem of credibility is easier to solve and has received more attention than the second problem in building relational contracts, i.e., clarity. Clarity is "the problem of communicating the terms of the relational contract." To this end, "instead of asking whether others will believe one's promises, we now ask whether others will understand one's promises" (Gibbons and Henderson 2012). Designing relational contracts also requires communicating "task knowledge (what each party is supposed to do)" for actionably fulfilling their end of the contract, and "relational knowledge (what each party could do, either to break a promise or to punish someone who did, and what the payoffs from all these possible actions are)." Compared to establishing credibility and providing task knowledge, which is fairly straightforward, establishing clarity and disseminating relational knowledge is harder, given that "there is much more of it [relational knowledge] and because its

acquisition is complicated by incentive problems." Achieving clarity similarly entails an "extensive amount of information that both employees and managers must hold in common" (Gibbons and Henderson 2012).

Improved relational contracts are by their nature self-enforcing as all parties perceive benefits to their maintenance and enhancement. For example, recent work by Croke et al. (2024) shows that in Estonia joint plans between physicians and patients strengthen clarity and credibility between providers and patients. This in turn leads to better health outcomes even in the absence of any formal accountability or enforcement mechanisms to ensure patients or providers adhere to the plans.

3. Clarity is not the same as exposure, and credibility is not burden of proof: Relationships require learning and the exercise of judgment and agency by citizens and state agents.

We know from long experience that relationships operate in fields of asymmetrical power. Clarity and credibility, of course, are not the same thing when provided or demanded by state agent of citizen or by the citizen of an agent of the state. Indeed, especially when it comes to citizens, the burden of proving credibility is often not only onerous; it can negate more obvious forms of recognition of one's existence and humanity. Similarly, the pursuit of clarity is not about exposure and is not achieved by surveillance. As we see further in Part 3, social theories of recognition, concepts, and practices on "Human Learning Systems," (Lowe et al. 2022), and social perspective taking put human dignity at the heart of the process of gathering and sharing relational knowledge. This requires the exercise of judgment and the existence of accountability regimes that support the exercise of judgment and agency by both citizens and state agents.

Moreover, like contracts under conditions of weak enforcement, RSC seems to do better under an accountability system with a trust-based "core" and a sanctions "periphery" (Mansbridge 2018), rather than being steeped in sanctions. These insights encourage thinking more deeply about how citizen-state agent relationships are mediated by associational and organizational life.

On the citizen side, the literature on organizing and collective action offers insights into how the behaviors and actions of citizens can build more RSC. Civic associations are particularly important because they "introduce important concerns into public discourse and policy, engaged members develop trust and learn valuable civic skills, and skilled organizational leaders become community leaders beyond the organization itself" (Andrews et al. 2010, 1198). Civic associations can enhance the leadership potential of their members and their commitment to collective outcomes through "face-to-face interaction, experiences of reciprocity, and norms of trust; participation in organizational activities can also generate social capital within the group and in the broader community" (Andrews et al. 2010, 1197). Further, civic associations are more effective when they adopt a relational approach to engagement with their members, such as through the endorsement of the member's personal goals, the recognition of a shared past and collective future, and through the process of getting members to reflect on their acts of civic engagement (Han 2016).

Management practices that empower bureaucrats often lead to greater performance (e.g., Bandiera et al. 2021; Honig 2024; Khan 2021; Rasul et al. 2017), and greater motivation to perform on the job (Aiyar et al. 2021; Honig 2024; Parker 2014). Fostering deliberative organizational norms can overcome the usual limitations of bureaucracy and enhance citizen-centricity (Mangla 2022). Literature on pockets of bureaucratic effectiveness (Hickey 2019; McDonnell 2020) also finds autonomy to be an important characteristic feature of such units or groups.

This is not to suggest there is no risk in empowering bureaucrats. The same darkness which allows the "hiding" of Eyben's beneficial relations can certainly also be used—by state agents and citizens alike—to do bad things, in addition to good ones. Most obviously, this includes acts of collusion or malfeasance, or state actors' use of public office for personal gains, i.e., corruption. The "light" of accountability-by-external observation (by managers and citizens) can remove the discretion in which societal bads like corruption and discriminatory treatment thrive.
But in "disinfecting" government we drive out not just disease but also "good bacteria": the processes and ac-

tions that build relationships and connection between state agents and citizens. Surely, we must consider the "costs" of darkness; it may well be true, as the *Washington Post*'s masthead reads, that "Democracy dies in darkness." But equally certainly we must consider the costs of erasing the darkness by removing all discretion and judgment from the system. Doing so may suffocate opportunities for corruption, but so too does it suffocate relationality and the development of genuine human connection.

4. We rarely ask how the inputs, processes, and outcomes of interest and study affect, transform, and are affected by the character and quality of state agent-citizen relationships.

Our fourth general observation of the (administrative) state-society literature is concerned with diverse variables of interest to scholars. We find a range of studies centered on the inputs, processes, and outcomes of strategies to improve public administration, all of which can be very insightful. However, it is striking that what is often missing is a keen focus on understanding how these inputs, processes, and outcomes transform relationships. For example, while studying public health behaviors, the focus of research has been on inputs like nonfinancial incentives (Auerbach 2019; Christensen et al. 2023), or financial incentives (Basinga et al. 2011; Gertler and Vermeersch 2012; Olken, Onishi, and Wong 2014). Other papers explore processes, such as the mitigation of administrative burdens in implementing public health programs (Ali and Altaf 2021), or processes of community-based resource management (Grillos, Zarychta, and Nelson Nuñez 2021; Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock 2011), or network-based policy formation and power sharing (O'Toole 2014; Fox, Hossain, and Robinson 2023), or processes of monitoring bureaucrat compliance (Reinikka and Svensson 2011; De La O, González, and Weitz-Shapiro 2023), or learning as a process to improve and co-design public services (Lowe et al. 2022; Evans and Terrey 2016; Voorberg et al. 2017). Behavioral outcomes have also formed the focus of many studies, such as measuring compliance with public health orders (Grossman et al. 2020; Kao et al. 2021; Blair et al. 2022).

With notable exceptions[12], the literature has rarely emphasized the nature of everyday quotidian interactions and relationships between state actors and citizens, and how these are transformed, as well as how they might influence outcomes. Given what we know about the importance of relationships from scholars such as Tendler and Freedheim, Zacka, Mangla, Maynard-Moody and Musheno among others, this appears to be a significant omission in furthering our understanding of state-society relations.

5. No matter how sharp scholarly insights on relationships and relationality are, they are no match for the blunt force of top-down targets and reporting.

No matter how often scholarly work points, explicitly or implicitly, to the importance of relationships between citizens and state agents, the same literature also emphasizes the enduring problem of translating such insight into policy and programs. Scholars of participation, accountability, co-production, co-design, or deliberation have all been acutely aware of the challenges of converting the normative ideal of collective and democratic participation and planning into practice. In the best scenarios, we find pockets of effectiveness. For example, organizations in which incentives among leadership are aligned with incentives among frontline workers (Heller and Rao 2015) are found to be more conducive to co-production, a process which enables relationship building. When citizen-state interactions are conducted keeping citizens in mind, closer to their homes, collaboratively designed on more informal terms the quality of the interaction and inclusion of citizen voice is significantly enhanced (Jupp 2008).

[12] In addition to the studies already cited, Lejano and Kan (2022) also urge us to take seriously the relationships in which policy actors are embedded and define relationality as the "condition in which policy, in its meaning and practice, emerge..." (pp. 2)

But in most cases in the literature, we encounter the challenges of elite capture: bureaucrats who consider citizen-participation or co-production to be time consuming and view citizens as lacking the right expertise; participation only from elite and educated citizens (Mansuri and Rao 2012); or the shifting of responsibility toward citizens and, in turn, the abrogation of the state's responsibilities toward them (O'Toole 2014). Perhaps the most challenging problem for scholars is how a system which focuses only on the countable, verifiable, and measurable has a tendency to "hit the target and miss the point" (Kerr 1975; Honig 2018). Systems that operate with this logic have a tendency to initiate deliberative exercises that will fall into the trap of "proceduralism" (Rallis, Rossman, and Gajda 2007) and, worse, can seem "perfunctory, tokenistic, or manipulative" (Quick and Bryson 2022) to the humans involved.

Relational state capacity is characterized by latency, another form of hiddenness, of not being immediately manifest or tractable to direct observation. This makes it very easy to ignore in favor of the immediately observable; the hospital bed, the skills training, the monitoring framework with clear rules, targets, and key performance indicators that in the end too often reinforce the notion that the state is "delivering to" citizens, rather than itself part of a broader collective relational (social) contract.

Part 3: What We Do Not (Yet) Know About RSC: An Agenda for Inquiry

We have developed a conceptual model for relational state capacity based on what we have learned from the existing literature. But there is much that cannot be learned in the absence of direct focus on RSC as an object of inquiry. In this final substantive section we focus on what we do not know about RSC and articulate some of the many open questions we believe are worthy of further theoretical development and empirical study.

RSC is a stock of capacity emerging from meaningful interactions that take place between citizens and state actors, but within contexts that hold significant variation in the type of outcomes desired and the organizational and social structures that exist around them.[13] We need to understand much more clearly when RSC is causal of better outcomes; the factors that mediate and moderate the relationship between RSC and outcomes; the precise manner in which spillovers occur; and how RSC can be built and maintained. Crucially, a research agenda on RSC must take seriously the role that emergent technology and nuanced and thoughtful use of such technology can play in fostering RSC. We posit some broad research questions for each of these avenues of future work below.

Causal pathways: When is RSC causal (either as a necessary or supportive condition) of better outcomes of interest? What mediates the relationship between RSC and outcomes?

We take from the literature support for our intuition that superlative public performance is at least sometimes associated with very high levels of RSC. We also suggest in our model that RSC has a role to play, regardless of the domain or task type, because the outcomes in every system in which the state and citizens interact can be improved by paying attention to the relationship between them. Taken together, we have the intuition that the causal relationship with good things—public performance, improved social relations, etc.—will be mediated by the types of task and accountability environments. That is, RSC can cause better outcomes in a broad range of environments, but more for the collective outcome of mental health (e.g., social workers as the focal state agents) than the collective outcome of keeping streets clean (e.g., garbage collection). And it will also do so when relationships of accountability are thick and nuanced. But this is only the tip of the iceberg regarding potential mediating factors. Open questions include:

- *Will RSC prove more/less complementary to other forms of capacity (administrative, technical, operational) in different settings, or for different types of tasks?* In other words, where would it be most beneficial to invest in developing RSC? Would the highest gains to outcomes occur in contexts with overall low administrative/technical capacity, or is RSC mainly beneficial in domains that require a high degree of interaction?

[13] In the language of David Jay's wonderful book *Relationality* (2024), relationship is held across and within governments by containers of varying size, shape, and purpose.

- *Will higher RSC lead to other positive outcomes of interest?* For example, will higher RSC lead to greater retention of highly skilled, mission-motivated bureaucrats? Will it attract different people to the public sector, and in what ways should we expect the norms and values within public sector institutions to change?
- *What will be the "democratic" spillovers of RSC, exactly?* In what ways will the social fabric be knit together if this occurs? We expect that the recognition of human-ness, reciprocity, and a sense of collective responsibility is a positive spillover from building more RSC, and that these have the potential to strengthen the broader social fabric and contract.

Mediators & Mechanisms:What are the precise structures of spillovers and intermediation?

The stock of RSC is formed when dyadic interactions aggregate, structured by spillovers and intermediation. Understanding these proceses of spillovers and intermediation is therefore critical to identifying the nature and quality of the stock. As an example, the interactions might occur within a tight and homogeneous community, leading to the development and maintenance of a niche stock. On the other hand, the stock of RSC might spread more widely through network effects when the interactions occur in a more heterogeneous community.

Beyond the interactions, we have emphasized the critical role of intermediaries and social imaginaries in structuring the stock of RSC. Intermediaries may take the form of organic associations on the citizen side (groups of friends), or structured associations and organizations on either the citizen side (civic associations, unions) or state side (government organizations), with wide variation in the norms on relationality, networks, ability to learn and adapt collectively, and levels of within-group cohesion, trust, and mutuality among other factors. Among many possible questions on spillovers and intermediation, we see particular promise in better understanding:

- *What predicts when spillovers (updating of mutual recognition, respect, credibility, clarity) will occur, to whom, and with what intensity?*
- *How do the organizational design and dynamics of the intermediaries themselves matter in shaping these effects?* Are intermediaries focused specifically on state-society interactions (e.g., community organizing) that are more important in building and maintaining RSC than other forms of intermediation?
- *In what ways can third party actors themselves catalyze RSC through engaging citizens and/or state agents?* For example, civic associations may build leadership, negotiation and collective bargaining capabilities among their members, skills that in turn can foster a more relational approach with state actors. Similarly, public service organizations may train their personnel or institute norms for approaching citizens with compassion or respect to foster relationality.
- *Is there a legitimating role to authorizing environments (e.g., politicians, senior leaders in government, etc.) played by intermediaries?* Can intermediaries help build RSC by providing fora that are protected by and invested in by authorizers? We imagine that in some environments, RSC will be strengthened because citizens assess the credibility of the relational contract as a function of authority, while in other cases frontline government workers who are more similar to citizens might offer greater credibility and clarity about the relationship.

Modeling equilibria: How is RSC best built and maintained?

We have theorized that RSC can be built, maintained, and grow, but it can also erode if the fundamental interactions that create and sustain it, or the intermediating structures and social imaginaries that prevail,

are not RSC-promoting. For example, dyadic interactions are likely to be RSC-promoting when there are high levels of mutual understanding and a sense of equity within a community, but might be detrimental to RSC if these interactions are purely instrumental and result in rent-seeking behavior. Similarly, civic associations might differ in their norms of engagement with state actors, some willing to work in cooperation with the state while others seek to exit state services and focus on self-provisioning of public goods. Social imaginaries and histories of state-citizen relations will also differ widely, with a more equal relationship between the state and citizens in some contexts and more a provider-recipient relationship in others. At this point these are but hypotheses, with some support from the literature, and therefore it will be important to ask a range of questions to understand the following better:

- *How do different environmental factors influence one another, e.g., how does mutual recognition between citizens and state agents influence the norms of civic associations or frontline public sector organizations?*
- *In what ways are RSC improvement strategies conditioned by the existing level of RSC? For example, are the activities that move RSC in a setting from "low" to "moderate" different from those which move from "high" to "very high"?*
- *Is RSC best maintained in the same ways it is built?* How does one reinforce the existing levels of RSC to maintain it? What strategies are required when new people join communities, associations, and organizations and what can be done to build institutional knowledge about RSC?
- *What kinds of facilitative structures make RSC more or less resilient to isolated bad acts/outcomes/headlines, dampening citizens' and state agents' likelihood of over-generalizing about the other?*

Exogenous technological (& other) shocks: How and when can emergent technologies foster (rather than undermine) RSC?

The use of technology can undermine RSC, by enabling, for example, a kind of remote monitoring and standardization that was previously unavailable, thus controlling the interaction between citizens and state agents in ways that undermine the opportunity for RSC to develop. In addition, technology often is used in ways that exacerbate multitask problems, inducing a focus on the observable and verifiable at the expense of harder to quantify and track elements of producing good outcomes (Holmstrom and Milgrom 1991). Doctors in the U.K. NHS routinely look at their computer or tablet, noting information required by procedure rather than looking at the patient in front of them. This is distraction by design; indeed, counting/noting things is precisely one common technique psychologists use to ***induce*** distracted listening (Pasupathi, Stallworth, and Murdoch 1998). Distraction by the public health professional surely undermines the likelihood that citizen patients will feel seen, heard, holistically understood.

That said, technology can also ***support*** relationality. It can help that same doctor understand a patient's background and prior concerns before entering the examining room. Emergent AI can listen to the patient along with the doctor, taking away the distracting tasks of data classification and entry rather than forcing the doctor to engage in them.[14] Among many questions we can ask in this domain include:

- *What kinds of technologies tend to undermine RSC, and which tend to build RSC?* Is the risk with technologies always one of disintermediation and the removal of the human element from interactions? Or can technologies be used to condense and process information and to fast-track mutual recognition, respect, credibility and clarity of the relationship?

[14] Thanks to James Plunkett for the listening to patients via AI suggestion.

- *How can new technological solutions be technically designed, collaboratively adopted, and implemented in practice in ways that best build RSC?* Most people in the world still have limited access to technical knowledge and make few choices about the technologies imposed on them. In such a context, how can (mainly) governments structure processes of technological upgradation with the human at the center of the process?
- *Does a given technology ever preclude the need for RSC to achieve outcomes of interest, and if so when, where, and for what outcomes?* How can relationship-centred thinking be used to design technological interventions that recognize the human in the process but also minimize the need for active human-human interaction if the costs of these interactions are high?

We hope thinking and research about and around relational state capacity might extend beyond the confines of a paper to helping foster a community of thought and practice on common, urgent questions and concerns that many of us share. We see in the questions above some of the (surely many) important questions we hope can be tractable to inquiry. This of course begs the question of where we might start looking for RSC, and we present a few ideas on potential sites below.

Operationalizing and empirical exploration: Where and how can we go looking for RSC?

So where might we best find these objects of assessment, to test hypotheses and explore unanswered questions regarding RSC? Our review of the literature offers a number of possibilities, for the observation of the quotidian relationships between citizens and state actors, and the variety of forms in which these interactions might occur (frequency, network etc). In addition to the list of sites outlined below, we are interested in policy change and therefore also believe it is important to study interventions, made both by government and citizens that contain the possibility of enhancing RSC. These might include change management programs within government institutions that are designed to foster a more relational approach to working with citizens, or the work of associations to create leadership potential among citizen actors. The existing literature offers us the following possibilities:

- *Sites of quotidian interaction*: Places in the world where citizens and state agents are interacting. Examining sites where state agents interact with citizens in spaces comfortable for citizens (e.g., their homes), but can also include quotidian interactions in public (e.g., between police officers and citizens) or in bureaucrats' workplaces (Bear 2015; Jupp 2008; Lameke et al. 2023; Tendler and Freedheim 1994; Zacka 2017).
- *Sites of recurrent or intermittent citizen participation*: These include sites where there are participatory or deliberative interventions that encourage citizen-state interactions, such as city council meetings (Sullivan 2021), the councilor-organized community meetings described by Jupp (2008), participatory democracy projects such as the KDP in Indonesia (Barron, Diprose, and Woolcock 2011), administrative camps (Kruks-Wisner 2018), or health camps for vaccination (Ali and Altaf 2021). Sites where the influence of the state is stronger, and where citizens may even feel like outsiders (Renedo and Marston 2015), can also include the structured interactions that take place in spaces where the state ordinarily delivers services to citizens such as public schools, hospitals, clinics, or post offices.
- *Long-term embeddedness in a site*: A lengthy engagement with a site can produce new perspectives and allow scholars to observe transformations and developments over time. This is useful in studying relationships that are never given nor can be objectively assessed in a moment but are rather elastic, can be strengthened and weakened by various factors including time, and need to be sustained over time. Thus, long-term ethnographic work and longitudinal studies and sites can help researchers observe the factors that contribute to sustaining and improving relationships (Banerjee 2022; Bear 2015; Krishnamurthy 2018; 2020; Mangla 2022).
- *The digital world*: The literature on networked governance offers us another site, the digital realm, as a space where encounters between citizens and public officials take place. Sometimes this is explicit, e.g.,

the Taiwanese government's explicit consultation and response process via the Taiwan platform. Social media also allows person-to-person messaging or communicating, even if it is one-way, and can personalize the state (Grossman et al. 2020).

- *Historical sites and records*: While all the previous sites are situated in the present, written histories from the past can also tell us a lot about citizen-state relationships, and therefore RSC. Thus, archives are a location that can help us trace the transformations and evolutions in citizen-state relations, particularly in combination with interviews/firsthand experience (Tudor Hart 2006; De 2018; Suryanarayan 2024).

Through such engagement, we hope that by collective effort we can:

Make RSC legible: Facilitate scholars, policymakers, citizens, and bureaucrats alike in thinking about RSC and its role in the collaborative life of societies;

Uncover truths about RSC's nature, formation, and maintenance: Figure out when, where, and how RSC forms, spreads, is sustained;

Explore when, where, and how RSC facilitates better outcomes: Figure out when and where RSC matters to things people care about, and when not—welfare outcomes; the social contract; shared purpose; better performance; and ability to respond to collective challenges.

Part 4: Discussion & Conclusion

In an important essay on delivering development assistance (foreign aid) titled "Hiding Relations," Rosalind Eyben (2010) argues that where development interventions by international actors (donors, NGOs, etc.) have been successful, it is largely because of the relationships between field staff and other actors—government, other organizations, citizens. These relations, however, usually remained hidden from headquarters. This was not a deliberate choice; headquarters simply failed to see what was not tracked, quantified, and reported.

As a result of this invisibility, however, headquarters started to believe that it was their monitoring and tracking that improved performance; that the regime of top-down performance management was itself catalyzing success when it occurred. Eyben argues that while this view was always mistaken, initially this misrecognition was not actually distortionary. While the system did demand the production of time-consuming paperwork to feed back to headquarters, the only real loss for field staff was the time taken in reporting.

However eventually this managerial regime began actually undermining the performance of the projects it sought to improve. Even when Eyben wrote 15 years ago (2010), it was already becoming clear that as oversight technology progressed to ever more granular levels of observation, the actual but hidden source of implementation capacity—relationalism, in Eyben's terms—was increasingly being crowded out.

This is not because headquarters meant ill or ***sought*** to undermine performance; much the opposite, headquarters was trying to make things better. Headquarters simply acted on its incorrect understanding of what drove success. This led to decisions to invest in putting in place things like GPS trackers on field staff so they could better monitor activities, reducing reliance on the possibly fallible judgment of staff members, and thereby driving improvements in performance. As these new instruments were zealously rolled out, it became clear that the mistaken beliefs held by those at the relative top of the hierarchy were in fact undermining success by removing the space for relationships and relationality on the ground to flourish.

It is as if those at the top of the system, having looked with a small flashlight at the wall of a large cave, had come to believe that it was their sharp little flashlight that had caused the beautiful cave paintings the flashlight revealed. Dazzled by the possibility, they built bigger and bigger flashlights to cover the entire cave. Of course, as they began using those larger flashlights, they indeed ***did*** come to see more cave paintings at any single time. But that is not because the flashlight was creating the paintings. The beings doing the painting had done so in the dark. Under the constant glare of flashlights newly trained on the cave, the painters, having lost the cover they needed, cease painting.

We believe a fair bit of the decline in social function we are experiencing today—populism, democratic backsliding, the fraying of the social contract—has at its core a decline in the more fundamental ways in which humans relate to each other and strive toward collective outcomes. But this requires us to perhaps put the torches down and find other ways to understand, illuminate, and acknowledge the character and contribution of relationships both more specifically and more generally.

"Society" is etymologically built on the relational; the Latin ***socius*** from which the word derives is a noun depicting a dyadic relationship of friend or ally-ship, which we have collectively transformed into a collective noun. A state is society's attempts to formalize and pursue collective ends; the state ultimately needs to incorporate the relational because it is not separate from society but rather a part of it.

Yet we have collectively overlooked the critical role of relationships in the administrative state's ability to work with citizens to achieve desired ends. We hope via this paper to convince readers not just that this is true but that it is important—even urgent—that we correct these intellectual lacunae. This is a time when technocratic "delivery" has certainly captured the policy imagination and even if the translation is far from seamless and full of glitches, large-scale experimentation and implementation of the kinds described above

(and that we are all familiar with) are de-centering interactions between human citizens and human state agents in pursuit of novel solutions to old and new challenges.

As importantly, the same tale can also be told from the citizen side of citizen-state relationships. The process of claim-making has also increasingly become about the delivery of benefits, not status, dignity, respect, or the capacities needed to collectively address current and future needs. Material goods (seats at university, subsidies for child care, benefits for migrants, etc.) are easier to measure and deliver in most cases. Civil society advocates frequently count and monitor; they ask for more X because another group has more X now or had it in the past. Equal status and respect, or more transformational far-reaching government programs that can bring about equality, are not so easy to make visible and deliver.

Thus, the state faces a citizenry who is claim-making for discrete goods. Citizens face a state that thinks and manages what it can see and deliver to the citizen. These dynamics reinforce one another. Both citizens and the state often agree that progress can be forwarded by the ***removal*** of human-human interactions (e.g., the distribution of benefits directly into citizens' bank accounts). A bank transfer avoids corruption or misrouting of the benefit. But it also precludes the building of relational state capacity.

We began this paper by stating that the quality and character of the relationship between citizens and state agents is an essential, but all too often unacknowledged, element of state capacity. We also observed that once we recognize this relational aspect of capacity it becomes apparent that it has been hiding in plain sight. Relationships depend on the exercise of discretion and judgment; allowing this to flourish will often require at least some degree of unobservability (or at least restraint in monitoring and controlling in search of standardization). In interactions that always have some degree of coercion, legitimate or not, we still find these vital unmonitorable, uncontrollable, and incoercible aspects at play.

The challenges of unobservability don't only encompass the forging and maintenance of relationships, but perhaps even more perilously, they engulf their fraying and disappearance. If relationships so often come to life in relative darkness, they also seem to dissolve and are snuffed out quite silently. Just as we have to move away from torchlight to better illuminate the ways in which the cave paintings come into being, when it comes to the loss of relationships, we have found ourselves thinking more and more about how we must learn to listen to warning signals that emit silence. Like canaries in a coal mine, which keeping chirping while there is enough oxygen and fall silent when the air has been depleted, the signals that tell us of the absence of affirming human relationships are already there in the many, palpable silences present in our societies.

This inherent unobservability of relational state capacity (RSC), both in its flourishing and fading, poses a real problem for those of us who believe that properly acknowledging and strengthening the citizen–state agent relationship and preserving and building relational state capacity are increasingly important and urgent for our societies. This feels especially the case now, in the face of new societal capabilities that undermine and diminish it with greater speed and scale than perhaps ever before. How is one to work clearly and constructively in the light of necessary darkness? Is it possible to illuminate without torching? Can we learn to listen before it's too late?

It has become cliche to discuss how diverse methods—not limited to quantitative (or even positivist) inquiry—will form a better, stronger base for understanding the world around us. But some things are cliche because they are true, and as applies to RSC, we believe strength in diversity to be very much the case. Some forms of inquiry may prove to be more important ways of making RSC legible to particular communities (e.g., quantitative work and policymakers/the social scientists most deeply embedded in policymaking). But to limit the bounds of inquiry on this basis, even if true, would diminish the potential for the most holistic possible understanding of RSC. The community of scholars examining the role of the relational will, we believe, be strongest if it embraces a "yes and" strategy to methods of inquiry; if it creates the biggest possible tent. Conceptual and empirical renewal, bridge-building, and expansion are possible and urgent more generally, and we believe this to be particularly the case with regard to the study of RSC.

Broadening our understanding of state capacity to include the relational holds the promise of helping our societies address the many crises of governance we face, from the fraying of the social contract to our ability to address the existential collective crises of climate change and inequality. Making relational state capacity legible as a complement to existing notions of state capacity is not a prescription for all society's ills, but it is a foundational element of what it is to *be* a state that we have collectively undervalued. It is essential that we acknowledge and engage the relational in order to strengthen societal capacities to respond to the existential challenges of our times.

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SNF Agora Working Paper 1

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