

STRUCTURATION THEORIES

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Summary

Structuration refers to the processes involved in the forming of structures. Social sciences investigate the formation of human social structures. These are the product of the interaction between the different kinds of causal powers attributable to the human and the non-human material which comprise social reality. Theories of structuration differ in where they think the powers to produce structures lie. Objectivists think structures produce themselves naturally (Reification). Subjectivists think they are entirely the products of human agency (Reduction). Against these positions, contemporary theories of structuration rule out reification and reduction, arguing that structures are produced in a process in which structures and human agents contribute to producing one another. These theories differ about how they are related. Structuration theory (ST) (Giddens and Bourdieu) argues that the relation is made in human practice and is therefore one of identity or ontological duality; structure and agency are indistinguishable. Against them analytical dualists such as Archer, argue that though they are ontologically inseparable, in order to investigate how they interact they must be analytically distinguished, and that the relation is made in historical time rather than just in episodes of practice. Between these two diametrically opposed views, is a mixed approach, represented by Mouzelis and Stones, which holds that structure and agency are related dualistically in some instances and as a duality in others. The test of these views is whether they facilitate understanding the history of human social structures.

1. The Problem of Structuration: Structure and Process

Structuration refers to the processes involved in the production of any sort of structure. A structure is relations between parts contributing to the constitutive of some 'whole'. Any 'whole' is the outcome of the sequential and/or coincidental interaction among constituent structures and other non-structural forces. Describing each structure requires theoretical abstraction to supply a set of concepts to show a way in which things can be related. For example, my bicycle is structured partly by geometrical relations between the metal tubes of its frame - the classic double-diamond configuration. That is one kind of constituting structural abstraction. But besides the frame's geometry there is, for instance, the molecular structure of its special steel alloy.

Structures are not objects which can be directly observed but rather inhere in objects. Structural analysis of something specifies constitutive relations between the various kinds of parts which help us understand why that something is as it appears. We see the actual bike but have to 'read' it as an arrangement of triangles and theorize what consequences this has for the bike as a whole. Evidence for structures is found in the effects they have in constituting actual cases. If the triangulation of a bicycle frame is compromised by bad design or a crash, it will be dangerously weak. It is not accidental that bicycle frames tend not to be rectangular or made of cast iron. In short, structural properties have causal force in the limited sense that they constrain and enable what is possible.

But structural analysis only gives a partial answer to questions about why something is the way it is. However long the list of constituting structures - geometric, mechanical, molecular etc., the bike, in order to be a bike, must be designed and built with

components which have themselves been designed and made. It is this designing, making and building, appropriately combining the material potentialities offered by structures, which produces a bike which is nice to ride! It results from a structuration process. Structural causation - that of the consequences of arrangements - is only one sort of causal force and depends on those causal forces which bring such arrangements into being, acting as the agents of structures. The nature and variety of causation is one of philosophy's oldest questions. The structures of the world are formed in historical processes stretching back to the origins of the universe. The distinction between a mode of causation by *arrangements conditioning possibilities*, and a mode of causation *exercised by whatever agency initiates events of change of, or among, arrangements*, is an important one. It equates to the Aristotelian distinction between *material* and *efficient* causation.

1.1. The Problematic of Structuration in the Social Sciences. Relating the Human to the Non-Human

Structuration talk occurs across the sciences and technologies, but is most prominent in the social sciences because their primary goal is to describe and explain the workings of human collective phenomena. Collectivizing involves structuring into relations, a particular kind of animal, human-beings. Other animals live collective lives whose pattern is highly predictable, seems to be transmitted genetically, and changes subject to the selection of intra-species variations for the survival advantages they may give. By contrast, human social life is relatively weakly governed by genetics, and tends strongly to arbitrariness and deliberate change. Human social forms exhibit highly variable arrangements of human-beings - for example, into categories, types, genders, classes, status-groups, institutions, forms of marriage, families, kinship systems, economic systems, armies, generations, religions, divisions of labor, communities, roles, households, traditions, nation-states.

The social sciences concentrate so much on human social phenomena as opposed to those of the rest of the animal world, because human social organization has the kind of underdetermined character which requires a special concept, namely, history, to partner biological evolution. Humans live in social forms which are the product of historical processes of formation, supplementing those of biology which are generally sufficient to explain the structuration of the social forms of other animals. Theories of structuration try to specify the historical process of human social life.

A fundamental problem is how to relate any special history-producing properties of the human material to the historical properties of the social forms they inhabit. So though social sciences' primary task is to specify the properties of the social realities, they must establish what the properties of the human stuff are, which might be involved in the structuration of the social stuff.

Thus theorizing the structuration of human social structures involves specifying the relative importance, manner and relation between, the non-human and human contributions. This depends crucially on what is held to have a capacity to exercise efficient causation, that is, powers to initiate structures and structural change. Is structuring agency to be claimed for structures or human beings, or neither, or both?

1.2. Conceptualizing the Structuring Powers of Social Structures and Human Beings.

Attention to the problem of theorizing social structure is often triggered by experiencing social change. 18th and 19th century European social sciences tried to understand the experience of rapid changes in social life in an era of revolutions - political, economic, technical, cultural and social. The full force of the reality of social structure was experienced as the powers, positions and presumptions of an established, predominantly rural, way of life, felt the impact of the formation of new kinds of structures, powers and positions associated with industrialization. Mechanization, urbanization, nationalization, proletarianization, democratization, individualization and formalized education were among the more important developments. These forces were experienced as objective, relentlessly making people change their ways of life.

1.3. Structuralist approaches: Evolutionism, Functionalism and Marxism

Given this compulsory effect, it is unsurprising that social scientists tried to account for social structure as objective and causally efficient. Early efforts to construct social science sought objective natural laws of social development equivalent to those of evolutionary biology. Social structures were natural phenomena subject to their own natural laws of historical development. The basic idea was that all societies inevitably experience some predetermined sequence of stages - from primitive to modern, simple to complex, hunter-gatherer to industrial, rural to urban etc. This approach saw structuration as a process of qualitative improvement in the survival capacity of social structures as they become more efficient at anticipating problems and mobilizing solutions. History was a story of social structures progressively enhancing the functional compatibility between their parts, or *system integration* - that is their goal. This approach sees social structures as processing humans into ways of relating to one another, acting and thinking which are functional for meeting requirements of the structures themselves. Socialization and a reward system ensuring the meeting of material and psychological needs, is the basic process shaping the human material. This teleological approach regards history as knowable in advance, and is typical of 19th Century social evolutionism, and Parsons' more recent modernization theory and system-functionalism.

Another kind of systems theory challenges system-functionalism and it's problematic of system integration. Focusing on systems of production, Marx tried to work out the range of possible 'modes of production' and their systematic potentialities and vulnerabilities. His great contribution to theorizing social systems was to recognize that each way of organizing production was only relatively sustainable, there being systematic reasons why, over time, they tended to undermine or contradict themselves. Social systems such as capitalism had objective developmental tendencies to change from being functional or integrated, to being dysfunctional or disintegrated, as structural contradictions emerged.

If the structuration problem is how structures are originated, made relatively long-lasting, and eventually changed into something else, Marx's insight into the tendencies of systems to change the conditions of their own reproduction might be made the basis

of a strong structuralist theory of structuration. Structuralist Marxism and systems-functionalism both believe efficient causation belongs to the structures themselves. They see structures as products of their own intrinsic developmental processes, and history as an entirely objectively necessary and in principle predictable process.

Objectivist (or structuralist) structuration treats human beings as entirely historically conditioned. They are passive functionaries supplying the energy required to work the structures, play the roles etc. Structures direct operations. What Lockwood called *social integration* (relations between people) is subordinated to *system integration* (relations between system parts). Human social relations, interaction, identities, conceptions of interests etc. are side-effects of the operation of the laws of structural development, be they self-maintaining (functionalism) or self-transforming (Marxism). Actors are agents only in the weak sense of functioning as mediators of system-reproducing processes, constrained to become these functional agents by socialization processes forming their personalities and values to the requirements of 'social order'.

1.4. Towards Non-structuralist Approaches

Non-structuralist approaches allow efficient causal power to the human material. Even emphatic objectivist accounts of structuration acknowledge that structures must shape the human material, implying that it has potential to foul things up! Hence talk about socialization, ideological control, the functions of the family and education etc. Human-beings are theorized as potentially dysfunctional for the unfolding of the latent structural process.

As Parsons wrote in 1937, sophisticated objectivist social science realized subjectivity had some causal powers, which might be 'scientifically relevant'. Provided subjective properties were theorized as natural properties of individuals, they could be allowed. So, typically, Utilitarian social theory (J. Bentham and J. S. Mill) modeled human agency as the following of naturally given self-interest, employing rationality to process information and make cost-benefit calculations about which course of action was most likely to achieve actors' ends. Human subjectivity was abbreviated to rationally pursuing self-interest. Emotional, cultural and social factors played no part. Later, Parsons used Freud's theory of personality-formation to identify humans' natural needs and susceptibilities which made them controllable in certain ways.

Important for later theories of structuration, the early Marx contributed to understanding the history-making potential of human-beings by attacking all forms of individualism including Utilitarianism. For Marx the nature of the human species was to transform natural resources using the productive power of collectivities. Humans had to cooperate to be productive, being defined by both their location in social relations of production and their individuality. To produce the conditions of their existence in the present (the processes of agency or doing) they must use existing legacies of what has already been produced (structure). Being collectively productive, humans can exercise efficient causation and 'make history', but only under pre-existing conditions. They cannot just do as they please. Legacies constrain but also enable present actors to be productive in their turn. Marx's great achievement in theorizing structuration is to conceptualize human agency as necessarily social, and the relationship between structure and agency

as an unending cycle of agency conditioned by the products of agency (structure). Humans have individual self-interests, but also interests derived from their positions in the social and technical structures involved in production. Conflicts of class interest generated by differential positioning, strongly influences all spheres of life, particularly the political and cultural.

The weakness of Marx's theory of structuration is that historical actors are only seen as classed, rational means-ends calculators. He has been called the last utilitarian. His instrumental rationalist theory of class subjectivity, though not individualist, failed to get to grips with the various springs of collective action. Marx recognized the importance of collectivization in constituting humans' historical agency, but failed to make space for the emotional, cultural and the full range of social relations. Thus his theory of working-class political action failed – unable to account for the unwillingness of working-class communities to engage in revolutionary politics or their cross-pressure by commitment to familial, local, cultural, religious or nationalist interests.

Enthusiasts for subjectivity opposed the natural science of society project. Drawing on religious thought, subjective idealists opposed the very idea of a social science, claiming self-directing powers for human-beings as having their own souls, capacity for reason, choice and, most important, values. The history-making powers of humans - their capacity for structural agency - were conferred by their capacity to infuse their worlds with meaning, by creating symbolic representations or interpretations which have emotionally committing force for both individuals and cultural communities.

The fundamental element of subjectivity is the use of meaning systems in self-reflection. Each person is an object of thought to themselves, exercising powers of self-control by anticipating, deliberating about, and evaluating their behavior before, during, and following, acting. This is a complex process of interplay between reason and the emotions. For the anti-scientific human or cultural studies, the goal was not *causal explanation* of objective processes but *understanding* creative, self-reflexive agents as they use symbolic resources to interpret the experience of their lives. The aim was to learn to see their worlds from their points of view. That is what being 'objective' about a reality which was all subjective, meant. Humans were historical agents because they created the symbolic systems which gave their behavior meaning. Ideas governed their lives.

Both objectivist social scientists and their subjectivist opponents felt it was impossible to combine ambitions to be properly scientific - objectively offering causal explanations - with viewing human-beings as self-directed, free subjects acting on the basis of subjective meaning. There are three possible responses. First, some form of *reified* social science, where humans are denied historical agency, and the subjectivity of human beings, culture and meaning are downplayed for the sake of objectivity. Second, *reductionist* social studies, where an idealized version of human agency is given the credit for history-making and spins free from the realities of structural conditioning. Objective social science is substituted by a practice of interpretation focused on understanding the subjective meanings of individuals and collectivities.

But third, one can try to maintain commitment to both social science objectivity and a

full-blooded subjectivity *avoiding both reification and reduction*.. This involves relaxing one's criteria of science, and widening the scientifically relevant aspects of subjectivity, to develop a more modest kind of systems analysis, incorporating the efficient causation of human-beings, but not defining structure only in their subjective terms. Both Weber and Durkheim understood the importance of expanding the scope of subjectivity beyond the instrumental rationality recognized by the utilitarians and Marx, to include value rationality (Weber) and the non-rational preconditions of rationality (Durkheim). *Value commitments* and *emotional response* as well as rationality, require acknowledging, to understand why humans do what they do, with whatever consequences for the structuration of structures. Secondly, they understood that genuine subjective freedom of human individuals had objective social and cultural conditions.

This third position combines the objective and subjective. The efficient causation of human agents, involving the interaction of their subjective and objective properties, is constrained and enabled by prevailing conditions, and makes its contribution as one among an array of causal forces. Pluralities of efficient and material causes interact. This contemporary, yet classical, approach, founded by Durkheim and Weber, sees structuration as a process of mutual interaction and influence between the forces which have tended to be polarized.

2. Against Subject-Object Dualism: Bourdieu and Giddens

2.1. Contemporary Accounts of Structuration

Contemporary theories of structuration follow renewed interest in the power of social structures by the post-World War Two generation entering a much expanded Western higher education system from the 1960s onwards. Their interest was fuelled by contradictions between ideals and realities in a period of civil rights, new wave feminism and national liberation struggles, with the Vietnam War being the most important for American youth. Political opposition to a destructive 'system' magnified the powers attributed to structures and reactively polarized these to the powers of creative agency of human subjects. Humanist versions of Marxism emphasized the voluntary nature of working-class politics, while symbolic-interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, emphasized humans' creativity in social interaction. The critical bias was towards indeterminacy, the temporariness of arrangements, and the human freedom to do otherwise. Desire to defend the efficient causation of human actors encouraged reductive wishful-thinking and understating structures' causal powers.

Into this situation stepped the first generation of contemporary theorists of structuration, led by Bourdieu and Giddens, the latter popularizing the term 'structuration' by calling his own solution to the ever present problem of structuration, 'Structuration Theory'(ST)! But Giddens' ST is only one of many theories of structuration. Bourdieu prefers 'genetic structuralism' to 'structuration theory' to describe his work but it tackles the same fundamental problems of social theory in a similar manner to Giddens - and earlier. Both oppose dualism. Subjective and objective must be combined. They resisted the contemporary reductionist tendency and were equally opposed to any kind of reification.

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Biographical Sketch

John Parker received his BA (History and Sociology) (First class) from Keele University (1968) and MA (Sociology of Literature) from University of Essex (1969) with a thesis on 'John Berger's Project'. He was lecturer in sociology at University of Wales, Swansea (1969 to 2006). As self-styled 'general sociologist', he taught courses at all levels covering a wide range of sociological topics, but mainly in social theory, historical sociology and sociology of art. He has published three books, a major historical sociology of art, *A Formal and Historical Sociology of Western Picture-making with special reference to J.M.W. Turner: Power, Space and Light*. (1998, Lampeter, E. Mellen); *Structuration* (2000, Buckingham, Open University Press) and (with colleagues) *Social Theory, a Basic tool-kit* (2003, Basingstoke, Palgrave/Macmillan). He has done field research with novice parachutists and has written about the moral significance of voluntary risk-taking. He is interested in exploring the strengths, weaknesses and applications of a critical realist approach to social science. Currently, as a Swansea University Honorary Research Fellow, he is participating in the Art-Life Project which is researching what it means to commit oneself to life as an artist, and how this is put into practice over the life-course.