



Perspectives

The Theory Section Newsletter
The American Sociological Association

Volume 15
Number 1
January 1992

SECTION OFFICERS

Chair
Craig Calhoun

Incoming Chair
Stephen Turner

Secretary
Deirdre Boden

Council
Janet Chafetz
Michael Hechler
Miriam Johnson
Dmitri Shalin
Charles W. Smith
Barrie Thorne

Nominating Committee
James Coleman, Convener

Theory Prize Committee
Anne Rawls, Chair

Perspectives Editor
Chris Prendergast

Submit news and commentary to:

Chris Prendergast
Department of Sociology
Illinois Wesleyan University
Bloomington, IL 61702
tel: (309) 556-3088
fax: (309) 556-3261
bitnet: SOCL001@
UTUCVMD

Deadlines for April Issue:

Articles/Commentaries: February 21
News/Book Announcements: February 28

SOME REMARKS ON "AGENCY" IN RECENT SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY¹

Jeffrey C. Alexander
University of California, Los Angeles

In the last decade or so, there has been a significant movement within Western sociological theory to bridge the gap between macro and micro work. While some movement has occurred from the micro to the macro direction, the most conspicuous developments have occurred in macrosociology, which has given renewed emphasis to the concept of "agency" vis-a-vis "social structure." This movement in post-Parsonian sociology was stimulated positively by the radical voluntarism of microsociologists like Homans, Goffman, and Garfinkel and negatively by the anti-voluntaristic overextension of macro thinking in conflict theory and structuralist Marxist and neo-Weberian thought.

This effort to "bring men back in," to recall Homans' classic phallo-centered phrase, is a fundamentally important theoretical development. Indeed, one cannot think of any major contemporary theorist who is not preoccupied with the micro/macro problem. From Collins and Giddens, on the one side, to Habermas and Touraine, and Coleman and Elster on the other, with Bourdieu and some neo-functionalists in between, this concern defines what can fairly be called "the new theoretical movement" in sociology.

The widespread agreement among current theorists about this new direction, however, should not disguise the fact that fundamental disagreements remain. The object of analysis has shifted, and even some basic concepts and models are new, but presuppositional issues continue to structure theorizing about the micro-macro link.

In this brief intervention, I would like to express strong misgivings about certain aspects of this new emphasis on agency. As I see it, three major problems can be discerned.

- 1) There has been a confusion of "agency" and "actors."
- 2) There has been a tendency to conceptualize "culture" as separate from "actors."
- 3) The concept of agency has been associated with a naively positive ideological tone.

Problem One: Actors and Agency

If one examines the articles and books that have articulated this new movement over the last decade, one recognizes a strong tendency to identify actors (persons who act) with agency (human freedom, free will) and agents (those who exercise free will). This identification provided the unquestioned starting point for the brilliant generation of anti-Parsonian microsociologists, and it has been taken over, to one degree or another, by most subsequent efforts to create a micro-macro link. From neo-Marxism to rational action theory, from reconstructed conflict models to social movement and praxis theories, the dangerous legacy of this fertile but fundamentally misguided conflation of actor and agency can be found.

My objection to this identification of actor and agency is that it is guilty of misplaced concreteness. Rather than replacing or reinterpreting the familiar dichotomy between actors and structures, the identification of actor with agency actually reproduces it in another form. Rather than forming a hierarchy, actors and

structures are placed horizontally--side-by-side but not interpenetrating and creating new forms. What results is a mixture rather than a solution, a compromise rather than a reformulation. The incantation that "structure controls actors who simultaneously reconstitute structure in turn" is simply that--an incantation. Because action and structure are conceived to be concrete, or empirically distinct, the dichotomization is inscribed in such a way that no amount of juggling--keeping both balls in the air at the same time--can create a fundamentally different conception of the micro-macro link.

A more complex position is needed. Actors are not simply agents--those who possess free will--nor are structures necessarily contradictory to the conditions under which actors exercise self-control and autonomy. If we define action as the movement of a person through time and space, we can say that there is a dimension of free will, or agency, in every action; we can even go further and suggest that agency--what Parsons called effort--is what allows actors to move through time and space. But actors per se are much more than, and much less than, "agents."

There are many ways to express this distinction. In my own work, I have done so by suggesting that agency is the moment of freedom, or effort, which occurs within three structured environments, and that two of these--culture and personality--exist ontologically only within the actor, conceived as a spatially and temporally located person. According to this model, actors certainly have knowledge, but it is an error to say, for example as Garfinkel and his microsociological followers have done, that actors are "knowledgeable agents." It is an error because the knowledge that actors have does not rest with their agency but results from the cultural environments which surround it (and transform it into identity). That this internal culture is a result of earlier interactions with others does not mean, moreover, that it can be viewed as the result of an agent's practical experience. While some of this knowledge is, indeed, distinctive to a uniquely individual learning process, or trajectory, it is misleading to identify most of this knowledge as the actor's own. It is "society's" knowledge. Even if it is not widely shared, rather than being generalized from a series of particular experiences it has been learned from gestalts which such sequential encounters are seen to represent.

If action is the exercise of agency by persons, then it can occur only in relation to two highly structured internal environments. Action is coded and motivated, by cultural systems and by personalities. Still, personalities and cultural codes do not exhaust the contents of a person's activities. There remains a dimension of agency which I have conceived as articulated through the processes of invention, typification, and strategization. By calling these agentic processes, I mean that they embody, in the sense of giving shape to, the exercise of free will. These agentic processes engage the structured, internal environments of action and move these environments through time and space. It is not only agency--as articulated by these three primordial processes--but the agentic articulations of these internally structured environments that comprise the "actor."

What this position tells us about "social structures" rather than agents is not something I am able to discuss here.

Suffice it to say that if actors are not only agents in the traditional sense, then structures are not only--not primarily, not essentially--constraining forces which confront actors from without. Culture and personality are social structures that confront agency from within and which, therefore, become part of action in a "voluntary" way. Structures can be described as existing outside of actors only if we focus on a third environment for agency: the social system. I refer here to the economic, political, solidaristic, and ecological relations and networks formed by persons in the course of their interactions in time and space. Yet, because they are formed from interaction, presenting themselves as aggregates of past interactions, it is impossible to conceive even of these components of the social system as things which exist independently of the patterned internal environments of the human beings who activate them. The internal and external environments of action must be thought of analytically, not concretely. There is a vast and complex interpenetration of action with its environment.

Problem Two: Culture and Agency

The confusing conflation of actors and agents has produced certain difficulties for cultural analysis, an area that has recently received increasing attention in the field. Some of the most interesting work in the field of culture--from the Birmingham school to the efforts by Archer and Swidler--has taken action as something which is often or even typically opposed to institutionalized cultural codes. This has occurred because these theorists equate action with creative, reflexive, or rebellious agency, and culture with patterns that exist outside of this actor her/himself.

If there are internal environments of action, however, action must be a constant process of exercising agency through, not against, culture. This means that typification, or reproduction, is a continuous referent of every action, not instead of but alongside of invention.

Agency must be conceptualized as a process that is inherently related to culture, not as a process that defines itself by opposition to it. Because agency is "free," action is never simply mimetic, never simply reproducing internalized symbolic environments. Action involves a process of externalization, or re-presentation. Indeed, agency is inherently connected to representational and symbolic capacity, just as it is connected to the capacities that underlay its other internal and external environments. Because actors have agency, they can exercise their representational capacities, re-presenting their internal environments through what is called externalization. According to this perspective, every actor is a match for Levi-Strauss' famed bricoleur, possessing what Durkheim called the "religious imagination" of the savage mind.

Problem Three: Ideology and Agency

In the preceding I have addressed some fundamental presuppositional problems of recent efforts to create a micro/macro link. I have sought to illustrate types of problems, not to identify particular efforts that exemplify them or even to highlight work which avoids them. There is no single theorist whose work completely exemplifies the problems I have

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 2)

presented. At the same time, the analytical distinctions, and lack of distinctions, which I have outlined can be used to identify persistent inadequacies in virtually every major strand of contemporary work.

In this concluding section, I want to address a related yet more evaluative or ideological problem. I wish to suggest that there is a distinctive evaluative "tone" to these conflationary discussions of agency. They are celebratory and often heroic. According to one tradition, actors are rational, autonomous, self-sufficient, wily, and clever. According to another, they are knowledgeable, reflexive, self-monitoring, and routinely competent. In the rhetoric of a third approach, actors are endlessly creative, expressive, and meaning-making.

Insofar as these evaluations refer to the analytic properties of agency, the adjectives are not objectionable in themselves. They should be subject to criticism, however, if we are to understand them as descriptions of actions or the properties of actors. In most instances, of course, this is exactly what is implied.

If we do not conflate actors with agents, we are forced to recognize that actors are not nearly as heroic as these accounts imply. They are often befuddled, passive, self-deceptive,

thoughtless, and vicious. How can this be so, if "agency" itself can be described in a positive way? The answer is that agency expresses itself only through its cultural and psychological environments, and these latter forces structure agency in open-ended and sometimes extraordinarily harmful ways.

In ignoring and underplaying the negative elements of action, strong theories of agency sometimes seem less like dispassionate efforts to describe action than efforts to mobilize moral evaluations of it. They are, in fact, reformulations of natural rights theory. Rather than analytical generalizations about reflexivity, they are unreflexive, if hopeful elaborations of the normative discourse that underpins democracy itself.

Rather than reproducing this cultural discourse, we must become more conscious of it. This means that we must recognize it as a discourse, deconstructing it as an ideology of action rather than rationalizing it as an explanation. Goodness cannot be inherently associated with action; it can only be attributed to action because of the social, psychological, and cultural environments with which agency is expressed.

Endnote

¹An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the International Sociological Association Meetings in July, 1990 in Madrid. The author thanks Chris Prendergast and Nicholas Entrikin for helpful critical readings.

BOOK ANNOUNCEMENTS

David Sciulli, *The Theory of Societal Constitutionalism: Foundations of a Non-Marxist Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. NPL.

David Sciulli (Texas A&M) develops a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between social authoritarianism and constitutionalism in modern societies. Defining social authoritarianism as the arbitrary exercise of collective power by professional, corporate and other private organizations, Sciulli shows the extent of the problem in diverse societies ranging from the United States to Zaire. Arguing that institutional restraints on social authoritarianism are not built into market-based or liberal-democratic regimes, he develops a theory of social constitutionalism which justifies and accounts for such restraints.

Charles Marske, *Communities of Fate: Readings in the Social Organization of Risk*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991. 246pp. \$19.50 p. \$46.50 c.

A collection of essays on risk and social theory. Marske (Saint Louis University) focuses on the social organization of risk, illustrating through case studies how risk is socially defined and reproduced. Drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Marske demonstrates through case material that reducing risk is not a technical matter, but a practical and socio-political one.

Deirdre Boden and Don H. Zimmerman (eds.), *Talk and Social Structure: Studies in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 335pp. \$35c.

This is a sparkling and well-integrated collection of papers originally prepared for a 1986 conference in Santa Barbara. Part I addresses the theoretical issues of structure-in-action, talk-in-interaction, and the role of conversation analysis in social structural inquiry. Well-written and jargon-free papers by Zimmerman and Boden, Thomas Wilson, Emanuel Schegloff, and Hugh Mehan stress the relevance of conversation analysis for the micro/macro problem in contemporary theory. During the last decade conversation analytic studies "branched out from the 'home base' of ordinary conversation to 'institutional' settings in which more or less official or formal task-based or role-based activities are undertaken," write John Heritage and David Greatbatch in the first of three essays in Part II on talk and institutions. Their data on television news interviews is followed by analyses of medical and clinical interactions by Paul ten Have and Douglas Maynard. Part III, on "structure-in-action," returns to home base with two studies of telephone interaction and one of direction-giving. Contributors include George Psathas, Robert Hopper, Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra, and Graham Button. The volume offers strong evidence that conversation analysis is both a significant development in ethnomethodology and a productive procedure for the analysis of interaction, structure, and institutions. (C.P.)