

Social Explanation and Social Structure

I. What is a social structure?

Social structures are theoretical entities, postulated to do work in a social theory. Examples: the wage-labor system of industrial capitalism; the heteronormative/bionormative nuclear family; the internal organization of an American university. What work do structures do in a social theory?

- a) They are invoked in structural explanations;
- b) They enable us to identify and critique structural injustice;
- c) They provide the context for human agency;
- d) They are, in some sense, constituted by actions of and relations between individuals.

Today I will focus mostly on (a) and, to a lesser extent, (b).

II. What is a structural explanation?

Structural explanations consider the phenomenon to be explained as part of a larger phenomenon that sets constraints on the behavior of the interdependent parts. Reference to the structured whole highlights those local constraints. [Example: throwing a penny into a pool.]

A. Garfinkel (1981) on questions, contrasts, and presuppositions.

“Suppose that, in a class I am teaching, I announce that the course will be “graded on a curve,” that is, that I have decided beforehand what the overall distribution of grades is going to be. Let us say, for the sake of the example, that I decide that there will be one A, 24 Bs, and 25 Cs. The finals come in, and let us say Mary gets the A. She wrote an original and thoughtful final.” (Garfinkel 1981, 41)

- Question: *Why did Mary earn an A in Garfinkel’s class?*
- To answer – to address what is being asked – we need to clarify the issue. This is revealed (in part) by implicit *contrast cases*:
 1. Why did Mary earn **an A** in Garfinkel’s class (as opposed to a B or C)?
 2. Why did Mary earn **an A** in Garfinkel’s class (as opposed to a poke in the eye or a free lunch)?
- Also, what counts as a good question depends on the circumstances. Mary didn’t just earn *an A*. She earned *THE A*. So is not enough to answer the question by saying that Mary wrote a thoughtful and original final, if others who also wrote a thoughtful and original final did not earn an A *due to rules of the curve*.
- Given the presupposed contrasts (e.g., the grades A, B, C) the options may be *relationally constrained* (e.g., by the curve) so that an adequate answer cannot be provided by considering the individual case in isolation.
- Contrast an aggregate and a structured whole.
 - In an aggregate of individuals (a heap of pebbles, a handful of dog treats), the behavior of an individual part is not systematically dependent on the behavior of the other parts, so the possibility-space for the behavior of an aggregate is nothing more than the product of the possibility-spaces for its individual parts.
 - In a structured whole the possibility-spaces for the parts are constrained by their relations to each other, as defined within the structure.

B. Shapiro (2000) on places-as-offices and places-as-objects.

“I define a *system* to be a collection of objects with certain relations. An extended family is a system of people with blood and marital relationships, a chess configuration is a system of pieces under spatial and “possible move” relationships...A *structure* is the abstract form of a system, highlighting the interrelationships among the objects, and ignoring any features of them that do not affect how they relate to other objects in the system.” (Shapiro 2000, 73)

“...there is an intuitive difference between an object and a place in a structure, between an officeholder and an office.” (82)

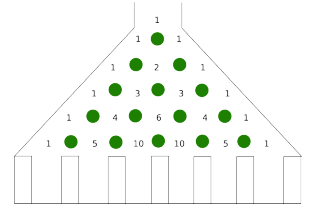
Office holder: Obama, Didier Drogba, small plastic tower

Office/Position: President of the United States, center forward (Chelsea), rook

- If it is *given* for the purposes of explanation that an individual occupies a position in a structure, then we must consider how its features are governed by the constraints defined by the structure’s internal relations. (Mary and the grading curve.)
- Sometimes questions about individuals/office holders are not the most fruitful. Consider a Galton Board (aka

Plinko): if we ask why a particular ball ended up where it did, why *it* landed there is a matter of chance. However, if the question is: Why do so few balls fall at each end (i.e., occupy those positions)? We can explain this by the structure of the board.

- Once we identify the structure we can also ask: why is the individual within this structure? Why does this structure/set of relations exist, rather than that?
- Reference to structures is needed to explain patterns, and also the behavior of individuals within structures that cause the patterns.



C. Dretske on structuring causes (In Dretske, ‘C’ is a cause and ‘M’ is a movement.)

In looking for the cause of a process, we are sometimes looking for the triggering event: what causes the C which caused the M. At other times we are looking for the event or events that shaped or structured the process: what caused C to cause M rather than something else. The first type of cause, the **triggering cause**, causes the process to occur *now*. The second type of cause, **the structuring cause**, is responsible for its being *this process*, one having M as its product, that occurs now... There is a clear difference between explaining why, on the one hand, Clyde stood up *then* and explaining, on the other hand, why what he did then was stand up (why he *stood up* then). He stood up *then* because that was when the queen entered, or when he saw the queen enter, the room. He *stood up* then as a gesture of respect. The difference between citing the triggering cause of a process (the cause of the C which causes M) and what I have been calling its structuring cause (the cause of C’s causing M) reflects this difference... (Dretske 1988, 42-3, my boldface)

In Dretske’s terms, if C is a cause and M a movement, then in

C causes M.

C is the triggering cause of M. But we may also want to know what causes [C causes M], i.e., why is it that [C causes M] rather than [C causes M’]? To answer this we need to find the structuring cause.

In some cases, the structuring cause is not only relevant to explaining how the event came about, but also what made it the event it is, e.g., a gesture of respect v. offense. (We’ll return to this.)

III. Example: *The Invisible Foot* (Okin 1989, Cudd 2006)

Question: Why do women continue to be economically disadvantaged relative to men?

- *Biologistic explanation*: women are innately disadvantaged in what it takes (intelligence, competitiveness, etc.) to be successful.
- *Individualistic explanation*: women prefer to spend time with children over being in a high-paying job (for whatever reason), so they choose to forego economic success.
- *Structural explanation*:
Imagine a couple, Larry and Lisa, who, let’s suppose, are equally intelligent, talented, educated, and experienced in the workplace; they have equal power in their relationship, have no prejudices about gender roles, and are equally capable of all domestic tasks and childrearing tasks. Larry and Lisa decide to have children. They live in a community where decent childcare is beyond their means. Moreover, in this community, as elsewhere, there is a wage gap: women, on average, make only 75% of what men make. Under these conditions, unless Larry and Lisa have special reasons to think that they are unusual in their earning capacities, it is reasonable for Larry to work full-time and for Lisa to make adjustments in her work, e.g., to work part-time, to take time off, to take a less demanding job. But in our society, “wealth determines power, domestic work is unpaid, and divorce laws do not evenly divide wealth.” (149) So Larry accrues greater human capital and ends up with more power in the relationship. Moreover, insofar as Larry and Lisa are typical, women on average will be poorer risks for employers who will “tend not to trust that women will stay with their careers or that if they do, they will devote the kind of time and energy to them that men will.” (149) As a result, ““women’s jobs” that require less commitment, mobility, and experience will pay less, and women will have to prove themselves exceptional to be considered for high paying “men’s jobs.” As a result, the pattern is reinforced. (Cudd 2006, 148-151)

Arguably, the invisible foot is a form of structural injustice, and it is a kind of injustice that does not become apparent when considering only biologistic or individualistic explanations. Consider:

3) Why did Lisa quit her job? (What caused the quitting?)

Plausibly, Lisa’s decision to not place Lulu in childcare is the *triggering cause* of her quitting her job. But why did Lisa quit her job rather than, say, take a leave of absence, or have Larry quit his job, or both go part-time and rely on grandparents, arrange to tele-commute... To answer these questions we need to find the *structuring cause*.

- 4_L) Why did Lisa's decision to avoid childcare for Lulu cause **her** to quit her job *as opposed to* Larry.
4_Q) Why did Lisa's decision to avoid childcare for Lulu cause her to **quit** her job *as opposed to* go part-time, tele-commute, etc?

The structuring causes concern Lisa's position within the structure of a workplace, the background institutions and opportunities for both parents, traditional social norms, e.g., that her employer doesn't offer paid leaves of absence or part-time work, that Lisa will be socially rewarded and Larry socially penalized for quitting.

We can push these questions deeper: once we identify the choice architecture within which Lisa made her decision, we can begin to ask, why are these the relevant set of options? Why does she have to choose between affordable crummy childcare, expensive quality childcare, or staying home with Lulu? Why isn't there a high-quality subsidized childcare center at her workplace? Identifying the social constraints on Lisa's decision enables us to raise new questions about those constraints, i.e., why is the social structure as it is?

The focus on structure provides resources for capturing regularities or patterns of action: those whose choices are similarly constrained will tend to act in similar ways, even if their personal histories, psychologies, and attitudes differ, e.g., Lisa and Mona may make similar choices re childcare even if they grew up in very different circumstances and are different in many other ways.

IV. Structures

So in order to play the right sort of role in structural explanation, social structures must impose constraints on our action. In effect, social structures provide us positions/offices within a set of relations defined by the structure.

A. Practices and constraints on action

There are many constraints on action (physical, biological, psychological), only some of which are social. How does the social constrain us? Is it just a matter of social expectations and attitudes such as blame and praise?

- Social relations include relations between people: being a parent of, being an employee of, being a spouse of; they also include relations to things: owning, occupying, driving, eating, herding. (Think of all the work we do in relation to things; work is not simply a physical or psychological relation).
- Start by considering practices, e.g., the practice of cooking dinner. What we do is conditioned by what food is available at what price, by expectations others have about what dinner looks/tastes like, by our traditions and moral framework, by the tools and time available, by information about health and diet, etc.
- There are at least three kinds of factors conditioning my dinner making:
 - my personal attitudes, habits, dispositions; the personal attitudes of those who will be eating.
 - *resources*: the materials/tools available (Note that materials/tools may also include skills, time?)
 - *schemas*: the collective concepts, narratives, expectations, those in my cultural milieu.

These three factors are tightly interdependent: collective expectations depend on individual attitudes and also influence individual attitudes; both individual attitudes and collective expectations affect what materials and tools are available, and the available materials affect attitudes.

- Both schemas and resources constrain (and enable) my action: I'm not going to cook idli if I don't know what idli are, if idli are just not what *we* eat, if I don't have an idli steamer or the ingredients, whereas I will cook pasta because it is what *we* eat, I have a box on the shelf, a way to heat water, and a colander.

B. Social constraints?

- Are schemas what *socially* constraint us? Perhaps: resources impose physical constraints, personal attitudes psychological constraints, and shared attitudes of a group (schemas) social constraints.
- But how do schemas constrain? The mechanisms seem to be psychological: I wear gender-acceptable clothes because there are gender clothing schemas in my community, and I believe that others will ridicule me if I don't wear gender-appropriate clothing and I don't want to deal with ridicule.
- But even if the psychological facts are triggering causes of our choices, they aren't what *socially* constrain our behavior. At the very least the social constraints must include the material manifestation of those assumptions in what is available for purchase, and the (threat of?) material consequences if we do not conform. In short, structures beyond my attitudes create my choice architecture.

- I can't cook idli without an idli steamer. This is not just a physical constraint, but a social constraint: the artifact is not available to me in my social milieu. I also can't cook idli for dinner, even if I have an idli steamer, if I am responsible for my family's meal and idli isn't what we eat (I take this to be more than just a matter of attitudes). What *food* I prepare is constrained both by the social materials available and the social meanings, over and above the physical objects and psychological attitudes. In such cases, action is socially constrained, i.e., it is constrained by social structures.
- Alternative hypothesis:
 Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute [social] *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time. (Sewell 1994, 13, my underline)

For example:

A factory is not an inert pile of bricks, wood, and metal. It incorporates or actualizes schemas....The factory gate, the punching-in station, the design of the assembly line: all of these features of the factory teach and validate the rules of the capitalist labor contract...In short, if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well... (Sewell 1994, 13)

V. Conclusion and Further Questions

Summary of take-home points:

- In providing structural explanations we are not looking, primarily, for triggering causes, but for structuring causes. We want to know now only what causes E, but what causes [C causes E].
- Explanation of individual action in structural terms situates individuals within "offices" in the structure. We explain the behavior of the individual *given* their place in a structure. The existence and shape of the structure also calls for explanation.
- Social structures consist in a network of social relations, some of which are to other people, some of which are to non-human animals, some to things; some are conscious and intentional (marriage), some are not (consumer vulnerability, racial privilege); some concern individuals, some relate groups, corporate entities, institutions, etc.
- It is a promising strategy to understand social relations in terms of practices, which themselves consist of interdependent schemas and resources. (This will be discussed further in the second and third lectures.)
- Offices/nodes in a structure of relations may be related causally (unemployment/crime), constitutively (what it is to be a rook is to be governed by the rook rules which specify allowable relations to other pieces), or regulatively (how a subject should behave in the presence of the queen).
- Resources, including material objects, mediate our relations to each other within a structure. In an important sense, we organize ourselves around resources; the resources, not only schemas, structure our behavior and play an important role in social explanation.
- A critique of social structures requires a normative theory that I have not provided here.

Further questions:

- What exactly is it for something (a relation, a structure, an object) to be *social*?
- What does it take for a physical object (and the like) to become a *resource* in the relevant sense?
- Can we get clearer on how schemas and resources "mutually imply" and "sustain each other"?

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