

# Anthony Giddens on Structuration

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Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration aims to find a 'third way' between, on the one hand, objectivist approaches like functionalism, social systems theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, which emphasize the pre-eminence of the social whole (structure) and the constraints they impose on individual participants whose knowledge about what they do is discounted, and on the other hand, subjectivist or voluntaristic approaches like hermeneutics and phenomenology, which tend to see the social whole in terms of the production and reproduction of individual agents who are taken to be essentially autonomous.

Giddens points out that structuralism takes the individual subjects whose activity is being studied to be 'sociological dopes' and simpleton prisoners of ideologies, discounting the knowledgeable ability of the participants in social processes. A distinctive feature of the theory of structuration is the idea of "reflexivity" – "There is no mechanism of social organization or social reproduction identified by social analysts which lay actors cannot also get to know about and actively incorporate into what they do" (1984, p. 284). So when a sociologist describes a social phenomenon they must expect that those whose actions are being described will use the sociologist's ideas to modify what they do. It is for this reason that the 'laws' which are the currency of natural science can never be manifested in social theory – the objects of research do not act independently of the knowing subject. This also implies that all social theorizing is itself an intervention in social life and history. Taking object and subject together, to a great extent it can be said that events unfold in a way reflecting reasoned, reflective activity by many different actors.

The predictability manifested in social life is largely 'made to happen' by strategically placed social actors, not in spite of them or 'behind their backs'. Far from people being driven to do what they do by remote or invisible 'structural forces', Giddens points out that "there is no such entity as a distinctive type of 'structural explanation' in the social sciences; all explanations will involve at least implicit references both to the purposive, reasoning behavior of agents and to its intersection with constraining and enabling features of the social and material contexts" (p. 179). The appearance of inevitability in the actions of actors arises from the limited options available to them on condition that they act rationally, and therefore actually rests on the presumption that social actors have good reasons for doing what they do. This is the meaning Giddens attaches to Marx's famous maxim: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (1852).

These reflections draw attention to Giddens' conception of the knowledgeable ability of social actors, to which I will turn shortly, because this is not purely a sociological question, but on the contrary is largely a question of Psychology.

Giddens also makes a devastating critique of functionalism. The principal idea of functionalism is that some event or social process happens because it is necessary to create the observed outcome, in particular the on-going reproduction of the social system. There is an ambiguity in this claim. A researcher who observes some situation

and figures out that this is evidence that some prior action must have taken place which functions as cause of the observed situation may be reasoning correctly. But it can form part of a valid explanation only to the extent that knowledge of this idea forms part of some agents' reasons for doing what they do. The need for the prior action to produce the observed outcome, in particular a stable social formation, is in itself no explanation at all, unless this is the conscious purpose of the agents in question. It was for this same reason that I have called Leontyev's version of Activity Theory functionalism. Functionalism poses questions, but it does not provide explanations. People have reasons for what they do and any explanation for their actions has to be in terms of their reasons and those of other actors for doing what they do, irrespective of whether the outcome is an expected result or an unintended consequence of all of their actions taken together.

This brings us to Giddens' conception of the knowledgeability of the social actors who are the objects of social theory, and the manner and extent to which the outcomes of their activity is a product of the reasons they have for doing what they do.

### The Knowledgeability of social actors

The limitations imposed on social theory by the segmentation of learning into academic disciplines is on display when Giddens sets out his Psychology. Giddens has never participated, so far as I know, in psychological research so must put together a Psychology to underpin his claims for the knowledgeability and motivation of social actors by picking and choosing from what is on offer from psychologists. His chosen psychologists are Erikson ("my appropriation [is] strictly limited and qualified") and Goffman, to shed light on the motivation of everyday interactions, and Freud. Giddens is to some extent aware of the problems in utilizing Freud, which he hopes to mitigate by substituting id, ego and superego in Freud's 1924 structural model with his own categories of basic security system, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness. This model bears little relation to Freud's, but 'practical consciousness' seems to approximate Freud's concept of the pre-conscious in his 1900 topographical model with the repressed unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious. In Giddens' schema:

"There is no bar between [practical and discursive consciousness], however, as there is between the unconscious and discursive consciousness. The unconscious includes those forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only in distorted form." (p. 4-5)

But Giddens still takes an indeterminate slab of Freud at face value, for example, in referring to the "back regions" (p. 128) where "back room deals" are made, and so on, he takes it that Freudian ideas about anal fixation are relevant to understanding these phenomena; likewise, Freudian slips may provide insight into unacknowledged motives. This really is not good enough. If one wants to create a social theory which genuinely overcomes the dichotomy between the reproduction of agents and structures, it is not good enough to equip a sophisticated social theory with a do-it-yourself bag of borrowed psychological tools.

The core of Giddens' ideas about agents' knowledgeability are his conceptions of practical and discursive consciousness. From the point of view of the Vygotskian Psychology which I use there are problems with this idea. However, it has to be said

that the obvious fact, from which he makes a beginning, that social actors have a relatively sound practical knowledge of the activities in which they are engaged is a vast improvement over structural and functionalist 'explanations' of the activity of social actors. As to the related conception of agents' motivation, I will come to this later.

The category of discursive consciousness is relatively clear, and "Every competent social actor ... is *ipso facto*, a social theorist on the level of discursive consciousness" (p. 18). But the key category of practical consciousness is unclear, particularly in terms of its genesis and so far as I know not based on psychological research – it is just consciousness which is not discursive but nonetheless implicated in behavior. Giddens' use of Freud is most problematic here because he holds that cognition and motivation may also originate from what Freud called the Unconscious, an entirely mythical construction (See Vygotsky 1928, §7). As Giddens says, there is no barrier between practical and discursive consciousness; when asked to give reasons for what they do an actor may offer what must be taken as an interpretation of their own practical consciousness, rather than being able to simply put practical consciousness into words. Nonetheless, social actors will generally have a far reaching practical knowledge of their activity and its context and ramifications and utilize this knowledge in the activity.

This fact – that social actors have good reasons for their actions, based on relatively sound knowledge – together with the fact that actors' knowledgeability and control over the consequences of their actions is *bounded*, constitute the rational core of the theory of structuration.

Undoubtedly, a social actor makes use of resources, whether allocative or authoritative, without necessarily having conscious awareness (see Vygotsky, 1934) of them and their limits. But how does an agent come to know the limits of those resources other than through what is communicated to them as part of discursive consciousness? How do they learn what they can and can't do? This is a problem for Giddens, because the key concept underlying his conception of agents' knowledgeability is *routine*.

His unit of analysis seems to be the individual agent confronting an on-going practice which although not created by the individual participant, is continuously reproduced and possibly modified by them through their participation. The underlying vision is one of individuals routinely enacting institutions. These practices are taken to form a *continuous flow*, and in an infinite feedback loop they are creating the conditions for, the motivations and reasons for their continuation. So people have their reasons for participating, but they do so under conditions already created by the existence of the practice itself and other such practices.

The knowledgeability of agents is finite however and there are unintended consequences for what people do. According to Giddens: "Every research investigation in the social sciences or history is involved in relating action to structure, in tracing, explicitly or otherwise, the conjunction or disjunctions of intended and unintended consequences of activity and how these affect the fate of individuals" (p. 219). These unintended consequences of a practice form part of the conditions in which a person takes up a practice and thereby sustains it.

## Routines

Institutions are essentially routines which are enacted by participants with the aid of 'rules' and resources. It is in this concept of routine that the subject matter of Sociology overlaps with the subject matter of Psychology.

“The concept of *routinization*, as grounded in practical consciousness, is vital to the theory of structuration. Routine is integral to both the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which *are* such only through their continued production. An examination of routinization ... provides us with a master key ...” (p. 60)

The point is not routines, but *routinization*, the *formation* of routines and their acquisition by the individuals who will sustain them. But Giddens has not explained how a practice *becomes* a routine, thereafter taken for granted, or how routines are changed by the very people who apparently require them for their ‘ontological security’. Giddens insists that routines are essentially *continuous*, and must be distinguished from acts, and on this basis, he claims that routines are essentially *unmotivated*.

“But it makes no more sense to claim that every act or gesture is motivated – meaning that a definite ‘motive’ can be attached to it – than it does to treat action as involving a string of intentions or reasons. ... Action ... cannot be satisfactorily be conceptualised as an aggregate of acts. .... rather than supposing that every ‘act’ has a corresponding ‘motive’, we have to understand the term ‘motivation’ to be a processual one. What this means concretely is that the unconscious only rarely impinges directly upon the reflexive monitoring of conduct. Nor are the connections involved solely dependent upon psychological mechanisms within the personality of the individual actor; they are mediated by the social relations which individuals sustain in the routine practices of their daily lives.” (p. 50)

It is the sense of ‘ontological security’ that a person gains from the approval of colleagues and the predictability of day to day life which Giddens sees as sustaining practices. It seems to me that instead of the structuralists’ ‘sociological dope’ what we have here a ‘motivational cripple’. But more importantly, I believe that this concept of unmotivated, continuous routines and the rejection of the idea of routines being composed of discrete, motivated actions which constitute *units* of social action (See Blunden 2014), is a grave methodological error. In particular, it makes the genesis of routines mysterious, and therefore prevents the true nature of routines from being revealed.

The Russian drama theorist, Constantin Stanislavskii (1936), expressed the opposite opinion in his direction to actors performing a ‘routine’ series of actions. Action, he says, has a “channel,” the motivation for which flows from the plot, and it this channel which is motivating a whole series of actions (e.g. going home); the channel is divided into separate “units” (e.g. looking in a shop window, crossing the road) each of which has its particular motive. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) agrees with this three-tier structure of motivation, a conception on which its analysis of action is based.

This does not destroy the concept of ‘routine’ but does suggest that the idea of routine being ‘unmotivated’ is psychologically false. This issue also sheds light on the relation between what Giddens calls ‘practical consciousness’ and ‘discursive consciousness’.

## Practical Consciousness

As consciousness which is not discursive but nonetheless is implicated in activity, practical consciousness subsumes several distinct categories of consciousness distinguished by their genesis. On the one hand, 'practical intelligence' is the first kind of intelligence acquired by an infant through their handling of their own body and artifacts; practical intelligence continues to develop through adulthood in the development of practical skills, but also underpins the development of discursive intelligence from when a child begins to master speech. Practical intelligence is indeed the kind of intelligence which is not easily expressed in words. On the other hand, operational knowledge, exercised in 'operations', is genetically connected with the development of all kinds of skill, whether practical or discursive. The important category which is skated over by Giddens is conscious awareness. Actions/operations, whether of a practical or symbolic character, may be executed consciously or without conscious awareness.

Operational knowledge is the kind of knowledge and skill which is deployed continuously in carrying out actions. Facility in using some word, gesture or tool, or in acting appropriately in relation to some person or context, is acquired at first with conscious awareness; in time, as we become used to using the action under different conditions we begin to use it without conscious control – otherwise it would be impossible to type or walk down the street or engage in a conversation without suffering from mental overload! Each such action enacted without conscious awareness and controlled by the goal of an action of which it forms a component parts and by the conditions, is called an *operation* (think of learning to tie your shoelaces).

Included in operational knowledge are interpersonal skills including everyday language use, the capacity to use and read facial expressions, etc., which are acquired spontaneously. Vygotsky called this kind of knowledge 'potential concepts' and it is indeed a kind of knowledge shared with nonhuman creatures.

However, in addition to everyday operations acquired spontaneously, when we participate in the activity of an *institution* where we are required to conform to the expectations of the institution and further its aims, operations are acquired with conscious awareness and generally with a degree of difficulty. Although operations are executed without conscious control, when something goes awry, we become immediately consciously aware of it. For example, when walking down the street one automatically steps over a curb without thinking about it, but if you trip, suddenly your feet and balance come under conscious control. When in the course of enacting a practice something goes awry – you inadvertently disrespect a boss or behave too freely with a customer – this has two effects: the operations routinely carried out without conscious control suddenly become part of conscious awareness and are brought under conscious control, and the agents concerned suffer a moment of embarrassment of the kind which not only leads to modification of the given routine, to better align it with its motive, but also to learning and personality development. If the operation has been adequately acquired, a moment's attention is all that is required for a subject to know what was wrong.

Another category of action of which the subject may be aware or not arises from the fact that what is taken to be the normal form of action appropriate to a given social position in some institution may in fact be something which is subject to interpretation. Institutions harbor legitimate conflicts over the proper ways to pursue the object of the

institution, differences which have a variety of social roots within the institution, and the degree of awareness of these differences will be variable.

Another category of action which could be subsumed under Giddens' concept of 'practical consciousness' arises when people are participating in institutions. In some cases, and always to some extent, a person fully understands and embraces the aims of the institution. But in general, people have their own reasons for participating in an institution, such as earning a wage, furthering their career, organizing the union or simply to enjoy the social interaction. Such an alternative 'agenda' may or may not be explicit, may be more or less repressed according to the relevant norms, and may be subordinate to the institutional requirements or may actually be, for that individual, the leading activity.

It can be seen that Giddens' category of 'practical consciousness' is quite inadequate to encompass the variety of forms of consciousness and their genesis relevant to acquiring, maintaining or changing routines. So long as routines are understood as unmotivated, continuous processes, it is impossible to reveal the sources of motivation and the potential for social change.

### Concepts and Motives

I argue that, following Stanislavskii, Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists, routines are a series of actions each of which have their own goal and is consciously controlled by the subject. However, the goal of an action is not the same as its motive. That is, when we ask "why did the chicken cross the road?" a valid answer must be something other than "to get to the other side" – there has to be a reason. Conscious control is exercised over actions pursuant to the motive of the entire *activity*, what Stanislavskii called "the channel," which provides the motivation for all the component actions.

The activity is made up of many actions which may be carried out by many different social actors, and its motive is represented by the actors as the *concept* of the activity, or institution. It is this concept which orients their actions and provides them with a "channel," and gives meaning to all the subjects' actions. This concept is supported symbolically in multiple ways, both through the actions of other people, and in the case of institutions, the built environment, and all manner of 'texts'. The various actions which make up the routines of the institution relate to the concept of the institution in the same way as many different word-meanings are required to constitute a *concrete* concept; an abstract definition is insufficient. Conflicts within an institution manifest the differing nuances and contradictions within the concept, and the ideal culture of a community is found in the constellation of these concepts, reflecting the manifold interconnection of institutions with each other, everyday life and social movements.

This allows us to understand how routine practices are formed, how participants acquire them and learn to operate the prerogatives and obligations appropriate to their social position, and amend these over time in the light of experience and social interaction with others.

The concept a person has of an institution within or in relation to which they are active, gives them a concrete form within which their knowledgeability of the practices they are participating in is developed.

Institutions are always 'for' something, which contributes no doubt to the appearance of functionalism in people's activity, and the institution's motive is intrinsic to its concept. Understanding what an institution is for is something that can be solved

concretely only through understanding the entire history of the institution, with the founding of the institution being a key moment, usually followed by other transformative moments. Institutions in general *solve some problem* or a complex or series of such problems, and in this sense have to be understood as the continuation of a social movement, or a number of such social movements. The pursuit of a concept which provides the motivation for actors is quite explicit in a social movement, and this does not disappear when it achieves that crucial moment of realization when it is institutionalized. Concepts likewise have to be understood as capturing the solution of some problem (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 126).

“Awareness of social rules, expressed first and foremost in practical consciousness, is the very core of that ‘knowledgeability’, which specifically characterizes human agents.” (Giddens, p. 22-23)

The fact that people are not *consciously aware* of these social rules does not take away from the fact that insofar as they relate to institutional life, they are invariably learnt through some kind of instruction, whether formal or informal, and generally grasped through concepts, and as soon as any such rule is violated it springs immediately into conscious awareness.

So people understand what is required of them and are able to problem-solve when contradictions arise. This does not in itself however resolve the problem of an agent’s motivation. An individual may not be wholly committed to a project and nor will they all have the same concept of it. People are always committed to a number of different projects and it is the relation between the various projects which determines the nature of a person’s commitment to any one of them. The classic example of this would be the wage earner whose commitment to their employer’s institution is purely instrumental, and their leading activity may be raising a family, using their wages for that purpose. This is an extreme case however, and most employees have some degree of commitment to where they work or their profession.

The web of commitments which motivates a person certainly cannot be adequately represented in terms of unmotivated routines serving to bolster someone’s ontological security.

### Unintended consequences and conceptual development

Where Giddens’ work reaches the limits of Psychology and passes over into sociology proper is when he investigates the limits of an agent’s knowledgeability. While emphasizing that social actors generally possess an extensive knowledge about the practices in which they are involved and its ramifications, there is a point beyond which they cannot control the impact of what they do and activity enters into the domain of unintended consequences.

“Every research investigation in the social sciences or history is involved in relating action to structure, in tracing, explicitly or otherwise, the conjunction or disjunctions of intended and unintended consequences of activity and how these affect the fate of individuals.” (p. 219)

The important category of unintended consequences of participation in a practice are those which form part of the conditions for agents to take up a practice (understood as an *on-going* practice) and thereby sustain it. Giddens uses some examples such as the fallacy of composition and the tragedy of the commons to show how actions which are rational for each agent may have perverse effects when combined, to illustrate how the

unintended consequences of rational practices may form systematic and predictable outcomes. Among such outcomes are the very conditions which sustain a practice.

Further, the concept of the boundedness of agents' knowledgeability in relation to their own activity encompasses the fact that in relation to social processes lying *outside* the sphere of their own immediate experience people may be profoundly ill-informed and misguided. Vygotsky used the term 'diffuse concept' to indicate the forms of knowledge which are constructed by extending local knowledge beyond the bounds of its validity. So even in relation to unintended consequences there is a psychological component. According to Giddens:

"Homeostatic system reproduction in human society can be regarded as involving the operation of causal loops, in which a range of unintended consequences of action feed back to reconstitute the initiating circumstances." (p. 27)

Nonetheless:

"Specification of those bounds [on agents' knowledgeability] allows the analyst to show how unintended consequences of the activities in question derive from what the agents did intentionally." (p. 294)

This shows how the appearance of functional and purely structural causation – both of which are illusory – can be created by the actions of perfectly rational people who are not 'sociological dopes'. And the reason that the theory of structuration, which has the knowledgeability of agents at its centre, does not descend into representing societies as intentional communities, is because knowledgeability is always bounded.

Agency, says Giddens, is the *capacity* to make a difference, and is not limited to a person's intentions. Holding some social position, such as an office in some institution, and in general participation in some project, does not mean that the agent has to play some *role*, as if acting out a script dictated by structural or functional imperatives, but simply that they have certain prerogatives and obligations, and it is in this that a person's agency resides (a king can abolish the monarchy for example). Some unintended consequences are within the scope of what a person could control, and these are consequences for which he/she is an agent, and is morally responsible for, whatever may have been their intentions; and some consequences are both unforeseeable and beyond the control of the person who carries out an initial action. In this case the actor should not be seen as the agent for those consequences.

It seems to me, however, that this does not settle the question of agency. Individuals make a difference only by means of collaboration with others, whether that is an office holder in some institution or as a participant in a social movement. Entering into such collaborations is almost invariably voluntary and done for good reason. Individuals exercise agency and bear moral responsibility for the difference they make *as part of collaborative projects*. It is really only the project that makes the difference, not the individual, but a project is not some ethereal social function or remote and invisible structure, but the aggregate of collaborative actions by the individuals who participate in it.

### Institutions and social movements

I take it that there is no hard and fast line between an institution and a social movement; a movement's objectification is never permanent but always liable to disruption and reactivation of the movement's aims. At the very least, institutions form

an arena in which social movements contest for dominion. It is only by making institutions continuous with social movements that the cultural and conceptual basis for an institution's existence can be grasped. For Giddens, however:

“I shall distinguish two main types of collectivity ... associations and organizations (all reproduction occurs in and through the regularized conduct of knowledgeable agents) ... [and on the other hand] social movements.” (p. 199)

This dichotomy is the reason for the conception of institutions as ‘routines’. By comprehending both social movements and institutions under a single developmental concept, the motivational springs of institutional life are made visible.

## Conclusion

It seems to me impossible that social theory can resolve the dichotomy aptly characterized by Giddens as the dualism of structure and agency so long as sociologists continue to rely on Freud or improvised psychological theories. As I have previously advocated (Blunden 2006), Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory are uniquely placed to overcome the dichotomy which has its roots in the disciplinary structure of the academy.

Two specific methodological defects in Giddens' work: (1) That he makes his unit of analysis a *continuous process*, and (2) that he takes a taxonomic rather than a phylogenetic approach to analysis, have prevented Giddens from achieving his goal of overcoming the dichotomy.

However, the key insights are that (1) social actors must be recognized as having significant knowledgeable ability concerning their own activity, while this knowledgeable ability is *bounded*, so that (2) social phenomena must be understood and explained in terms that include understanding the good reasons social actors have for doing what they do.

These insights should dispose of functionalism and structuralism for good.

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