

The interactions between structure and agency



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How does the work of Giddens help us to understand the interactions between structure and agency?

Anthony Giddens has become one of the first few British social theorists in recent times to have an international reputation for his influential work on social theory (Craib, 1992). According to Craib, the work of Giddens is very influential, not only because of its quantity but also for the range of different ideas it brings together (Craib, 1992).

In this essay, I will discuss and critically analyse how the work of Giddens help us to understand the interactions between structure and agency. I will first outline and define what the terms structure and agency mean, according to both classical theorists and Anthony Giddens.

Structure can be defined as 'pattern' of social relationships and a system that identifies how these patterns operate in the society. In functionalism, Structure is a broad term defined by its 'function' (Giddens, 1979). On the other hand, In Structuralism, 'structure' is defined as more explanatory in nature due to the element of transformations. The difference between structure and function is similar to the one between code and message; both are dependants on each other (Giddens, 1979).

Hence, both functionalism and structuralism share overall characteristics between each other. The difference between 'structure' and 'system' is that structures are patterns of social relationships whereas system refers to the actual functioning of such relationships (Giddens, 1979).

According to Giddens, structure is when the rules and resources are organised as properties of social systems. Whereas systems are reproduced relations between actors organised as social practices. Structuralisms are the conditions governing the duality of both structure and system for the reproduction of social systems (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens states that, 'structure' means a structural property providing the binding of time and space in social systems. These properties are the rules and resources for the reproduction of social systems.

Thus, structure means the study of the following, firstly the knowledge, how things are to be done by social actors. Secondly, social practices which are used to gain that knowledge. And lastly, capabilities of these practices for example what they can change (Giddens, 1979).

In social sciences, structural analysis involves the study of Structutaion of social systems. Hence, rules and practices exist in conjunction with one another.

In a nutshell, we can say that, Structures are rules and resources, which are organised as properties of social systems. Whereas systems are reproduced relationships between actors organised as social practices. Structutaion are the conditions deciding the continuity or transformation of structures and systems (Giddens, 1979).

Both functionalism and structuralism are very similar despite their differences, they both express a naturalistic standpoint and hence they both

prefer objectivism. Giddens argues that agents reproduce the conditions that make human social activities possible (Giddens, 1984).

Duality of structure can be viewed in many ways, it's a conformist way looking at structure, something which constrains action or even determines it. It is difficult to assume that structure and agency are the same thing, however they do have many similarities. According to Giddens, it is social practices which constitute us as actors (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens argues that agency is the centre of sociological concern; however the crucial feature of action is that it is not determined. Giddens claims that action is a continuous flow, a process whereby it can't be broken down into reasons and motives. He argues that rather it is a process in which we monitor and rationalize our daily actions (Turker, 1998).

According to Giddens, agency involves a notion of practical consciousness, such as all the things that we know as social actors, and hence must know to make social life happen. Giddens see the relationship between structure and agency as the duality of structure, whereby individuals reflexively produce and reproduce their social life (Turker, 1998).

According to Giddens, agency is when an individual is able to observe his/her own experience and then be able to give reasons for their action. Agency should be identified with reasoning and knowledge (Turker, 1998).

Giddens argues that we as actors know what we are doing, hence we are conscious of these things, we routinely rationalize what we do. Giddens argues that as individuals we can often give a rational account of what we

are doing. Giddens states that a sense of routine is needed in order to have self security. For example, if your daily routine is broken you are more likely to feel insecure (Craib, 1992).

Agency and Power, an agent (individual) is able to act or influence the outside world or resist from such intervention. In other words, to be an agent means to be able to use range of casual (daily life) powers such as influential powers that may already be used or deployed by others (Giddens, 1984).

Whereas, action depends upon the capability of those individuals to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs in the society. An agent doesn't exist anymore when he or she loses the capability to make a difference or in other words, when they lose power (Giddens, 1984).

In terms of sociology, power can be defined as the will or capacity to achieve desired and intended outcomes. Giddens, agrees with Bachrach and Baratz when they classify two faces of power, which are, firstly the capability of individuals to influence decisions and secondly the mobilization of bias (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens argues that the resources are the structured properties of social systems, taken and improved by knowledgeable agents or individuals in the society during their course of interaction. Giddens further goes on to state that, power is not just connected to the achievement of the individual's interests. Power itself is not a resource; resources are media through which power is exercised (Giddens, 1984).

In social science, structure refers to the structuring properties allowing the 'binding' of time-space in social systems (Giddens, 1984). It will not be right to call structures as rules and resources due to its different implications in philosophical literature. The difference between structure and rules is that rules are often connected with games but they are different in terms of social systems (Giddens, 1984). Rules are frequently treated in the singular; hence rules cannot be separated from resources. However, on the other hand structural properties represent domination and power (Giddens, 1984).

The Structutaion theory states that rules and resources used in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction.

Therefore, we can say that a 'rule' is more or less similarly to having a habit or routine (Giddens, 1984). Habit is a part of routine and have significant role in social life. Whereas, rules of social life are techniques or generalised procedures applied in reproduction of social practices (Giddens, 1984).

Furthermore, formulated rules can be expressed such as bureaucratic rules, rules of games and so on. Knowledge of procedure of doing 'social activity' is methodological (Giddens, 1984). As social actors, all human beings are highly knowledgeable in the production and reproduction of day to day activities. This knowledge is more practical rather than theoretical in nature.

On the other hand, what does 'intentional' mean? According to Giddens it is an act carried out by an individual when he knows there will be particular outcome or quality of that act (Giddens, 1984). Hence, this knowledge of specific outcome is known to the individual when he starts pursuing that

particular act. According to Giddens, there is a difference between what is intended and what is done (Giddens, 1984).

The consequences of what agents do, intentionally or unintentionally, are the events which could have not happened if the individuals had behaved differently (Giddens, 1984). The consequences play an important role in deciding what agent has done.

Merton has claimed that the study of unintended consequences is very important in the sociological system. Every activity can have two functions, Non-Significant Consequences or either Significant Consequences (Giddens, 1984).

Merton differentiates intentional activity from its unintended consequences. For example, if an individual is intending to turn the light switch on, he or she might face a consequence to trigger the alarm but not with an intention to call the police or to get caught by them and spend rest of his /her life in the jail. Here, the intentional activity was just to turn the light on; however, due to unintended consequences (alarm being triggered) the outcome was different (Giddens, 1984).

On the other hand, both Freud and Giddens claim that there are mini agents within the human agent. Freud states that these mini agents within the human agents decide their actions. These mini agents have been classified as “id”, “ego” and “super ego”. However, Giddens doesn't agree with Freud when he says it is ego (mini agent) within the human agents that decides their actions (Mestrovic, 1998).

Here “id” or “unconscious behaviour” means the desires that these agents create within the mind of an individual (human agent) that is beyond rational thinking and consciousness (Mestrovic, 1998).

Freud’s usage of “unconsciousness” was later replaced by Giddens terminology of unconscious motives. Freud referred things like sexual and violent urges to state of unconsciousness while Giddens simply defined “unconsciousness” as state of mind when human beings are not conscious of something or in other words they cannot express their feelings into words. This explanation was given by Giddens without using any analysis from any other social theorists (Mestrovic, 1998).

Giddens has stated that there should be a democratic relationship between a parent and a young child. For example, it is the right of the child, to be treated as equal to an adult. It needs to be justified when we say “no you are too young” to negotiate with children. However, it is difficult for an adult parent to make their child understand about sexual stereotypes without causing any emotional damage to the child (Mestrovic, 1998).

The modernists believe culture should be blamed for this but the reality is that these children freely select what they like according to their own preferences. Because the rational abilities of the children are not fully developed so they may react to culture in an emotional way. Hence, even critics have accepted Giddens viewpoint that sociology is the study of modern societies and also recognise his significant contribution in the field of social theory (Mestrovic, 1998).

On the other hand, Wittgensteinian Philosophy has only emphasized on action theory (nature of reasons or intentions) rather than structural explanation. They haven't taken into consideration several other elements such as social change, power relations or conflicts in the society (Giddens, 1979). Furthermore, Durkheim argues that society and individuals have different characteristics and every person is born into an already constituted society. However, he failed to support this external or objective nature of the society in his writings (Giddens, 1979).

According to Giddens, risk and trust need to be analyzed together in late modernity. Giddens emphasis the fact that active trust is needed in today's society in order to form social solidarity and personal ties. For example, many people who are in relationships, spend much of their time away from each other living in different countries, hence active trust is needed for the relationship to continue. Trust has to be won and actively sustained for relationships to be successful. Giddens argues that in today's society we see that more women are now divorcing their marriage partners; this then leads them to leading the household by themselves, which then leads to poverty (Giddens, in Beck et al, 1994).

Giddens argues that society is produced and also reproduced through human action; hence he rejects any view which states that society might have an existence over individuals (Craib, 1992). Duality of structure is linked to Structutaion, Gidden argues that society normally sees structure as a determining feature of social life, however this is not always the case (Craib, 1992).

Giddens also takes the notion of reflexivity very seriously, the way in which we represent our social world. In his work, Giddens talks about different types of knowledge, one of the knowledge Giddens mentions is the taken-for-granted knowledge, which plays an important part in Giddens' theory. In other words, this relates to ontological security whereby an individual has a sense of the world and the people around him are more or less the same from day to day (Craib, 1992).

Furthermore, Giddens states that reflexivity should not be understood only in terms of self-consciousness, but also as the ongoing flow of social life (Giddens, 1984). According to Giddens, actors are continuously monitoring their activities; they monitor aspects both physically and socially. Giddens also states that human action can only be defined in terms of intention (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens argues that we are incorrect to assume that societies are somehow continuous with geographical borders; rather he believes that systems are more or less open and therefore cut across geographical boundaries (Craib, 1992).

Giddens believes that faith is entirely based on trust and vice-versa. In fact, they are closely related to each other. However, he has been criticised by his fellow sociologists for putting too much emphasis on this. For example, human beings have to show faith in things such as religion, science, technology and even teachers' notes (Mestrovic, 1998). If there was no faith in these social agents then this modern world would not be able to function properly. On the other hand, we also trust these politicians, scientists,

teachers and various other social agents to build up the faith process (Mestrovic, 1998).

Over one hundred articles have been published in scholarly journals on Anthony Giddens and his work and very few of them seriously challenged him. The most significant criticism of Giddens concept of structuration ignores the idea of culture. In the modern society, culture plays a vital role so it needs to be studied in detail. Giddens sometime speaks like a typical Politician rather than being a social theorist. For instance, at one point he talks about a democratic system in the society. Whereas on the other hand, he justifies that sometimes individual interest are different from the common minority groups.

During his work on Structuration theory, Giddens does not emphasize that much on the social environment's influence on sociology. Giddens argues that social structures are both the condition and the outcome of people's daily activities; hence one cannot exist without the other. Giddens theory is very similar to Bourdieu; like Bourdieu, Giddens states that social practices are hugely important to the ongoing reproduction of societies (Tucker, 1998).

On the other hand, Nicos Mouzelis argues that Giddens in his book 'The Constitution of society' didn't give enough emphasis to the constraining effects of social structure. (Bryant and Jary, 2001). Though, Giddens replied back to his critic by Mouzelis and stated that Mouzelis critic was not justified in terms of the content of what he wrote (Bryant and Jary, 2001).

Furthermore, throughout his work Giddens makes a great deal of the notion of time and space. Criab argues that Giddens deals with time and space on <https://assignbuster.com/the-interactions-between-structure-and-agency/>

two different levels and unless they are clearly distinguished, his work is difficult to understand and confusing (Craib, 1992).

In social theory, action and structure are inter-dependent (or are linked to each other)

' Action' or ' agency' is a continuous flow of conduct (regular series of acts).

To study the structure of the society is like studying the anatomy of the organisms, where you have to study a number of small functions (Giddens, 1979).

Furthermore, Giddens mentions that an understanding of action and structure is needed regardless of what problem one is seeking to analyse (Bryant and Jary, 2001). On the whole, Giddens provides us with evidence through examples and theories to show and help us understand the interaction between structure and agency.

ANTHONY GIDDENS-THE LAST MODERNIST, By S G Mestrovic, Routledge (1998) “ The role of desire in agency and structure”

Anthony Giddens, 1984, “ The Constitution of Society”, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Agency and Structure, Anthony Giddens (1979) “ Central Problems in Social Theory”

Risk, Trust, Reflexivity – Giddens (In Beck et al, 1994)

Reading 5 – Craib , I (1992) Modern Social Theory – Structutaion theory: There is such a thing as society, there is no such thing as society

Reading 6 – The contemporary Giddens and Social theory in a Globalizing age (Bryant and Jary, 2001)

Reading 7 – Structutaion theory – Craib, I (1992) Anthony Giddens

Anthony Giddens, and Modern Social theory/ Tucker, Kenneth, London, Sage (1998) Structuration theory: