

Mediating Ontological Stances in Social Sciences: Bridging the Dilemma Between Agency and Structure on Studying Social Phenomena

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Abstract

With a critical consideration of Giddens' theory of structuration, this paper set out to bridge the agency-structure dilemma by illustrating how to apply Giddens' theory of structuration in studying crime and criminal behaviors in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the author come up with the argument that both agency and structures are the two sides of a coin that we could not separately attribute to a given social phenomena.

Keywords: Ontological Stance, Agency, Structure, Structuration, Contemporary Sociological Theory, Crime.

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Introduction

Throughout history social thinkers from different disciplines have tries to understand social phenomena. In doing this, scholars have employed different perspectives since there is no universal consensus among social theorists on whether individuals produces social life through voluntary action or 'agency', or whether it is the 'structures' of social rules and processes that operate independently of the agent that determines agency. With this regard, social theories has been classified into two main groups holding two polarized ontological stances, that either favor social structures (for example, structuralism), or underline on social action (for example, symbolic interactionism).

As noted by Rose (1998) for structuralist, human social existence is largely determined by the overall structure of society and the perceived agency of individuals can mostly be explained by the operation of this structure. In contrast to this, other theoretical systems such as social phenomenology, interactionism and ethnomethodology stress the capacity of individual "agents" to construct and reconstruct their worlds.

The reason for these alienating and polarizing ideologies stems from the underling dilemma of considering either agency or structure to explain social phenomena, with the added feature that both claim to provide the only and absolute perspective to understand social phenomenon.

Different from the above positions, a third option, taken by many modern social theorists such as Antony Giddens, is to attempt to find a point of balance between the two previous positions. They observe structure and agency as paired forces. Hence, structure influences human behavior, and humans are capable of changing the social structures they inhabit. Giddens' theory of structuration is one prominent example of this view (Lye, 1997).

With a critical consideration of Giddens' theory of structuration, this paper set out to bridge the agency-structure dilemma by illustrating how to apply Giddens' theory of structuration in studying crime and criminal behaviors in Ethiopia. Therefore, it can show us that both agency and structures are the two sides of a coin that we could not separately attribute to a given social phenomena.

An Overview of Agency-Structure Debate

There is no universal consensus among social theorists on whether individuals produces social life through voluntary action or 'agency', or whether it is the 'structures' of social rules and processes that operate independently of the agent that determines agency. As a result, the notion of agency and structure to be the sole attribute for explaining social behavior has been debatable until today.

Basically, the debate is held between theorists committed to the notions of methodological holism and those devotes to methodological individualism. On the one hand, theorists who stands for methodological holism disseminates the idea that individuals are socialized and embedded into social structures and institutions that constrain, or enable, and generally shape the individuals' dispositions towards, and capacities for action, and that this social structure should be taken as primary and most significant. On the other hand, those who support methodological individualism come up with the idea that actors are the central theoretical and ontological elements in social systems, and social structure is an epiphenomenon, a result and consequence of the actions and activities of interacting individuals (Seidman, 1998).

Opposed to these line of thinking Anthony Giddens has came with the theory of structuration, arguing that structure and agency as paired forces, hence structure influences human behavior, and humans are capable of changing the social structures they inhabit. Since this paper sets out to mediate the existing dilemma between agency and structure, Giddens' theory of structuration is used to frame the paper and his theory is briefly highlighted up on below.

Key Concepts in Structuration Theory

Giddens in his theory of structuration has perceived social systems as being constituted by the activities of human agents. Drawing from ethnomethodology, he acknowledged agents as being highly skilled (knowledgeable) about their environment and interactions across time and space (Contextuality), as they draw from rules and resources (structural properties) available to them. Thus, social life is constructed and reconstructed based on the meanings people attach to their actions. He defines people as an 'agents of action' enabled and constrained by Knowledgeability, that is 'Everything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others', yet at the same time there is a great deal that they do not know about the unacknowledged conditions and consequences of their activities but, which, nevertheless influence their actions. To this effect, the more knowledgeable an agent is about their social context and the social structures available to them, the more capacity they are assumed to have in exercising their agency (Giddens, 1984).

Agency

According to Giddens (1984) agency is individuals capacity for acting in the first place, implying 'power to do', and is achieved by access to, and application of, structural properties (the rules and resources), which generate modalities of social control. He further explained agency as a continuous flow of conduct. Thus, each act, which contributes to the reproduction of a structure, is simultaneously an act of production and may initiate change by altering that structure which is simultaneously being produced. To this end, actors are knowledgeable agents who act on the basis of both *practical consciousness* (i.e. implicit knowledge which cannot be formulated discursively) and *discursive consciousness* (i.e. which the actors can talk about).

The implication of Giddens notion of agency in studying crime and criminal behavior can tell us that all people, regardless of their social background, have the capacity to become offenders. At the same time Giddens notion of agency has also show us how the application of structural properties (i.e. rules and resources), which was formulated by agents, are used as a mechanism for controlling individuals action.

Knowledgeability

In the notion of knowledgeability Giddens (1984) states that the *knowledgeable* social actor knows a great deal about the circumstances of self and others' actions, including the consequences of these actions in day to day life. In this regard, Giddens has acknowledged every person as possessing the capacity or 'agency' to act differently and change social practice through agency. As a result, latent assumptions, discourses, ideologies and constructions become exposed to be reproduced and recreated through interaction and dialogue, though in slight dimensions.

Let's take a look at the most common criminal behavior offended by political elites in Ethiopia, to better understand what Giddens want to convey in his concept of knowledgeability. What is least controvertible in Ethiopia is the fact that most of higher government officials are noticed as being accused of corruption. It is equally true that the accused government officials hide the evidence which make them guilty, since they are aware of the consequences resulted from their respective corrupted action. Even if they are arrested for being guilty of their action, they engaged in searching for ways to be released out of being arrested. While some of them may achieve though their charge seems serious, some of them may not succeed though their charge seems a bit easy. From this we can understand that individual agents are conscious of their action including the consequences resulted from their action.

Contextuality of Interaction across Time and Space

Another key concept in Giddens structuration theory is the notion of *contextuality*. Giddens (1984) has defined contextuality as an important factor to investigate social reproduction. In this regard, for Giddens contextuality is the situated character of interaction across time and space, involving the setting of interaction. He has noted that time intersects with space and is centered on the agent who is *positioned* during encounters, and who influences how time and space are used. Such encounters frequently create cyclic or recursive patterns of social activity producing *locales* of interaction. On the one hand, physical settings and their connected rules and regulations provide social structures that can enable and constrain encounters over time. On the other way, stability of time and space interactions contribute to *the recursive nature of life*, which reproduce structures that then reproduce social practice. As a result of knowing what to do, and when, is assumed to provide agents with a sense of safety or *ontological security* and can be understood as a 'coping mechanism' facilitating daily activities (Giddens, 1991).

To understand the contextuality of interaction across time and space in studying crime and criminal behaviors in Ethiopia, let's consider someone who is accused of being offender. In the time of investigation he/she may give his/her speech to the police officers as he/she offends. However, when he/she is presented to the judicial court he/she may change his/her speech and may say that he/she accepted as being offender since he/she was physically abused by the police officers. As a result, knowing what to do and when is assumed to provide agents with a sense of safety, which is in our case to protect themselves from being physically abused.

Rules and Resources as Structural Properties

As Seidman (1998) has mentioned Giddens' concept of structure does not subscribe to the traditional belief that structures are an external force that determines human action. Contrary to this, structural properties, rules, and resources that 'virtually' exist in the moment of social practice, are not independent of action but rather are created and maintained through social interaction reproducing social structures and become patterned across time and space. Moreover, social structures are symbolically brought to life by knowledgeable actors and provide the conditions for action and are being constantly recreated, renegotiated, and redefined based on what people do and how they think (Orlikowski, 2001). Besides, human interactions are determined by 'rules', 'mutual knowledge', and 'accepted norms of social practice', that can be unpredictable since human nature itself determines these social features.

The Duality of Structure

The essential feature of the theory of structuration is the *duality of structure* which implies the transcendence of the structural agency dichotomy. Structure represents the rules and resources and exists only in the constituting moments of social systems; social systems, on the other hand, represent the reproduced relations between actors and collectivities organized as regular practices, while structuration refers to the conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures and the reproduction of systems. Finally, action represents a wide range of options for the actor (Giddens, 1984).

The Practical Implication of Structuration Theory on Studying Crime and Criminal Behaviors in Ethiopia

There are a number of criminological theories that attempt to explain why people opt to violate codified laws. Among these, the classical model of human choice, for instance, assumes that crime is an act of choice that is committed by rational individuals. In other way, there are sociological theories that place more emphasis on social forces as factors behind individuals' tendency to commit crime. Among these sociological theories, one of the most relevant theories, social process theories, is presented below with empirical evidence; hence, it will help us to better understand Antony Giddens' theory of structuration.

Social process theories are a group of sociological theories that generally attempt to understand the complex nature of criminal behavior. The theories hold that criminality is a function of individual socialization. These theories draw attention to the interactions that people have with various organization, institutions, and process of society during their formative years in particular. Most people are influenced by their familial relationships, peer group associations, educational experiences, as well as by interactions with authority figures, including teachers, employers, and agents of the justice system. If these relationships are positive and supportive, people can succeed to behave and live within the rules of society; if these relationships are dysfunctional, conventional success might be impossible. As a result, criminal solutions may become feasible alternatives (Siegal, 2000).

Therefore, based on the above theoretical explanations, on the one hand, we can understand that social behaviors in general or criminal behaviors in particular could potentially be described as being constrained by powerful stable societal structures (such as educational, religious, or political institutions). On the other hand, the tendency of involving in criminal behaviors could be explained as a function of the individual expression of will (i.e., agency).

Contrary to the above mentioned theoretical explanation of crime and criminal behaviors, Giddens theory of structuration address a particular structure-agency relationship, the link between social structures and the actions of the different agents in the study of crime and criminal behaviors. Along with this, using structuration theory will help us to assess how societal and individual levels factors are linked through the agency of individuals in the study of social behavior in general and criminal behaviors in particular. To this end, individual action in any given event is shaped both by the actor's general dispositions and by his or her specific knowledge of the strategic terrain for social action, which includes interpretive schemas, social norms and capacity to allocate resources or influence others.

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