

Philosophy of the Social Sciences

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Lecture 6: **STRUCTURE AND AGENCY I**

The Problem

Philosophers of the social sciences who insist on 'individualism' in social scientific explanation are fundamentally confused about the nature of 'social facts'. So insist a whole range of theorists from the earliest statisticians through the positivists including Durkheim, structuralists, and cultural theorists. But these theorists postulate a huge range of kinds of 'social facts'. So, if not individualism, then what? The concepts of 'social structure' and 'social system' are difficult to 'operationalise' in a way that satisfies empiricist social scientists. An answer is that these are metaphors – abstract models that have a heuristic value. But this is a radically anti-realist position.

Key concepts

Social

..... a surprisingly vague concept

1. contrast terms: psychological, biological, physical, chemical.....
2. a portmanteau term analysable into: kinship, economy, culture, political etc
3. social as interactional:
 - qua physical being I could be alone in the universe
 - qua social being I MUST be interacting with other (social) individuals
 - in social interaction we relate to each other by way of social roles, social attitudes, deportments and demeanours, etc.

Fact

2 rival approaches in analysis

1. a 'fact' is *an item of knowledge, a linguistically expressed entity, usually of propositional form.*
 - There are no facts 'in nature', on this view; facts are an aspect of our epistemological lives.
 - Facts are independent of any natural language; but are linguistic in form: le chat est sur le paillason = il gatto e sul zerbino = the cat is on the mat
2. a 'fact' is the state of affairs that a true proposition describes or refers to.
 - 'the cat is on the mat' is true iff the cat is on the mat; the cat's being on the mat is the fact

Both ordinary and philosophical usage is frequently ambiguous between these two.

Why does it matter?

Kuhn argues that 'the facts' can change from theory context to theory context. Realists argue that this is preposterous – facts must be unchanging and stable.

Individual

This is a tough one.

- In some interpretations ‘individual’ is a **social status** from the outset – depending on legal, political and other conditions.
eg in C18 English common law a woman was not a legal individual.
- The idea of the individual – that we are separate from each other, with autonomy, our own volition, capacity for self-sufficiency etc – can be argued to be a particular **cultural (and legal, political, etc) construction** that does not really apply to all cultures.
- In other interpretations an individual is the upshot of theoretical individuation;; that is, it is an **epistemological construction**
eg here is an individual desk
there is an individual bank of benches and desks
here is an individual splinter of wood
under the microscope I could see the atomic structure of the splinter of wood – the individual atoms
think of ‘individual family’, ‘individual college’, ‘individual department’ – no need for physical unity of an individual.
- The theme of ‘individualism’ in social science is often taken to involve **reductivism** – the reduction of statements about collective phenomena (nations, families, classes, societies) to statements about individual phenomena. But the question is: *what ‘individual’ is this?*
eg the individual person looks like a moral principle;
the individual gene looks like a biological reduction, perhaps to a more causally powerful level....
the social scientist’s individualism is the biologist’s collectivism

We must distinguish among a *range of ‘individualisms’ for social science.*

- **metaphysical individualism** – *all there IS are individuals...* (although what individuals are these?)
- **methodological individualism** – *for the purposes of social sciences we treat the world as though all there are are individuals* (just as chemists ignore the social context of their chemicals when doing chemistry).
- **explanatory individualism** – *in social science explanations we always invoke individuals* rather than eg classes (macro) or psyches (a variety of psychologism or mentalism)
- **moral individualism** – *morally we must act in such a way that moral priority is always given to individuals* (not groups, not individual genes...) The problem with non-individualistic social science is that it constructs a view of the world which is generalisable to politics and other domains which devalues individuals (Popper’s eg of Stalinist social theory and Stalinist social policy).

Structure

- Constituents of object under study, and the relations between them;
- Structure is stable
- ? Structure as restabilising
- Structure describable mathematically
- Structure as distinct from its concrete instantiation

Structuralism

- structures are the proper objects of study for social science: only then can we understand and get explanation of the flux of surface (experienceable) reality
- ‘deepness’ of structures; under the surface:
 - structuralist grammar (**Chomsky**) – deep grammar of language generated by deep structure of brain/mind
 - structuralist anthropology (**Levi-Strauss**) – deep grammar of society, generated by deep structure of mind/psyche
 - structuralist linguistics (**Saussure**) - deep grammar of language and meaning – rules governing relationships between concepts/words/world – signified (concept-world) v sign (word/grammatical item)

- structuralist literary criticism/text analysis (**Propp** on fairy tales): ALL written texts, narratives, stories, can be analysed for (uniform) deep dualistic structure; reflect or manifested by/in structure of psychic life
- structuralist Marxism (**Althusser**) – deep structure of capitalist society; surface manifestations of human relations as ideological products of deep structure

System

- Structure static. System dynamic.
- ‘System’ is the process, usually describable as a flow, that takes place, performs, in a structure.
- Systems often thought of on a continuum of open to closed.
- In social theory, ‘system’ also has to be thought of as ‘reflexive’, to be distinguished from ‘self-equilibrating’.

Wholes

- confusingly the ‘ism’ is often written ‘holism’
- whole as opposed to parts
- whole as unified totality

Who has said what about this?

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

- influenced by C19 developments in statistical analysis
- also influenced by the positive philosophy of Auguste Comte (1798-1857)
NOTE these two do not go together conceptually, nor, really, historically. However many social scientists take it that they come as a package; and criticisms of Durkheim often run the two sets of issues together.
- social facts: a fact about society; a ‘macro’ fact; eg suicide rates, laws, norms
- social facts can be explanatory factors in individual human actions
REMEMBER that for positivists and empiricists prediction IS explanation
- fact/value distinction: *a methodological injunction is one thing; a moral injunction is quite another*
- metaphysics is outwith the domain of science:
It is often overlooked that Durkheim’s first rule is ‘TREAT social facts as things’; there is no valid inference from this to ‘social facts ARE things’.
- treat social facts as things
- cause of a social fact is a prior social fact (cf empiricist analysis of cause)
- a variable is a scientific variable if it is measurable
- social facts do affect/cause individual behaviour
- elements both of realism and anti-realism

The ‘methodological individualists’

Popper

all social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc of human individuals and ... we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called ‘collectives’.

Watkins

According to this principle, the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation or event is the

result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs and physical resources or environment.

NOTE Watkins here sets out 'metaphysical individualism', but he CALLS it 'methodological individualism'.

Steven Lukes

Critical analysis of 'methodological individualism': he distinguishes:

- 'truistic social atomism' – on at least one interpretation you can't argue with Watkins. True but trivial
- a theory of meaning – 'all statements about collectives are 'reducible' or analysable out as a (finite?) series of statements about individuals. Try it
- ontological individualism – 'all there are are individuals'. False
- epistemological individualism – 'all we can know about/ observe are individuals'. False
- sociological laws are impossible. Doesn't prove anything
- social individualism or moral individualism – society has as its end the good of individuals. Fair enough.

Structuralists

- content/function/nature of 'parts' dependent on position in 'whole'/'structure'/'system'
- 'binarism' as fundamental principle of all human life
- binary oppositions serve as
 1. imperatives
 2. sorting mechanisms

Controversies in structural causation and structural explanation:

1. Structure causes action
2. Structure causes action causes social outcomes
3. Structure causes social outcomes
4. Social structure causes individual action
5. Structures conceptually connected with individual actions

The question of realism

1. Structures are systems of meaning
2. Structures are outcome of cognitive propensity to binarism
3. Knowledge is structured in binary oppositions
4. Structures as normative systems
5. Social structures as physical: structures as distributions of material goods

Systems theory

- systems in nature: elements in constant interaction
- systems in society: parts don't simultaneously affect one another
- social systems are 'open'

Hayek

- micro point of view gives us limited access to patterns in the world
- it takes maths and stats to detect patterns at the macro level
- wholes can be defined in terms of general properties of their structure
- wholes constitute distinct objects for explanatory theory
- the problem with social structures is their complexity
- scientific explanation
 1. explanation of an event / class of events
 2. explanation of the recurrence of patterns – this is an end in itself for social science