THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL ACTION:

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The related concepts of act, action, social action, and interaction have been viewed as central to sociological analysis, and yet curiously, they remain subjects of theoretical controversy. At present, sociology does not possess an agreed upon definition of action or social action; and moreover, discussions of these concepts typically raise a host of philosophical issues: What is the nature of social reality? What kind of science can sociology be? What methodologies are most appropriate? What theoretical strategies are most useful?

These kinds of questions surface in discussions of action because the act, social action, or interaction are often defined as the most basic or elemental units of sociological analysis. As the most elemental units, they

define the boundary with psychology, which by itself is an arena of controversy, and they pose the constant dilemma for sociologists as to whether or not emergent properties—social structures—arise out of actions and interactions. And when the never ending debates over what kind of science, if any, sociology can be are added to the issue of emergent properties, it is not hard to see why the concept of social action remains so illusive in social theory.

In this paper, I will propose a "formal" sociological approach to the controversy surrounding conceptualizations of social action. By formal, I refer to Georg Simmel's (1950) sociology, where emphasis is less on the units of analysis than on *the forms of relations among the units*. From a formal point of view, there is a ready critique of current analyses of social action, interaction, and structure. This critique argues that, too often, the act and social action are analyzed as processes inhering in individual persons as "actors," whereas structures are seen as fundamentally different, or emergent from, the interactions of individuals. I do not doubt that there is considerable "ontological truth" to this implicit division of sociology into micro and macro processes. But Simmel's formal sociology alerts us to the fact that there are also *common forms* underlying processes among very different social units. For example, while conflict relations among individuals and nation-states may reveal many differences, they also evidence commonalities. That is, the form of the conflict process is in many ways similar for different types of "actors."

In this paper, I will extend this emphasis on the generic forms inhering in social processes to the analysis of social action. What I propose, then, is to ask: At the most generic level and for all social units, what processes in the social universe do the concepts of "action" and "social action" (and related concepts like behavior, act, and interaction) denote? I do not deny that the unit of analysis—say, an individual or governmental bureaucracy—reveal their own distinctive properties that also need to be analyzed. But I nonetheless argue that we can also conceptualize their common properties and that this is theoretically the more important task.

In making this assertion, I am also implicitly criticizing many conceptualizations of action which, I feel, have focused too extensively on individual people as actors and not sufficiently on corporate or collective actors. Moreover, I am also assuming that the rationale for examining commonalities among individual and corporate actors is to facilitate the science of sociology. With clear conceptualization of the generic properties of the social universe, we can begin to develop abstract laws that enable us to understand how this universe operates. Many sociologists do not accept this vision; indeed, most of those from whom I borrow concepts would reject my view of science (Turner, 1981a, b, 1979, 1978).

PROBLEMS IN CONCEPTUALIZING ACTION AND SOCIAL ACTION

Early efforts (Weber, 1968; Simmel, 1907; Mead, 1934; Schutz, 1932) to conceptualize action have, as I noted above, focused primarily upon the individual person as the acting unit. One consequence of this emphasis has been for social theory to employ a "micro-to-macro" model building strategy. That is, one initiates theoretical analysis with a conceptualization of action, moves to the exploration of interaction, and then, examines emergent structures which are seen as "regularized," "patterned," or "institutionalized" interactions. As it unfolded over the decades, the Parsonian action scheme (Parsons, 1937, 1951, 1961, 1978), is the best example of this approach, although Weber's (1968:4–33) analysis of action, social action, social relations, and legitimated orders provided an earlier illustration of this micro-to-macro approach. There is inherently nothing wrong with this approach, per se, but it tends to obscure the fact that collectivities of individuals often evidence action processes similar to those among individuals. Parsons felt, of course, that his "unit act" (Parsons, 1937) and "systems of action" (Parsons, 1961) emphasized this fact, but in its actual consequences, the Parsonian conceptualization simply abandoned serious discussion of action processes among individuals in favor of the macro analysis of functional requisites in a social universe partitioned into four action systems. Weber's analysis similarly left the definitions of action behind in a web of historical details and structural ideal types.

As a result of the tendency for micro-to-macro models to stress macro structural properties after an initial statement on action and interaction among individuals, a conceptual division of sociology into micro and macro analysis emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). One either stayed with macro analysis or leaped conceptually to emergent structures, seeking benediction in Durkheim's (1895) polemics about social reality *sui-generis*. Thus, rather than achieving what one might expect—models revealing *how* action and interaction underlie social structure—sociology was split into micro and macro orthodoxies. Action and interaction were relegated to the micro and taken as "givens" or "bracketed out" (Giddens, 1981) when performing macro analysis. There is nothing wrong with this strategy as one of several possible approaches to building theory, but it has tended to hide the points of isomorphism in the action of individuals and corporate units.

An even worse consequence of the split of micro and macro analysis has been the creation of theoretical chauvinists. Micro chauvinists (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967) simply deny the existence of social struc-

tures; macro chauvinists (e.g., Blau, 1977; Mayhew, 1980a, b) do not deny the reality of the micro world, only its relevance to sociology (preferring to relegate it to psychology and social psychology). More recent efforts at a sociological "structuralism" have attempted to bridge the extremes of these micro and macro chauvinists, but in fact have diluted to concept of structure. The best of these efforts is Giddens' (1981) recent work which seeks to reconcile interactionism and macro structural analysis. Unfortunately, the concept of structure as "rules and resources" for action and interaction of individuals in concrete settings (his concept of "system") violates a conception of structure as patterns and networks of action and interaction that persist over time. As a result, Giddens' works in this "structuralist" tradition have, like the micro-to-macro modeling approaches, obscured the isomorphism among individual and corporate processes. In fact, these works have highlighted the discontinuities between individual and collective units, with the somewhat ironical consequence of subtly supporting the micro and macro split in sociological theory.

THE ISOMORPHIC MODEL ON ACTION PROCESSES

In Table 1, I have provided abstract definitions for five properties of the social universe: behavior, action, social action, social interaction, and social organization. Several points need to be emphasized in these definitions. First, the conceptualization of action, social action, and social interaction must be seen in the context of behavior and social organization. That is, action, social action, and social interaction are forms of behavior, whereas social organization is a form of interaction. Second, in these definitions no unit of analysis is specified. An individual person, community, organization, group, nation, or any other unit that meets the criteria listed in the definitions is behaving, acting, interacting, or organizing. Third, these definitions are phrased as variables, and hence, there can be degrees of behavior, action, social action, social interaction, and social organization.

With these general preliminaries, let me now turn to the definition of action which is the central topic of this paper. As is evident, I view action as a type of behavior which reveals five interrelated processes: (1) the formulation of end states or goals; (2) the perception of objects in, and the processing of information about, the environment; (3) the covert assessment of alternative behaviors; (4) the decision to select a line of behavior(s), and (5) the maintenance of an identity *vis-a-vis* other units in an environment. Behavior that does not reveal some (admittedly unspecified) minimal level of these five processes is not action. Conversely, *the greater the degree* of teleology, perception, deliberation, decision-making, and self-identity, the greater is the degree of action on the part

Table 1. Definitions of Key Concepts

Behavior:	the degree of movement in an environment by an energy expending unit
Action:	the degree to which the behavior of an energy expending unit involves:
	(1) *teleological processes* in which goals and end states are formulated
	(2) *perceptual processes* through which information from the environment is received
	(3) *deliberative processes* in which the consequences of alternative behaviors are considered
	(4) *decision-making processes* in which behaviors to be emitted are selected
	(5) *identity processes* by which a unit views itself as a differential unit in an environment
Social Action:	the degree to which teleological, perceptual, deliberative, decision-making, and identity processes of a unit are circumscribed by the behavior of other energy expending units in an environment
Social Interaction:	the degree to which the teleological, perceptual, deliberative, decision making, and identity processes of two or more units are mutually circumscribed by each other's action
Social Organization:	the degree to which social interactions among two or more units are predictable and persistent over time

of a social unit. As is also evident in these definitions, action is a process which occurs over time; and the degree of action, therefore, refers to variations in these processes over time.

As an additional, but crucial footnote, I have not conceptualized actions in terms of types, as have most philosophers and many sociologists, particularly Weber (1968) and Parsons (1951). Such types refer to the content of action; my concern is with it as a form and as a process that varies by degree. Many of our conceptualizations of action in both sociology and social philosophy have, in my view, become mired in typologies of action as "rational," "irrational," "non-rational," "cathetic," aesthetic," "appreciative," "artistic," "value-rational," "traditional," and a host of other content-laden states. Typologies are useful for classification and description, but theorizing will require conceptualizing our crucial processes as variables that can be converted into a metric.

As is perhaps obvious, there is nothing "new" or "startling" in my definitions. They borrow from others' work, most particularly Weber (1968), Mead (1934), Simmel (1907), Schutz (1932), Blumer (1969), and

Parsons (1937). The only thing "new" about the definitions is the shift in ontology toward an emphasis on isomorphism evident in the action of varying social units as well as the emphasis on action as a process which can be conceptualized as a variable. This shift in emphasis, however, suggests the next step in conceptualization: statements on those generic conditions under which the degree of action increases or decreases. This task extends beyond this paper but it is the long range goal of the strategy that I am proposing. For my present purposes, let me return to Table 1 and review in more detail the five elements in the definition of action.

Most sociologists view action as goal directed behavior where the acting unit pursues an end state, or states. Moreover, end states involve more than diffuse desires to "survive" or "adjust." That is, as Schutz (1932), Mead (1934), and Simmel (1907) argued, acting units are capable of defining discrete goals and maintaining them as a frame of reference by which behaviors are organized. As Parsons (1937) and Weber (1968) stressed, the ability to formulate explicit goals, the capacity to rank-order them in terms of priorities, and the ability to organize conscious responses to meet them is a signal of "rational action" but for my conceptualization, all action is rational in the sense that it involves some degree of formulating goals, priorities among them, and using these priorities to select and organize responses. Other views on "rationality" as "the maximation of utility" in the selection of means denote such a rare phenomenon that they are not useful theoretically. Thus, we could without loss of conceptual rigor expunge the concept of "rationality" from theoretical formulations on action. For the really crucial theoretical question is: under what general conditions does behavior become teleological and under what general conditions do behaving units formulate goals, establish priorities among them, and use these priorities as a frame of reference for guiding and correcting behavior?

Behavior is not action unless it also involves the capacity to perceive objects in the environment and to convert such perceptions into information which is used to organize the expenditure of energy. Mead (1934) and Simmel (1907) both saw the importance of perception as a critical action process, because social units become selectively sensitized to objects in the environment relevant to achieving goals. The crucial theoretical question thus becomes: under what general conditions are perceptual and information gathering processes heightened in social units? Mead and Simmel stressed the "blockage of impulses" or "states of disequilibrium" in the environment, whereas analytical philosophers as well as Parsons (1937) and Weber (1968) implicitly emphasize the degree of goal directedness. Both sets of conditions are related, since states of disequilibrium establish priorities among goals which, in turn, become the

basis for selective perception of objects that can facilitate realization of the goals, and hence, consummation of impulses or elimination of disequilibrium.

For behavior to constitute action, there must also be deliberation over the potential outcomes of alternative lines of behavior. Mead (1934) denoted this process as covert manipulation or, borrowing from Dewey, the "imaginative rehearsal" or alternatives; Simmel (1907) similarly emphasized the process of "manipulation" in terms of both "material and symbolic tools." Most economic thinkers have tended to phrase the process in terms of "rationality," or "means-ends calculations," and "assessments of utility," but these latter formulations tend to invoke the implicit assumptions that deliberation involves efforts to "maximize utilities" which, as Homans (1974) noted is "good advice for human behavior but a poor description of it." As Parsons (1937) emphasized long ago, human action is rarely rational, but it does involve "projecting into the future," to use Schutz's (1932) words, various courses of action. Thus, the crucial theoretical question is not whether or not deliberation is rational, but the generic conditions under which it increases by degree.

Deliberation eventually gives way to decision-making about a course of action. Too often, I feel, the processes of deliberation and decision-making are conceptually fused (along with goal-seeking), but they are quite distinct processes. One can occur without the other. Deliberation often produce an incapacity to make decisive decisions about a course of behavior, whereas many decisions about behavior are highly routinized and require little or no conscious deliberation. It is only when there are both high levels of deliberation and conscious decision-making about a course of action that we can begin to distinguish action as a special type, or subclass, of behavior. Again, the critical theoretical question becomes: what general conditions produce high or low levels of decision-making?

Finally, all action involves a social unit with a sense of its boundaries and with the capacity to see itself as a distinctive object in its environment. At the individual level, Mead (1934), Simmel (1907), and Schutz (1932) conceptualized this process as "self." That is, humans carry with them the behavioral capacity to see themselves as an object and to develop stable attitudes toward themselves as a certain type of object. In turn, these identity processes greatly circumscribe teleological, perceptual, deliberative, and decision-making processes. What is true of individuals is also the case for acting corporate or collective units. Collective units as much as individuals hold an identity and use it as an object or frame of reference to circumscribe the other four action processes. Indeed, much like individuals (Goffman, 1959), corporate units emit gestures or signals to establish their identity in an environment (Williamson, 1975; Meyer,

1979). As I noted for the other action process, then, the theoretical question becomes: Under what general conditions is the degree of identity in a social unit high or low?

Turning to the other definitions in Table 1, the next theoretical step is to connect conceptually "action" to "social action" and "interaction." Following Weber's lead (1968:4–32), but incorporating Schutz's (1932) critique of Weber, I propose to define "social action" as action which is circumscribed by the behavior of another unit. That is, the more teleological, perceptual, deliberative, decision-making, and identity processes of one social unit are influenced by (take account of) the behavior(s) of other unit(s), the more "social" is the action. For "social action" to become "social interaction," there must be reciprocity of influence. That is, the teleological, perceptual, deliberative, decision-making processes of one unit must influence the operation of these same processes in another unit, and vice versa. What I have in mind is a more precise interpretation of "inter-subjectivity" (Schutz, 1932), "mutual orientation" (Weber, 1968), and "taking the role of the other" (Mead, 1934). The more actors use their perceptual capacities to assess the remaining four action processes, the greater is their degree of interaction. All interaction involves, I argue, some degree of effort by interacting parties to determine the teleological, perceptual, deliberative, decision-making, and identity processes of the other actor. Even routinized interactions evidence this fact, but as Schutz (1932) emphasized, these action processes are portrayed as "ideal types" or are defined in terms of what Ralph Turner has called "role" (R. Turner, 1979). Nonetheless, even as ideals, stereotypes, or roles, they circumscribe the action processes of each actor in even routine situations.

When action is seen as consisting of five basic processes, the varying biases of diverse theoretical positions become evident. For example, dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) emphasizes "identity processes" in that interaction is seen as a mutual "presentation of self." Similarly, Iowa School (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954; Turner, 1978) interactionism views the self as the crucial mediator in organizing interactive responses. Blumer's (1969) interactionism also stresses the self but implicitly gives importance to perceptual, deliberative, and decision-making processes as actors mutually assess, define, and map a course of "joint action." Weber's (1968:4–31) and Parsons' (1937) schemes focus primarily on teleological processes in their concern for the "type of orientation" (read: direction or goal) of actors in an interaction. While the special emphasis of various perspectives on one or two of the action processes has yielded great insight into the process of interaction, my view is that we need to recognize that interaction involves the intersubjectivity along the five dimensions

specified in the action processes in Table 1. The interesting theoretical questions thus become: What conditions produce reciprocity of all action processes? And, under what conditions do which action processes become more (less) salient in an interaction?

Turning to the last definition in Table 1, social organization is simply patterns of interaction that persist over time. I have deliberately avoided the term, "social structure," because radically different perspectives—from functionalism to dogmatic Marxism and from network analysis to French structuralisms—now claim the term. The theoretical question for theorists of social organization are: What are the generic and fundamental properties of organized interactions? How are these to be conceptualized? And, how are these conceptualized properties to be connected to each other in formal propositions?

CONCLUSION

My concern in this paper has not been with social organization or even social action and interaction, except to indicate in a general way their conceptual linkage to the process of action. Moreover, I should emphasize that many of the generic conditions increasing the level of any action process are, no doubt, the result of basic interactive and organizational processes. Indeed, if we begin to develop principles about action, we will probably state the general interactive and organizational conditions influencing the weights for the five action processes listed in Table 1. My view is that this is the next step in making the concept of action theoretically (as opposed to philosophically) interesting.

In this short paper, I have only proposed one of several potentially useful strategies. This strategy offers, I feel, more potential pay-off than others, for two reasons. First, it is theoretical in that action is seen as a multi-dimensional process that varies by degree. When phrased in this way, the theoretical task becomes one of specifying, at the most generic level, those conditions that influence the degree of variation in each dimension. Second, my proposal offers at least one path to reconciling the micro-macro split in sociology. If we seek out the common properties of action at the individual and corporate level, and then, attempt to develop some abstract principles on these properties, the end result should be some basic "laws of action" from which the more specific theorems and corollaries on the unique action properties of individuals and collectivities can be deduced. In this way, much of the ontological acrimony and chauvinism of micro and macro antagonists can be theoretically resolved.

NOTE

1. This research has been funded by the Academic Senate, University of California at Riverside. The title is meant to imply an alternative to the Parsonian approach which emphasizes "the structure" of social action.

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