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Perceptions of Contradiction: Structure and Agency in the Undergraduate Classroom

It is impossible to conceptualize *society* without developing an understanding of the structural mechanics that organize human interaction. As such, teaching the concept of *social structure* becomes essential to any social scientific understanding of what we term societies. Teaching this fundamental concept is, however, often easier said than done. The basic problem centers on reconciling the constraining tendencies of structure with the autonomous individualism of human agency; simply put, is individual choice “free” or are these choices conditioned and shaped by other forces. Students tend to be much more comfortable internalizing the idea that actions, choices, and behaviors are the result of their own volition and certainly not constrained or conformed by any ephemeral structures. This dichotomous barrier is complicated (ironically) by ideological and cultural structures that have privileged the individual in this postmodern/poststructural era.

This essay briefly presents the primary issues faced by social scientists in teaching the concept of social structure. Specifically, the challenges of contemporary (postmodern) subjectivity and the impact of such structural conditions on undergraduate student perspectives are juxtaposed with the continued necessity of understanding the role of structure in social interaction. I then argue that a relatively common strategy (see excursus below), from a subtly economic deterministic perspective that takes the form of an exercise in budget construction (and destruction), is an effective means of teaching social structure in a contemporary collegiate setting. Rather than a simplistic attempt to circumvent a subjectively oriented audience, I argue that this deterministic approach is capable of integrating subjective/individualistic perspectives into a larger illustration of how structure can conform and construct opportunities and agency.

The primary pedagogical issue is two-fold. First, undergraduate students, particularly those fresh from the strict oversight of parents and high school environments, are often fiercely determined to exert autonomy over their own actions. The very climate of college offers an interesting mix of social liberation and deferred cost, which allows one to actually have increased control over their actions (at least on the surface) (see Taylor 2005). Secondly, historical shifts in authoritative structures and technological opportunities has constructed an environment in which the individual is increasingly privileged with regards to managing and defining themselves, in addition to unprecedented access to information not only as consumers but also active contributors (see Askeland and Payne 2006; Delucchi and Korgen 2002). The very notions of Facebook (as a medium of self-marketing and definition) and blogs/electronic bulletin boards (as media of individual commentary) offer valuable illustrations of the increasingly privileged role of the individual in contemporary social interaction[1] (see Castells 2010; Wellman *et a*l. 2003).

Interestingly, students seem to have very little problem with the fact that social structures exist. Many regularly mention pressures to conform to group behavior and the threat of consequences for nonconformity as two popular examples. In a sense, they implicitly understand that social structures can influence their behavior, yet are resistant to the idea that it does so without their consent. As such, teaching anything related to social interaction, order, conflict, or other sociological topics in a discussion-oriented environment consistently pulls toward agency-centered explanations. Thus, poverty becomes a "choice" as do other social problems such as crime or educational attainment. This conclusion is obviously common in American society (Smith and Stone 1989; see also Lepianka *et al.* 2009) and allows students to immediately correlate their perspective with normative belief structures. Even social ideologies such as racism or homophobia become reducible to choices made by individuals in the minds of many students, in large part due to the fact that in their lives – they can be[2]. The confluence of independence and unprecedented (subjectively and historically) access to information creates a (dare I say, virtual) reality in which students are increasingly able to make their own choices and encouraged articulate those choices publically.

Of course, all of this happens within distinct structural boundaries. The average American college student is relatively privileged[3]. In many cases, discussions of the structural influences that underlie racism and poverty, for instance, are difficult to communicate in rooms full of students who have no personal experience with either. There is no question that the pervasive influence of social structures creates opportunities

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[1] This should be read as an explicitly value-neutral statement. I am attempting merely to provide an articulation of contemporary social psychological conditions and not to provide any analytical perspective on the value or lack thereof of these mechanisms.

[2] See, for instance, studies of multiracial identity formation (Harris and Sim 2002; Herman 2004) as well as bisexuality and the contemporary role of choice and ambivalent sexuality (Hoburg *et al.* 2004; Rhoads 1997).

[3] The U.S. Department of Education calculated the percentage of minority students enrolled as undergraduates at 32% of overall enrollments (U.S. Department of Education 2007). Within this total percentage there are also substantial differences both by institution and type of institution. For example, Carnevale and Strohl (2010) highlight the decreasing diversity of students in highly selective institutions and the increasing diversity of enrollment in "less-selective" institutions, while others emphasize the substantial disparity in socioeconomic status and underrepresentation of students of low socioeconomic status in American higher education (see Astin and Oseguera 2004; McDonough, 1997; Mortenson, 2005).

for some and restricts them for others; similarly, there is no debate among reasonable sociologists that social structure is a concept that can be ignored. So how can we effectively communicate the capacity of social structures, as constraining agency, to students who commonly embrace the world-view that even conforming to dominant structures is a choice?

Social Structure and the Potential of a Hybrid Deterministic Approach

If the concept of social structure is not necessarily foreign to contemporary students, the actual connection of the concept to their experiential worldview commonly is. There are several possible reasons for this, including the aforementioned class/socioeconomic disparities in American higher education. However, it seems premature (or even incorrect) to jump aboard that monocausal train. While a general analysis of national statistics is helpful, there are many institutions of higher education that work diligently to reach underserved populations. This fact alone, not to mention the presence of class diversity in many public (and some private) institutions means that there will, at least, be a population of students whose personal experience may be amenable to understanding the pernicious effects of structural inequalities, thus problematizing the "privileged" explanation.

Anecdotally, my experience in these types of institutions has been that many underserved students are just as likely to embrace the idea that their experiences and opportunities are the product of individual choices. While it may be easier to connect their experience to structural influences, many students from underserved populations construct their worldviews, particularly their resistance to structural explanations, in the same way as their "privileged" peers.

The point, of course, is that attributing the difficulties in teaching social structure solely to economic structural conditions is highly problematic. Ideological structures work to condition student perspectives in two important (and counterintuitive) ways. First, the overarching national ideology of economic opportunity through labor/effort remains hegemonic and works as a ubiquitous socialization mechanism. At the heart of this national ideology is the understanding that individualism and personal choice underlie all aspects of socio-economic interaction (see Smith and Stone, 1989). As this ideology significantly underscores formal and informal socialization, it would be foolish to ignore these effects.

Secondly, paradigmatic trends in the social sciences have tended to favor subjectivist explanations and problematize the importance of structural causality (see Beck 2002; also Steinmetz, 1999, 1-50). This so-called "cultural turn" has not only influenced scholarship but also the training of future/contemporary social science educators. As professional trends shift toward the subjective, the prospect of connecting social structural conditions to individual experience and conditions becomes increasingly difficult – primarily through the privileging of subjective explanations that students are already comfortable accepting.

Anyone seeking to introduce the concept of social structure in the contemporary classroom is confronted with these twin ideological challenges that are only exacerbated by the technological enabling of individualism. In sum, the contemporary poststructural classroom is one in which an instructor must deal with certain empirical realities. Despite the fact that the "cultural turn" and postmodern/structural trends were intended to counter the dominance of ideological structures (such as the previously mentioned American ideal), the effect has been a privileging of subjectivist explanations that weakens the efficacy of structural causal explanations – which is most certainly not the intent of many post-structural theorists (see Foucault, 1982, for instance).

For everyone but exclusive subjectivists, the integration of social structural influences remains an essential component of any social scientific course. So how can we accomplish this necessary feat in an increasingly hostile environment? I would argue that we can circumvent these obstacles by (1) embracing, rather than disavowing, a structural determinism while (2) integrating the subjectivist inclinations of contemporary students into this process. While this approach may certainly seem counterintuitive (I know what you are thinking – teaching structure though deterministic *and* subjectivist means is both contradictory and potentially counterproductive), but I would argue that it is an effective strategy in classrooms, and among student populations, that may be hesitant to accept the causal importance of social structures. The following section illustrates an exercise that works to integrate the power of structural realities through a subjective lens.

Monetary Structures and Constraining Choice: An Excursus

You don't have to be a materialist to recognize the power of economic structures in conforming behavior. In fact, few social structures have such a universal and profound effect on the actions of individuals and groups. As such, it seems logical to embrace economic structures (capitalism, money, consumption, etc…) as an ideal exemplar when attempting to teach the more general concept. In practice, however, such declarative attempts are commonly shunned by students who continue to recognize that (1) money does allow you access to certain opportunities, but (2) that if one doesn't have access more money can be obtained "somehow." I can't help but think back to a former mentor who once grumbled, "kids today have more money accidentally that I ever had on purpose," so perhaps there is a structural reason for their eternal optimism – but I digress.

Given such reluctance, it becomes necessary to clearly illustrate not that money, capitalism, conspicuous consumption or any other structural mechanism *can* influence individual behavior, but *how* such mechanisms do enable and constrain opportunities. To this end, the following exercise has proven effective to achieve these goals. The exercise proceeds in three parts and is not only useful in communicating the efficacy of structure, but also in generating significant student contributions. This exercise is certainly not novel. Budget-oriented exercises are quite common in introductory social science courses (see Garoutte and Bobbitt-Zeher 2011) and similar activities such as "Life Happens" are designed to accomplish the similar goal of engendering Mill's oft-referenced "sociological imagination." What is somewhat distinct about this version is the potential to link student choices directly with structural conditions – put another way, this is a structured exercise, but one in which students are granted (nearly) exclusive decision-making capacities.

Step One: Conceptualization and Definition

Theory is exceedingly abstract for most undergraduates with many arguing that it is simply an exercise in thought with no "real world" applicability. This obviously creates the need to clearly define abstract structures and immediately provide an empirical application. We can accomplish this by first defining structure in explicit terms: *Social structures work to conform individual behavior*[4]. The generality of this definition is suitably abstract and will, of course, lead students to question how these invisible forces could possibly conform their behavior. At this point, it is necessary to work toward an empirical understanding of how structures can conform behavior.

In keeping the applied context as simple and comprehensible as possible, we can distill an economic structure down to: *money*. Immediately understandable and relevant to daily life, money can be used as a perfect example of how a social object can mechanically work to reinforce a larger economic structure (capitalism). An effective way to move beyond the temptation to simply view money as a material "thing" is to view money as a means to *participate* in modern capitalist societies[5]. Individual require money – not simply to enhance their wealth or as a means to acquire new and better products, but in order to actually survive as well as participate in any respective capitalist society. Basic needs (food, shelter, and clothing) are fully commodified and failure to obtain money, can significantly threaten one's survival (and in a less extreme fashion, inhibit one's ability to live comfortably).

[4] This definition works as in a general theoretical sense, but I am not advocating its adoption as a necessary definition for this exercise. I have neither the space nor time to engage in a theoretical defense of this definition, but I would like to emphasize that a general theoretical definition is absolutely necessary to ensure that students make the connection between general theoretical structures and their more identifiable mechanisms.

[5] This is consistent with Georg Simmel's (1978) conceptualization of money as a "conditioning mechanism" in the transition from traditional to modern/urban societies.

More consistent with the idea of money enabling participation is the fact that money enables rates and levels of such participation. Staying healthy, providing opportunity for yourself and your children, leisure, and countless other taken for granted conditions of modern life are entirely contingent on one's ability to exchange money for these desired conditions. Political success, educational advancement (particularly in high status institutions), and other means of obtaining social power are directly attributable to the mobilization of money in some form or another. In these ways, money does not just facilitate participation, but also enables the opportunity to participate.

Step Two: Building the Fantasy Budget

So how can we communicate the impact of money on individual opportunity and participation in our respective capitalist society? Put simply, students can gain an understanding through a simple exercise in budget construction – albeit in a particular way. The overall project begins as an exercise in categorizing and calculating how much one would need to earn to live a desirable existence. Students will work to define categorical expenses and the amount of money required/desired to fulfill those categorical needs and desires. I have found it helpful to break down expenses on a monthly basis to keep the numbers visually (and conceptually) manageable and consistent with developing a monthly budget. Before the exercise it is helpful to start by initially building the scenario. My strategy is to state that they will be in a typical family structure with two adults and two children – a helpful way to kick start interaction is to ask the class to select the age of the children.

It is important to act as a facilitator in this exercise for several reasons; chief among them being the fact that most undergraduates have very little conceptual idea about how much specific activities and material goods cost. I've found it helpful to start with housing. We already know we have a family of four – ask them where they would like to live given their family structure and lifestyle goals. Respective of your geographic location, you can anticipate major categorical expenses like housing, food, utilities, taxes, and other variable costs of living. Having these numbers prepared before hand will be essential to assistant students and keep the exercise moving[6]. For example, after we establish the age and sex of

[6] For example, most students will have very little idea about cost of the homes in which they hope to live. I prepared for this by finding the average cost of a four-bedroom home in a suburban community near New York City, as well as anticipating the cost of apartments in desirable and non-desirable location in New York City. These data are easily obtainable, in any locale, through either government or real estate sources. In the case of the monthly housing cost in Table 1, I took the average home price in Westchester County ($776,277) from www.city-data.com and made some rudimentary calculations (including taxes and homeowner's insurance) using a mortgage calculator. The final monthly figure of $5000 is most likely low, but this is not important in the grand scheme of the activity.

the children I immediate ask the question "where would you like to live?" This leads to discussion about the type of home (bedrooms, bathrooms, etc…) and location. Since I have prepared general monthly costs for these types and locations, I can immediately place a number on the board as representative of what one can expect to pay for that type of home in that location (including insurance and taxes, see Table 1). The exercise progresses quickly after that as we add categories and monthly costs. Table 1 illustrates a hypothetical list of monthly expenses in the New York metropolitan area.

Table 1. "Fantasy" Monthly Categorical Expenses in the New York Metropolitan Area

House (Suburban 4 bdr) $5000	Car (2) $800	Auto Insurance (2) $300	Clothing $800	Food $1200	Utilities $1200
Gas/Tolls $800	Vacations $850	Furniture/Home $500	Health Care $1000	Holidays $850	Entertainment $2000
Home Repair Fund $250	Hygiene/ Personal Care $400	Retirement $1000	College Fund $1600	Combined Consumer Debt $2000	Savings $300
Outdoor/Lawn $140	Pets $150	Cell Phones (3) $150	Cable Internet Phone $150	Childcare $2500	House Cleaning/Supplies $600

The point of keeping the running list is to give a visual depiction of categorical expenses, which will be essential in the final section. As you and your students are compiling the list it is important for them to take ownership over the categories and expenses – so let them reach a consensus (by majority vote if necessary) – and the interaction between students as they debate expenses also illuminates existent differences in class and status expectations within the group. This is largely ancillary to the project at hand, but it never hurts for any population to understand the heterogeneity of their peers.

As you finish categorizing expenses, compile the expenses into a single monthly number, then simply multiply by twelve to give students an approximate (and undoubtedly conservative) annual salary to enable their "fantasy" lifestyle. In the aforementioned case, students estimated their monthly expenses as $24,540, which would translate to an annual (gross) salary requirement of $294,480. While the individual categorical amounts are often exaggerated (low or high) and several categories have been excluded, the accuracy of these numbers is irrelevant. We have an annual gross total that we can then use to illustrate the constraining characteristics of money as a mechanism of larger economic (capitalist) structure.

Step Three: Realizing Poverty

At this point, students are feeling good about their accomplishment and focused on what they would have to earn to live the way they desire in the future (albeit fantastic in nearly all sense of the word). This is the moment I write, $22,350, on the board directly under their calculated annual total of $294,480 – and state to the class that this is the federal poverty rate for a family of four. Their task now becomes reducing monthly expenditures so that annual expenses come in at or below $22, 350.

As you can imagine, the rush is on to cut – this can be an important instructional moment. If your students are anything like mine, the first cuts are to housing and so-called "extra expenses" such as retirement, savings, and college funds. Most advocate moving to a smaller and lower-cost apartment as well as minimizing and even eliminating several categorical expenses. Make sure you emphasize the effects of such cuts as the students make them. For example, moving from a suburban location to a less expensive suburban or urban alternative may negative affect the quality of public education for the two children. Similarly, the elimination of a college fund has long-lasting effects on limiting the future educational and employment opportunities of those same two children – thus reinforcing the impact of structural opportunities on a second generation and making it more likely that they will be less affluent in their futures.

Similar connections can be drawn by reductions in transportation capacities (most of my students draw the logical conclusion that car ownership is less affordable than public transportation- which often requires a move into an urban area), but the most dramatic affect is when students realize that they need to severely reduce or eliminate the "holiday" category. The prospect that a parent may not be able to afford gifts for their children is almost unbelievable for many of them and serves to illustrate the effects of constraining structures. Table 2 illustrates an attempt by the same class (those who agreed upon the figures in Table 1) to cut expenses to the federal poverty level.

Table 2. Impoverished Monthly Categorical Expenses in the New York Metro Area

House (Urban 2 bdr) $1500	Public Transit $200	Auto Insurance (2) $0	Clothing $100	Food $350	Utilities $150
Gas/Tolls $0	Vacations $0	Furniture/Home $50	Health Care ($1000)	Holidays $100	Entertainment $100
Home Repair Fund $0	Hygiene/ Personal Care $100	Retirement $0	College Fund $0	Combined Consumer Debt ($2000)	Savings $0

Outdoor/Lawn $0	Pets $0	Cell Phones (3) $150	Cable Internet Phone $0	Childcare $0	House Cleaning/Supplies $50

In an admirable attempt[7], this class was able to reduce monthly expenses to the point where this family is living on a gross annual salary of $33,600 – still more than eleven thousand dollars above the target. The are many points of emphasis here that I am sure you can clearly see, but I would like to highlight a few. First, notice the health care and consumer debt parenthetical figures – the above total ($33,600) excludes these categories. You should point out that without health insurance and the disproportionately expensive option of borrowing money in impoverished communities (see Barr, 2004) these categorical expenses actually *increase*. For instance, the lack of affordable health insurance leaves many with a choice of acquiring health care and incurring the cost or going without and leaving illnesses/conditions untreated.

Second, it is essential to point out the categories that become minimally funded or eliminated. Students understand that their college education is (theoretically) the ticket to the economic opportunities they hope will enable a comfortable lifestyle. The prospect of having to move to a low-cost area is commensurate with decreased educational opportunities (see Ferguson 1991; Jud and Watts 1981), which weakens the academic resume of any prospective college student – add to that the elimination of (a) the internet at home and (b) a college fund that could actually enable college attendance and students begin to see how poverty can structurally constrain individual opportunities.

Third, it is also helpful to point out the actual breakdown of certain expense categories. For example, reducing the clothing budget to $100 per month ultimately means that each member of the family has $25 per month for clothing. This becomes more immediately comprehensive when you ask students how much their shoes alone cost. Entertainment is also an area that generates significant debate with some advocating no money for leisure activities and others recognizing the effect of this austerity. The breakdown here becomes more individualized – family movies and activities are sometimes not the desired leisure activities of individual adults.

Finally, it is absolutely essential to conclude by reinforcing the fact that these numbers are reflective of a reality in American society. The US Census Bureau estimates that 43.6 million people were "officially" poor in 2009, which represents 14.3% of the

[7] I should note that in several years of engaging in this activity no class have ever successfully reached the poverty figure for a family of four. The astute students will not that rent alone accounts for such a disproportional amount of monthly expenses that any attempt to actually live outside of the apartment is severely restricted.

American population. This is also an effective time to mention that if a family of four makes $25,000 per year they are *not* "poor," according to official statistics. More to the point it becomes helpful to note that this federal poverty level is distinctly higher than the minimum wage. In the state of New York is $7.25 per hour – if we calculate a forty-hour workweek and a 52-week year (i.e., no vacations/holidays) we are able to earn $15,080 per year. This number is significantly below the poverty level – this realization is commonly enough to drive the point home that one need not be unemployed or "hardly working" to be officially poor.

The efficacy of this exercise is palpable in the classroom. Student emotions range from euphoric and enthusiastic in Step Two to shocked and somewhat depressed in Step Three. While my intention is certainly not to emotionally depress my students, this emotional swing is reflective of a deeper understanding that a life limited by a lack of money is also a life of limited opportunity. Interestingly, this point is made without even successfully completing the exercise (reducing budgets to the poverty level), rather it is the cumulative effect of seeing cuts made to categories so enthusiastically supported and described minutes earlier.

Student participation in the construction and destruction of these budgets is important for several reasons. They are the ones establishing categorical importance and funding those activities – and they are the ones making the decisions (sometimes through agonizing realizations) to reduce and/or eliminate those funds. The effect on the individual is enhanced through their recognition that many of these activities are personally "necessary" or enjoyable in their own experiences and living without them would significantly affect their lives in a negative fashion. Of course, many students remain convinced that out hypothetical family can pull themselves out of poverty through due diligence and hard work, but their ability to summarily dismiss structural factors is severely weakened. The point, however, is not even an illustration of American poverty; rather, our goal is to illustrate the power of structures in conforming opportunities and behaviors in any respective society. Through the integration of an approach emphasizing a micro-level examination of social life and the effect of a single (albeit incredibly powerful) structure on individual choices, it is possible to teach the concept of structure in classrooms dominated by a subjectivist ontology.

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