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Institutions and Social Structures: Some Clarifications*

STEVE FLEETWOOD

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**Centre for Employment Studies Research
Bristol Business School
University of the West of England**

Steve.Fleetwood@uwe.ac.uk

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Institutions and Social Structures: Some Clarifications

Abstract. The objective of this paper is to continue the important task of clarifying two terms that are central to a great deal of social science, but often mired in confusion, namely, 'institutions' and 'social structures'. The opening part of the paper uses recent insights in contemporary sociological and (Institutional) economic theory to explore the *similarities* between social structures and institutions, especially in the relation between them as a couple, and human agents. The second and third parts shift from exploring similarities to exploring differences. Drawing largely on the work of Hodgson, whose work can be considered current 'best practice' on institutions; part two considers properties that are specific to institutions. Drawing largely on an important historico-theoretical overview of over a century of writing on social structures by Lopez and Scott, (but departing from them in significant ways) part three considers properties that are specific to social structures.

Introduction

Whilst the terms ‘institutions’ and ‘social structures’¹ feature extensively in many social scientific disciplines, there is more than a little confusion about what each term means and how they relate to one another. I am not the only one who is concerned. Writers like Battiera (2006); Hodgson (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006); Jessop & Nielsen (2003); Lawson (2003); Nielsen (2006); Rogers-Hollingsworth & Muller (2002); Searle (2005) and Portes (2005) have recently sought to tighten up our understanding of the term ‘institution’. Archer (2000); Elder-Vass (2006, 2007a, 2007b); Jackson (2007); Lewis (2000); Lewis & Runde (2007); Lopez & Scott (2000); Scott (2001); and Porpora (1998, 2007); have done something similar for the term ‘social structures’. Although clarity is occasionally gained from the context in which the terms are used, this is not always the case. Allow me to exemplify.

Perhaps the most common way of dealing with the *relationship* between institutions and social structures is to treat institutions as kinds of social structures. For Hodgson: ‘Institutions’ are the kind of structures that matter most in the social realm: they make up the stuff of social life (Hodgson (2006: 2, *passim*). Lawson makes a similar point, writing: Some ‘structures are actually set up as institutions’ (Lawson 2004: 10). For (Wells 1970: 3) ‘Social institutions form an element in a more general concept known as social structure’. Whilst there is a sense in which institutions and social structures are similar kinds of things, as we will see below, there is also a sense in which they are different. Treating institutions as kinds of social structures emphasises the fact that they have similarities, but tends to hide their important differences.

One extremely common notion of institutions and social structures is to treat them not only as social practices, but as patterned practices, particularly regularities of some kind. Whilst Jessop and Nielsen (2003: 1) disagree with the notion, they are probably correct to observe that: ‘In general the social

¹ I will not make the distinction between social and cultural structures. On this issue, see Archer (1995).

science literature tends to regard institutions as social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated' and I would extend this to include social structures. In short, this confuses the conditions of action with the action itself. This does seem to be a remarkable misunderstanding given that Giddens's *Structuration* theory and more recently the *transformational* and *morphogentic/morphostatic* approach advocated by critical realists, both of which firmly reject this common notion, have been available for decades. I will return to this later.

The term 'institution' can be used to refer to very different things like: money, the family, religion, property, markets, the state, education, sport and medicine, language, law, systems of weights and measures and table manners. This ignores important differences. The 'institution' of money, for example, does *not* contain human beings, whereas the 'institution' of the family clearly *does*. Are they different kinds of institution, or is one of them not really an institution? For Schmid and Schomann (1994: 19) 'Labour market policy' is an institution whilst for Schmid (1994: 3-5) 'early retirement, further education, retraining and regulation of working hours, trade unions, labour and social security laws, labour market programs, codetermination, and collective bargaining' are all institutions. The problem here is that the term 'institution' can easily become a catch all term to refer to virtually any kind of social arrangement that is drawn upon by agents. Indeed, Portes (2005) refers to this as the 'institutions are everything approach'. Furthermore, in one place Schmid (1994: 3) claims: 'Institutions steer and regulate labour markets in a variety of ways,' which implies labour markets are *not* institutions. Yet a page later claims thinks a better explanation is available by 'perceiving the labour market as a social institution', which implies labour markets *are* institutions. Whilst it is possible to conceive of the labour market as an institution that is embedded within other institutions, it is unclear what labour markets and industrial relations systems have in common that allows them both to be described as institutions. Furthermore, it is also possible to conceive of the labour market as an institution embedded within social structures, which raises the thorny issue of the nature of the relationship between institutions and social structures just noted.

The term 'social structure' can be used in many ways and, as Porpora (2007: 195) notes: 'there continues to be a certain blurriness in the way we speak of social structure'. The term can be used negatively, to refer to those social phenomena such as 'rules, relations, positions, processes, systems, values, meanings and the like that *do not* reduce to human behaviour' (Lawson 2003: 181, emphasis added). But because there are many things that *do not* reduce to human behaviour, this definition is difficult to operationalise. Moreover, neither social structures nor institutions are reducible to human behaviour, so on this usage, their differences remain hidden. In a similar vein, and by emphasising the first word of the pair, '*social* structure' can be used to refer to anything that is the result of human action, as opposed to some naturally occurring phenomenon. The term 'social structure' can be used analogously in an 'architectural' sense in cases where we refer to the structure of a market, an industry or organisation; or to the way a market, an industry or organisation is structured. It can be used to refer to *specific* phenomenon like the structure of social class or the gender regime. In contrast, it can also be used to refer to *general* phenomena, where it acts as a place-holder for a series of un-named 'structural' phenomena like rules, conventions, norms, resources, mechanisms and so on.² None of these ways of using the term are exactly wrong, and in many cases the meaning can be derived from the context. But the term 'social structure' can also be used in a more precise, and theoretically elaborated, way. Lopez and Scott's (2000) trawl through over a century of sociological theory identified three broad, and theoretically elaborated, uses of the term which they refer to as *institutional*, *embodied* and

² I make no attempt to engage with the (incorrect) way some postmodernists and poststructuralists use the term, which is to reduce social structure to ideas, language or discourse. Two examples should suffice to explicate this position. 'For postmodernists, it is the explanation itself that creates order, gives structure to experience. Structure is the meaning given to experience. Structure is immanent in the subject not in the object, in the observer not the observed... Poststructuralists conclude that there are no real structures that give order to human affairs, but that the construction of order (of sense making) by people is what gives rise to structure. Structure is the explanation itself, that which makes sense, not that which gives sense. It follows from this that structure cannot be seen as determining action because it is not real and transcendent, but a product of the human mind (Jackson and Carter 2000: 41 & 43, emphasis original). 'Organization is a structure, but only when structure is recognized to be an effect of language' (Westwood & Linstead 2001: 5). Neither will I engage in debate over Harre's social constructivist notion of social structures – see May & Williams (2000) Harre (2002); Strydom (2002); and Carter (2002).

relational structures. I will argue below that only relational structures can be considered *bone fide* social structures, and that institutional and embodied structures are very similar, if not identical, to what many would call institutions.

Finally, when discussing social structures and institutions, some writers also mention terms like habits, rules, conventions, norms, values, roles, laws, regulations, practices, customs, routines, procedures, precedents and so on as if they were similar things. Unfortunately, ambiguity in the understanding of these concepts can easily transpose itself to ambiguity in the understanding of social structures and institutions. Rutherford (1994: 92) for example, considers 'habits, routines, social conventions, social norms' as types of rules. In doing this, however, he conflates properties that should be associated with human agency, (*i.e.* habits) with properties that should be associated with institutions (*i.e.* conventions and norms). He furthermore makes the common mistake of confusing the conditions that make action possible (*i.e.* conventions and norms) with the subsequent actions (*i.e.* routines), something I noted above.

The objective of this paper, then, is to continue the important task of clarifying the meaning of 'institutions' and 'social structures' by drawing upon recent insights in contemporary sociological and (Institutional) economic theory. The opening part of the paper uses these insights to explore the *similarities* between social structures and institutions, especially in the relation between them as a couple, and human agents. The second and third parts shift from exploring similarities to exploring differences. Drawing largely on the work of Hodgson, whose work can be considered current 'best practice' on institutions; part two considers properties that are specific to institutions. Drawing largely on an important historico-theoretical overview of over a century of writing on social structures by Lopez and Scott, (but departing from them in significant ways) part three considers properties that are specific to structures.

1. The similarities between social structures and institutions vis-à-vis agents

Hodgson's (2004: 179-181) summarisation of contemporary social ontology is a good starting point because it obviates the need to repeat arguments that, if not widely known, are readily available – although I make three slight alterations. Where Hodgson refers only to 'social structures' I refer to 'social structures and institutions'. I add the first point (a) although it is recognised elsewhere by Hodgson. Because reconstitutive downward causation is a property of institutions, and not social structures, I refrain from listing it here and will return to it in more depth in section two.

- a) *Ontic differentiation between agents and social structures and institutions.* Human agents, and social structures and institutions are different kinds of things. Clearly, they are mutually supportive, recursive, and constitute an unbreakable unity: but this is a unity in difference.³
- b) *The dependence of social structures and institutions upon agents.* Social structures and institutions exist only via the intentional and unintentional actions of human agents.
- c) *The rejection of methodological and ontological individualism.* Social structures and institutions are irreducible, in an ontological and/or an explanatory sense, to individuals.
- d) *The dependence of agents on social structures and institutions.* For their socialization, survival and interaction, human agents depend upon social structures and institutions, which can change their behaviour.
- e) *The rejection of methodological and ontological collectivism.* Individual actions are irreducible, in an ontological and explanatory sense, to

³ Compare this with Schmid & Schomann (1994: 11) who claim 'institutions are part of the preference structure of individuals'.

social structures. This will become important later on when *structural determinism* is mentioned, because this erroneous doctrine results precisely from reducing individual actions and intentions to social structures.

- f) *The temporal priority of social structures and institutions over any one agent.* Social structures pre-exist human action. Social structures can be changed, but the starting point is not of our choosing.

Holding to this basic social ontology allows us to make a very important three-fold distinction between: (i) agents, (ii) social structures and institutions, and (iii) actions or outcomes of agents interacting with social structures and institutions. Figure 1, places the various terms related to social structures and institutions (mentioned above) under three headings: *agents, social structures and institutions, and actions.*

<i>Human agents</i>	<i>Social structures and Institutions</i>	<i>Actions or Outcomes</i>
Powers	Rules	Practices
Dispositions	Conventions	Routines
Capacities	Norms	Precedents
Capabilities	Values	
Habits	Roles	
Tacit skills	Laws	
Non-tacit skills	Regulations	
	Procedures	
	Customs	

Fig 1. Differentiating between agents, social structures and institutions, and outcomes or actions

Human agents are emergent entities with an internal make up that provides them with a set of dispositions, capacities or powers. Whilst these powers are rooted in biology and neuro-physiology, they are irreducible to them as they also require input from the social world. The power to engage in habitual action, or to reason, are examples of the kind of power I have in mind here.

Recognising habits as properties of human agents, makes it easy to see what is wrong with Rutherford's exposition above.

To grasp the distinction between (ii) social structures and institutions, and (iii) action, we need to turn to social theory. Bhaskar and, more recently, Archer, have updated Giddens's influential *Structuration* approach, to provide a sophisticated account of the interaction between agency and structure, which Bhaskar refers to as the *Transformational Model of Social Action* (TMSA) and Archer's refers to as the *morphogenic/morphostatic* approach.⁴ The observant reader might notice a slippage in terminology here. The 'agency-structure' framework has somehow been transposed into an 'agency-structure and institution' framework. Whilst this might appear to be misleading, there is, arguably, nothing wrong with this exposition. What is going on here is that we are using that important aspect of social structures and institutions that make them similar, namely, they are both phenomena that are drawn, reproduced and transformed, upon by human agents. Allow me to exemplify.

In order to undertake (even the most insignificant) social action, agents have no choice but to (consciously and/or unconsciously) engage with social structures and/or institutions that pre-exist them. To hold a conversation, agents have to engage with the institutional rules of grammar, and the convention of how far to stand from the interlocutor. To enter paid employment, agents have to engage with the social structure of class. By engaging with these institutions and/or structures, agents *reproduce* (hence morphostasis) or *transform* (hence morphogenesis) these structures and/or institutions and, are themselves reproduced or transformed. Social structures and institutions are *different kinds of things than* the human agents that reproduce and transform them, although each is necessary for the transformation or reproduction of the other. Social structures and institutions are the *conditions* of human action, they make human action possible; but they are *not* actions and so cannot be patterns of actions, although they may

⁴ Bhaskar's (1989) TMSA has been elaborated upon by Archer. See Archer (1998) for a succinct overview of this approach, and Stones (2005) for a recent attempt to reconcile the work of Giddens with that of critical realists like Archer.

make such patterns possible. It is now easy to see that some things are actions, that is, the outcome of agents engaging with structures and institutions. Practices, routines and precedents are, arguably, outcomes in the form of patterns of actions that can be observed. They are probably what we have in mind when we say things like: 'John routinely treats his female employees as if they were idiots'; 'the practice around here is to buy cakes on your birthday' or 'Sue set the precedent of leaving early on Friday'. In these cases, agents are drawing upon a rule, convention, norm, value or whatever.

2. Institutions

The *Routledge Dictionary of Economics* (Rutherford 2000) defines institutions as: '(1) An organization...(2) A system of property rights. (3) A norm of behaviour. (4) A decision making unit. (5) A type of contract'. This definition is probably correct (only) in the sense that this is how institutions are commonly defined; but the definition is incorrect in the sense that this common usage is confused and confusing.

In a world where the intentions and actions of others are, typically, unknown and unknowable, a particular group of phenomena play a significant part in facilitating the co-ordination of our intentions and actions, at least to a degree that allows society to continue to exist.⁵ This group consists of rules, conventions and habits, although sometimes norms, values, roles, laws, procedures and regulations are included. There is, of course, a long economic tradition of thinking along these lines. Veblen made use of habits; Keynes made use of conventions; and Hayek made use of social rules of conduct.⁶

Let us establish our analysis of institutions with definitions of their basic component: rules. 'Rules' for Hodgson (2006: 18) are 'socially transmitted and

⁵ To 'exist' is not simply in terms of provisioning, but also in terms of an ethical or moral existence. To 'know what to do' in a given situation extends to knowing what is morally acceptable. See Van Staveren (2001: chapter 7).

⁶ For an interpretation of Hayek's approach to rule following that stresses tacit knowledge, see Fleetwood (1995: chapter 7).

customary normative injunctions or immanently normative dispositions, that in circumstances X'; and similarly, for (Lawson 1997: 172) rules state: 'if x do y under conditions z'. When a community has an established set of rules, and they are followed, these rules allow agents to (*fallibly*) render the intentions and actions of others (relatively) predictable, thereby allowing a degree of co-ordination between their intentions and actions. Students and lecturers know that in lectures, there is a tacit, unwritten, rule that states: 'when in the lecture theatre, do not interrupt the lecturer unless invited'. If this is adhered to, by most students, most of the time, then students and lecturers can co-ordinate their intentions and actions and the lecture can pass off smoothly. The term 'fallibly' is important because, as all lecturers know, not all students observe this rule. Rules can be broken, and/or followed to varying degrees, but this is often sufficient for them to work. Rules facilitate practical wisdom or *phronesis*: they enable us not only to take action, but to take 'the right' action in the particular context. This version of rules has nothing in common with the kind of game-theoretic rules economists invent for *homo economicus*. *Rules in Institutionalist thought should always be thought of as rules of thumb.*

Conventions according to Hodgson (2006: 18) are 'particular instances of institutional rules'. Whilst all countries have traffic rules, for instance, it is a matter of convention whether the rule is to drive on the left or the right. Rules (henceforth, encapsulating conventions) are rarely singular, and the kind we are interested in, typically, come in sets or systems. Indeed, systems of rules constitute institutions. 'Institutions are systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions' (Hodgson 2006: 18).

But in order for institutional rules to work, they must influence agents in some way. The question is: How? We have to tread carefully here to avoid two dangers. First is the danger of structural determinism, or more accurately, *institutional* determinism. Institutional rules *influence* agents' intentions and actions, but they do not *determine* them. Second is the danger of assuming over-rationalisation, that is, assuming that agents consciously reflect upon the array of rules and rationally choose which one(s) to follow. As we will see in a moment, much of rule following is unconscious and tacit.

The following passage from Hodgson contains a plausible answer to the above question, but it is quite dense and needs careful unpacking.

[R]ules are embedded because people choose to follow them repeatedly...[I]nstitutions work only because the rules involved are embedded in shared habits of thought and behaviour. From this perspective, institutions are emergent social structures, based upon commonly held habits of thought: institutions are conditioned by and dependent upon individuals and their habits, but are not reducible to them. Habits are the constitutive material of institutions (2003: 164).

To say the rules are 'embedded' means two things. First, they are embedded in the institution, in the sense that they have a history of being accepted and followed by most of the agents who engage with the institution. Lawson (1997: 317-8) and Giddens (1984: 24) emphasise the relatively enduring nature of institutions. Second they are embedded, internalised or embodied in the agents. These two meanings imply something odd. If rules are embedded in the institution, then they are in some sense *external to the agent*, yet if rules are embedded in the agents, then they are in some sense *internal to the agent*. This is often expressed in phraseology like: rules are external and internal; objective and subjective; real and ideal, in the head and outside the head, and such like. I note this phraseology to alert the reader to other modes of exposition, but refrain (where possible) from using it because it invites confusion.

The sentence, 'the rules involved are embedded in shared habits of thought and behaviour' introduces an important term, *habit* which, slightly changing Thomas and Znaniecki's phraseology, I define as: the tendency to repeat the same act in similar conditions (cited in Hodgson 2003: 169). A habit should not be thought of as an observable behaviour, pattern, routine, action or outcome (in the sense noted in part one) but as a *disposition, capacity or power* that generates a *tendency*. Kleptomaniacs might possess the habit of

stealing, but this does not mean they steal all the time: sometimes they do and sometimes they do not. The habit is, however, always present in the form of a disposition generating a tendency to steal. A habit, then, is an *agential disposition* that generates a tendency for the agent to do *x* (see Lawson (1997) and Fleetwood (2001) and (2008).

Notice that we have crossed an ontic divide. We started with rules as external to agents, and ended up with habits as dispositions internal to agents. The process by which this shift from external rules to internal dispositions occurs, is a process of *habituation*. 'Habituation is the psychological mechanism by which individuals acquire dispositions to engage in previously adopted (rule-like) behaviour' (Hodgson 2006: 18). Once habits are acquired, agents act upon them and are, thereby, able to 'go on'. This is why habits appear to have a kind of double life: they are internal and psychological phenomena, whilst being related to external and sociological phenomena. What Hodgson has in mind here is a process wherein agents begin to follow rules, perhaps inadvertently, and unconsciously, but constant repetition results in the development of a habit: when this happens, the rule becomes internalised or embodied in the form of a habit.⁷

Now the process of embodiment is well known in contemporary sociological literature, especially in the work of Foucault and Bourdieu and their followers. Lopez and Scott (2000: 101) refer to 'objective relations and institutions [being]...incorporated (taken into the corpse or body) as subjective dispositions to act'. For Elder-Vass, embodiment can be used legitimately in a metaphoric sense, or illegitimately in a literal sense. Writing about habitus, and using the term 'structure' where in our context it is more accurate to use the term 'institution', he writes:

In this [literal] sense, when we *internalize* something it becomes literally part of us. In this sense, habitus is not merely a set of dispositions that has been causally influenced by our experiences

⁷ This makes habits compatible with Lawson's (2003: 332-5) and Hodgson's understanding.

of social structure. Instead habitus literally *is* structure, internalized into our bodies...Now, beliefs and dispositions are no longer properties of human beings who are distinct from social structures; rather they represent an ontological penetration of the individual by the social structure. On this reading, structures really are parts of people. (Elder-Vass: 2006: 185).

The term 'embodiment', in the metaphoric sense, allows us to hold onto the ontic differentiation between agents, and social structures and institutions - point (a) in Hodgson's summary of contemporary social ontology noted above. Rules are, and remain, external to agents, whilst habits are the internal, psychological (and neuro-physiological) result of rule following. Recognising this ontic divide allows Hodgson to write: 'institutions are conditioned by and dependent upon individuals and their habits, but are not reducible to them' (above).

Whilst Hodgson is aware of the role played by neuro-physiology, he does not elaborate.

To act in and adapt to the world, our complex nervous system has to be developed and rehearsed. It is now believed that these developments depend upon the evolutionary process within the brain, where neural connections are established, selected and maintained (Hodgson and *passim*).

It is, however, hard to see how the process of habituation could *not* be rooted in neuro-physiology. Repeated practice probably triggers psychological and neuro-physiological processes, generating habits that become stored in our neural networks – which does not, of course, mean habits are reducible to neural networks, neurons, synaptic connection or some such.

Moreover, this differentiation allows us to understand the relationship between the individual and the group in claims such as: 'institutions are based upon *commonly held* habits of thought' and 'rules are embedded in *shared* habits of

thought' (Hodgson cited above). It is possible to understand this now, because we understand not only that rules, as socially real phenomena, can only be common or shared, but also that rules are partly constitutive of institutions. 'Habits', according to Hodgson are 'the constitutive material of institutions'. Without, I hope, altering the sentiment, it seems more accurate, and less prone to cause confusion, to re-phrase this sentence and write: rules, and their embodiment in the form of habits, are the constitutive material of institutions.

To write, that rules are partly constitutive of institutions, brings us to the notion of 'constitutive' and 'regulative' rules (Searle 2005). Regulative rules regulate activities that can exist independently of the rules, such as driving on the right hand side of the road. Constitutive rules not only regulate activities, but also constitute the very activities they regulate, such as the rules of chess. It is, however, often difficult to maintain this distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. According to Bhaskar (1989: 144); 'the rules governing linguistic behaviour are typically constitutive of speech acts, but regulative for the language learner'. Transposing the context, it seems entirely plausible to write, for example: the rules constituting the institution of medicine, and governing the behaviour of health workers, are typically constitutive of medicine, but regulative for the health worker. For me, then, institutional rules are regulative *and* constitutive.

Reconstitutive downward causation

Hodgson has recently introduced one important property of institutions: they have the capacity of *reconstitutive downward causation*. Whilst it is commonly agreed that social structures enable and constrain agents' intentions and actions, it is also believed, although less commonly, that structures cannot directly affect agents' intentions and actions. Metaphorically speaking, social structures are not magical forces that penetrate agents' minds and bodies, throwing a kind of mental switch and causing them to change their intentions. And yet institutions have something like this ability – although I do not want to push this metaphor any further. The following comments from Hodgson

incorporate the points made thus far, and then extend them to the idea of reconstitutive downward causation:

What have to be examined are the social and psychological mechanisms leading to such changes of preference, disposition, or mentality. What does happen, is the framing, shifting and constraining capacities of social institutions give rise to new perceptions and dispositions within individuals. Upon new habits of thought and behaviour, new preferences and intentions emerge...[R]econstitutive downward causation works by creating and moulding habits (Hodgson 2002: 170-1).

The following example explains how reconstitutive downward causation works.

For reason of cost, and a desire to minimise pollution and road congestion, a person may use the bus to travel to work. As a result of this repeated behaviour, an associated set of habits of thought and behaviour will be reinforced. These habits may have further repercussions. However, if the bus service is withdrawn, then the individual will be obliged to use another means of travel. It may be that there is no alternative to the car. The individual will then begin to drive to work and develop another set of habits. Even if a preference for public transport is maintained, it could eventually be undermined by repeated personal car use. The change in the provision of public transport can alter preferences for that mode (2003: 166).

How exactly does repeated car use cause a new set of habits of thought and behaviour, leading to a preference for car use? Hodgson's example does not elaborate, but it is not difficult to imagine what he has in mind. Consider the daily routine of finding the car keys, walking to the car, getting started, driving the familiar route to work, (in relative warmth, dryness, comfort and convenience vis-à-vis bus travellers) parking, then doing the same every

evening. When this goes on every day of every week of every month of every year, it becomes ritual, a habit. Through repeated behaviour of this kind, the commuter may well eventually develop a preference for car use. As Veblen wrote in 1908: 'habits of thought are the outcomes of habits of life' (Hodgson 2004: 171). Habits, then, are not embodied consciously or actively, but sub-consciously and passively. Even if agents were initially conscious of some aspect of behaviour, through repetition over time, it often retreats into our sub-conscious. Habits are multiple, and on occasion, can lead to contradictory intentions and actions. To have a habit is to have a tacit skill, a 'feel for the game'. Although Hodgson does not state this explicitly, it seems likely that habits reflect the wider social, cultural and economic environment agents find themselves engaging with: repeated behaviour is always context specific. As Hodgson (2003: 164) puts it: 'Through their habits, individuals carry the marks of their own unique history'. If something like this is what Hodgson has in mind, then this process of habituation involves a kind of *tacit knowing* or *embodiment*, reminiscent of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, indeed Hodgson suggests this (2004: 187) and I will return to this in section three.⁸ Habits form via this process of habituation, and intentions and actions can change, entirely without deliberation.

Whilst Hodgson does not actually, affirm or deny the following, it is possible that intentions and actions are sometimes caused by habit alone as he implies, sometimes by deliberation alone, and sometimes by a combination of habit and deliberation in a complex iterative process. Elder-Vass makes the point with his usual succinctness.

[I]t might be possible that our actions are directly and non-consciously determined by our current dispositions, while allowing that those dispositions are themselves the outcome of a series of past events. Those events include (i) very recent reflections that we tend to see as directly causally effective 'decisions'; (ii) older

⁸ Bourdieu's notion of habitus is, however, exceptionally vague. See Bourdieu (1996: chapter 3) and Jenkin's (1996: chapter 4).

reflections that shaped our dispositions consciously at the time but which we may now have forgotten; and (iii) experiences that affected our dispositions (for example in the subliminal acquisition of a habit or skill) without us ever consciously deciding how' (Elder-Vass 2006: 175).

It follows from what has been said above, then, that institutions: (a) consist of systems of rules, (b) are sometimes consciously, at least at first, but more often unconsciously, internalised or embodied as habits, (c) assist in coordinating agents' intentions and actions, (d) exist independently of the agents who draw upon, reproduce and/or transform them, and in so-doing, reproduce and/or transform themselves, and (e) may, via a process of reconstitutive downward causation involving habituation and habit formation, transform the intentions and actions of these agents. *This last property is perhaps the most crucial one in differentiating institutions from social structures because the latter simply do not possess this property.*⁹

Alongside rules and conventions, however, are also norms and values, and they too satisfy points (b) to (e) above, strongly suggesting that institutions should include norms and values as well. The ambiguity surrounding the use of norms and values, and their relationship to rules and conventions, means that on some definitions, rules and conventions could be treated as identical to norms and value, whilst on other definitions, a distinction would have to be made. The *safest* way to deal with them in this paper is to leave them out of the definition of institutions – although a specific analysis of norms and values might well treat them as institutional. Furthermore, I also exclude roles from the content of institutions on the grounds that they are associated with organisations; and exclude laws, procedures, regulations and customs on the grounds that they are, typically, explicitly and consciously identified and followed, although they may or may not become habitual.

⁹ Fleetwood (2008) explains, at length, the difference between institutions, habits and reconstitutive downward causation on the one hand, and social structures and agential deliberation on the other.

Before turning to analyse social structures, let me conclude this section, then, with a definition of institutions.

An institution is a system of rules and conventions that assist in coordinating and rendering (relatively) predictable, the intentions and actions of agents who (systematically) draw upon, reproduce or transform these rules and conventions, whilst simultaneously reproducing and transforming themselves and who may, via a process of reconstitutive downward causation involving habituation and habit formation, have their intentions and actions transformed or changed.

3. Social structures

Lopez and Scott (2000) have done a significant job of work by trawling through over a century of sociological theory to identify three broad approaches to social structures which they refer to as *institutional*, *embodied* and *relational structures*. By using their comments on several social theorists, I will show that of the three broad approaches, only relational structures can really be considered as *bone fide* social structures; institutional structure and embodied structure appear to be *very similar, if not identical to, what many would just call institutions*. In the following sections I quote fairly extensively from their work, in order to make clear how difficult it is, even for two astute writers, to avoid running into problems and inconsistencies in the way certain crucial terms are used. By being aware of some common pitfalls, we can hope to avoid them in future.

Institutional Structure

Lopez & Scott define *institutional structure* as:

‘Those cultural or normative patterns that define the expectations that agents hold about each other’s behaviour and that organize their enduring relations with each other.’ (Lopez & Scott 2000: 3)

In attempting to explain why institutional structure is a social structure, in many places they abandon the term 'institutional structure' and simply refer to 'social institutions'.

Social institutions... are built up from the reciprocal expectations that people build up in their interactions. As someone observes another's actions, they infer meanings and motives and they begin to formulate these observations into enduring assumptions about what others will typically do in a variety of situations...Social institutions, then, have a dual reality, being both subjective and objective (*ibid*: 24).

Social institutions are the 'normative patterns which define what are felt to be, in a given society, proper, legitimate or expected modes of action or of social relationship'...Institutions...form 'predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against another (*ibid*: 25).

It is fairly clear to anyone familiar with Institutional economics that they are at least trying to describe institutions as systems of rules that allow agents to coordinate their actions. Although they do not make much use of the term 'rule' it seems clear that they have it in mind. It is presupposed in examples they use such as queuing, turn-taking in conversations and collective bargaining. Furthermore, they argue that institutions are built from norms, and norms are 'rule[s] of conduct,' (*ibid*: 25). They also refer to rules in the work of ethnomethodologists such as Cicourel (*ibid*: 94).

The following point, however, shows where Lopez & Scott's understanding of institutional structure differs from the understanding of institution I am trying to sustain. First, institutions are not patterns. As noted above, this confuses the conditions of action with the action itself. Second, Lopez and Scott do not mention reconstitutive downward causation, nor seem aware of the fact that agents' intentions and actions might be changed by institutions. Third, for them, the key mechanisms through which institutions operate are not habits

and the process of habituation, but ‘the concept of social positions and role expectations’ (*ibid*: 29). Drawing on the work of several well known mid-twentieth century social theorists they offer the following thoughts on social positions and roles:

Social institutions regulate actions by defining social positions agents can occupy and the behaviour that is associated with these positions... As a part of culture, knowledge about social positions is held in the individual mind, but this knowledge is shared by those who interact together (*ibid*: 29).

Each social position defines a role in social life for its occupants...Roles are definitions of those things that people are expected to do...They are blueprints or templates for action...They specify the rights and obligations that are entailed in social positions, and tell us what is expected of us and what we should expect others to do (*ibid*: 30).

They stated above that institutions are built from norms, norms are synonymous with rules and norms or rules generate regular behaviour. Now it appears that institutions regulate behaviour by defining social positions, and associated *roles*. Roles now appear to be doing what norms previously did, and because, norms and rules are synonymous, then roles now appear to be doing what rules did. If I interpret them correctly, their understanding of social positions and role expectations fits with the Institutional understanding of habits and the process of habituation.

Alongside norms and rules, there are social positions and roles. An agent, who takes up a position, inherits a set of practices. For example, a person who takes up the role of lecturer inherits a set of practices (e.g. teaching, research and administration) and a set of rules involved with these practices. Some rules are explicit, such as those contained in the employment contract; and some are implicit, such as those regulating how ‘late’ is ‘late’ in terms of a student who hands in a ‘late’ essay. Whether explicit or implicit, conscious or

unconscious, many of these rules generate a process of habituation where, over time, they are embodied in the form of habits. The lecturer is now an experienced lecturer, and these habits become a social skill that, for example, avoids the need to stop and weigh up the pros and cons of each 'late' essay. She immediately, and habitually, employs the embodied 'it is only a day late' rule. If this interpretation is plausible, then there seems a place for social positions and roles, or positioned-practices, alongside the processes of habit and habituation.

Institutions, then, consist of rules and norms that allow those agents who draw upon them to co-ordinate their actions with others who do likewise. In this case, however, *institutional structures become very similar, if not identical, to what many would just call institutions*. The reference to 'structures' becomes redundant and, because it is likely to be cause confusion, should be dropped. It makes sense to explicitly recognise that institutional structures are just institutions, because then we can use the knowledge of reconstitutive downward causation, habituation and habits coming from the Institutionalist economics tradition, alongside positions and roles, to get a richer understanding of how institutions work.

Embodied structure

Lopez and Scott define *embodied structure* as:

'The habits and skills that are inscribed in human bodies and minds and that allow them to produce, reproduce, and transform institutional structures and relational structures.' (Lopez & Scott 2000: 4)

We established above that institutional rules are, and remain, external to agents, whilst habits are the internal, psychological and neuro-physiological result of a process of habituation. There is, however, no similar process by which social structures can be internalised or embodied. To return to a previous metaphor, social structures are not magical forces that penetrate

agents' minds and bodies, throwing a kind of mental switch and causing them to change their intentions. Social structures are, and remain, external to agents. Lopez and Scott draw upon Bourdieu's notion of habitus in an attempt to show how social structures are embodied. Because habitus is roughly equivalent to Hodgson's notion of habit, what is required is an elaboration of a process that would do for social structures, what habituation does for institutions. Yet, because nothing like a process of habituation is offered, their account of embodiment runs into two problems: (i) it is difficult to make sense of; and (ii) where sense can be made of it, it borders on structural determinism. Here we need to remind ourselves of Elder-Vass's distinction between metaphoric and literal senses of embodiment. Scott and Lopez, are getting very close to a literal reading, implying that: 'habitus literally *is* structure, internalized into our bodies' or implying the 'ontological penetration of the individual by the social structure' as Elder-Vass put it above. Let us consider a passage from Lopez & Scott where they are explaining the 'class habitus' which following Bourdieu they define as 'the internalized form of class condition'. A class habitus:

'Is the result of the particular experiences and opportunities shared by those who occupy a particular class position. It is because people acquire a class-specific habitus that there are similar patterns of class action in various fields of activity; and it is because of these similar objective patterns that they acquire the habitus. Politics, leisure, religion, art, and so on all show similar patterns of class behaviours when they are the results of (and therefore the conditions for) the application of class habituses...Individuals acquire these systems of classification and social behaviour without realizing that they are doing so.' (*ibid*: 104-5)

If 'individuals acquire these systems of classification and social behaviour without realizing that they are doing so' the question is: How? What is needed is an explanation of the mechanism(s) by which the particular experiences and opportunities shared by those who occupy a particular class position

result in this class habitus. Is the mechanism the similar objective patterns of behaviour? Maybe, but how exactly do patterns, which are external to the agent, become internalized or embodied? Is the mechanism the act of sharing things like experiences and opportunities? Maybe, but what exactly is it about sharing that has this effect? Without an explanation of the (conscious or unconscious) processes by which agents come to embody external forces, Lopez and Scott are left flirting ambiguously with social structures as 'magic forces' that somehow 'ontologically penetrate agents' – which is not, I am sure, their intention. Moreover, structural determinism looms large vis-à-vis the claim that the particular experiences and opportunities shared by those who occupy a particular class position result in a class habitus. This comes close to suggesting that the development of particular class intentions and the undertaking of particular class actions are determined by the shared particular experiences which are a product of being brought up with particular social structures. I freely admit that this may not be what Lopez and Scott believe. But ambiguity, coupled with, or even deriving from, the lack of an explanation of the mechanisms or processes by which agents come to embody external forces, leads in this direction.

The way out of this tangle is to interpret (class) habitus to mean habits (of persons of a certain class, or indeed gender or generation and so on) and make use of the process of habituation through which habits are formed to explain the psychological and neuro-physiological mechanisms by which social structures may be embodied. But then we need to recognise that we are dealing with institutions, or institutionalised rules, not social structures or institutional structures.

We started with a definition of embodied structure consisting of 'the habits and skills that are inscribed in human bodies and minds'. But to make sense of the notion of embodiment, we had to use the processes of habituation through which habits are formed. And this makes *embodied structures very similar, if not identical, to what many would just call institutions*. Referring to embodied structures as institutions, adds to the confusion between social structures and institutions. It makes sense to recognise that embodied structures are just

institutions, because then we can bring the knowledge of habituation and habits, coming from the Institutionalist economics tradition into the picture to get a richer understanding of how institutional rules are embodied.

Relational Structure

Lopez & Scott define *relational structure* as:

‘The social relations themselves, understood as patterns of causal interconnection and interdependence among agents and their actions, as well as the positions that they occupy.’ (Lopez & Scott 2000: 3)

In contrast to arguing that institutional structures and embodied structures are better understood as institutions, I will argue that relational structures are *bone fide* social structures. The idea of relational structure does not, however, come without its critics. And one such critic is Elder-Vass who observes that relational structure:

‘Can refer to the whole entity that is structured by the relations between its parts, which I shall call *structure-as-whole*, or it can refer to the way that a group of things (generally the parts of a whole) is related to each other, which I shall call *structure-as-relations*.’ (Elder-Vass 2006: 100. See also Elder Vass 2007b)

Treating social structure as structure-as-relations means rejecting its causal efficacy because, he argues, relations themselves are not causally efficacious: only their relata are. Treating social structure as structure-as-whole, restores causal efficacy, but it also means that social structure becomes synonymous with some whole entity such as an institution or organisation, thereby denying any difference between structure (as structure-as-whole) and institutions – or organisations. This is not a problem for my argument, because it is in-keeping with the idea that institutional and

embodied structures are better understood as institutions.¹⁰ I will say nothing more about structure-as-whole, and turn to consider structure-as-relations in more depth. Let me start with Elder-Vass's argument.

[R]elations as such can have no causal effect on the world. It is only when actual entities are related that the set of entities so related can have an effect; and, as I have shown in chapter three, when we claim that a set of lower-level entities and the stable substantial relations between them have a causal effect, this is synonymous with claiming that there is a higher-level entity formed from these parts and relations that is the causally effective element. Ultimately, then, the idea that structures have causal effects is incoherent if structure is taken to mean structures-as-relations and not structures-as-wholes (Elder-Vass 2006: 100, emphasis added)

Two key phrases make Elder-Vass's argument compelling. First is his claim that: 'relations as such can have no causal effect on the world. It is only when actual entities are related that the set of entities so related can have an effect'. Second, is Ollman's worry that a focus solely on relations between things, without the things themselves, might lead to reification of the term 'between' (cited in Elder-Vass 2006: 56). I must admit, this threw me for a while until in a discussion, a colleague¹¹ pointed out that there is no such thing as a 'relation as such', or a relation without relata. There can be no 'between' if there are no things 'either side' as it were. Of course a 'relation as such' has no causal efficacy, but this is because it is not real – although ambiguous phraseology might suggest or imply otherwise. Is there a sense in which relation-as-structure can be rescued by abandoning the misleading idea of a 'relation as such' and allowing that relations are always relations between things? I think there is.

¹⁰ Elder Vass (2007b 470-1) does not want to equate social structures and institutions, and he gives a relatively lengthy exposition of a social institution as the causal power of a group norm. I hesitate to draw further on his work in pursuit of the meaning of institutions because this is not the main focus of his work.

¹¹ I would like to thank Filipe Sousa for this insight.

The roots of a plausible notion of structure-as-relations lies in what Elder-Vass (2006: 55) previously attributed to Collier who writes that: ‘The latticework of relations constitutes the structure of “society”’. For Elder-Vass, ‘the latticework of relations constitutes structure (*i.e.* the mode of organisation)’. I assume this means that the relations constitute the mode of organisation or even ‘the way a group of things or people relate’ (Elder-Vass 2006: 100). It might be less confusing to treat structure-as-relation as a *latticework of relations*, with different latticework’s referring to different ways in which the parts relate. We would then be able to differentiate between relational structures because we could differentiate between latticeworks.

If the *relations* between a set of unchanging things are altered and new, systematic and stable relations emerge, then the entity will become a different one. The change will be caused solely by changes in the relations. We could identify a different latticework, a different way in which the parts relate. Imagine a scenario wherein an unemployed person contemplates offering her labour power on the labour market, and an employer contemplates hiring labour power. At the stage of contemplation, when the two parties are unaware of each other, are totally unrelated, each has causal powers X and Y respectively, and these powers exist independently of any relation between them. If the two parties are brought together via the labour market and an employment contract is signed, then at this point, a very definite relationship emerges: an *employment* relation. Indeed, at this point, the relations between them become internal relations.

Notice that the employment relation is a very definite or particular one. The employee and employer may be related in terms of being family, friends, or supporting the same football club, but these relations are *not* the same as the employment relation, they constitute a different latticework. If the way the people relate should change, that is, if the relations should change, people would act differently. If, for example, the employer married the employee and the latter ceased work, then the employment relation would disappear and a different relation, a family relation, would emerge. The relations that we are

focussing upon in this example, those that constitute the employment relation, are not *external*, but *internal* relations – i.e. where the nature of one of the relata, depends upon the nature of the other, landlord and tenant would be another example. This is important, because not any old relata can be internally related: the employer-employee relations cannot be an employment relation if, for example, the employee quits to become a subcontracted worker, whilst continuing to carry out the same tasks she previously did.

Now, has the relation (between things) caused anything? The employee, who previously had causal powers X , now has *additional* causal power X^1 - e.g. the power to purchase goods with wages. The employer, who previously had causal powers Y , now has *additional* causal power Y^1 - e.g. the power to produce extra products with the additional labour. What is the *cause* of these additional causal powers? There are (at least) three possibilities:

- a) The cause of the additional powers could be the employment relation, the way the people are organised or related.
- b) The cause of the additional powers could be something involved in creating the relationship, like the employment contract or the workplace.
- c) The cause of the additional powers could be something to do with the act of transferring resources. The employer transfers wages (which was part of Y) to the employee and the employee transfers the control of labour power to the employer (which was part of X).

Cause (b) seems to depend upon cause (a) in the sense that the employment contract depends upon the employment relation; indeed, the contract officially registers the existence of the relation. *No employment relation, no employment contract.* Cause (c) also seems to depend on cause (a). The resources without the transfer, and hence without the relation, remain in their original locations and cannot become *additional* causal powers. *No employment relation, no transfer, no resources.* By default, then, we are left

with cause (a) and can, I think, conclude that employment relations, as an example of (social) relations more generally, are causally efficacious.¹²

In sum, then, having abandoned the misleading idea of a 'relation as such' and recognised that relations are always relations between things, I conclude that: (social) relations are causal; (social) relations are emergent entities; structure-as-relation is plausible and so, therefore, is relational structure. Unlike institutional structures, embodied structures and also structure-as-whole, which are all more accurately interpreted as institutions, relational structure, *qua* structure-as-relation, is a *bone fide* social structure. These observations allow me to conclude this section, then, with the following definition:

A *social structure* is a latticework of internal relations between entities that may enable and constrain (but cannot transform or change) the intentions and actions of agents who draw upon, reproduce and/or transform these relations.¹³

Conclusion

This paper has shown that, on the one hand, institutions and structures share similarities. The three-fold distinction between (i) agents; (ii) social structures and institutions; and (iii) actions or outcomes illustrates how agents who engage with structures and institutions are enabled to act, and in so acting reproduce or transform not only the structures and institutions, but also themselves. Social structures and institutions, then, are the *conditions* of human action, they make human action possible. The paper has also shown that, on the other hand, institutions and structures have two important differences. First, institutions are systems of rules and conventions, whereas social structures are latticeworks of internal relations between entities. Second, institutions contribute to a process of reconstitutive downward

¹² This is in-keeping with Porpora (2007: 196-7)

¹³ This is in-keeping with Porpora (1998: 344) and (2007:198).

causation involving habituation and habit formation whereby agents' intentions and actions are transformed or changed, whereas social structures enable and constrain, but cannot transform or change, agents' intentions and actions. Recognising these similarities and differences between institutions and social structures has allowed us to take another small step in the task of clarifying the meaning of these important terms.

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