

Social Structure and Social Relations

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Abstract: This paper replies to Porpora, King, and Varela's responses to my earlier paper 'For Emergence', focussing on the relationship between the concepts of *social structure* and *social relations*. It recognises the importance of identifying the mechanisms responsible whenever we make claims for the existence of causal powers, and discusses the mechanism underlying one case of social structure: normative institutions. It also shows how critical realism reconciles the claims that *both* social structures and human individuals have causal powers that combine to produce actual social events.

Keywords: social structure; emergence; social relations; causal powers; critical realism.

Social Structure and Social Relations

Introduction

This paper offers a reply to the three generous and stimulating responses by Douglas Porpora, Charles Varela, and Anthony King to my earlier paper 'For emergence: refining Archer's account of social structure' (Elder-Vass, 2007a; King, 2007; Porpora, 2007; Varela, 2007). Although there are many interesting divergences between their papers, all three converge to some extent on one theme: they are all concerned about how I approach the relationship between social structure and social relations. Yet this superficial similarity conceals some substantial differences in the sorts of concerns they raise. This is not entirely surprising, as *social relations*, like *social structure*, and indeed several other terms in this debate, are expressions that can support a variety of different meanings.

Rather than replying to their concerns individually and exhaustively, this paper will construct a unified argument that addresses what I take to be the key issues; some of their other points are picked up in short asides or footnotes.¹ It begins by examining the meanings of *social structure* and *social relations* a little more thoroughly in order to clarify the relationship between the two. Then it engages with the more general ontological questions of causal powers and their plausibility raised by Varela, recognising that we do indeed need criteria for the ascription of causal powers, but suggesting some different ones than he does. My criteria converge with Varela's response in recognising the need to identify the mechanisms that underpin claims for the causal effectiveness of social structures, and I examine these mechanisms in the next section. Finally, I turn from the identification of mechanisms (what Bhaskar calls *retroduction*) to the examination of how those mechanisms interact in the causation of individual events (*retrodiction*), in order to show that the emergentist approach enables us to recognise and reconcile the causal contributions of *both* social structures and human individuals. It is perhaps this unfamiliar combination that leads to the ironic contrast between Porpora's desire to label me a sociological holist and King's to see me as an individualist.

The meanings of *social structure* and *social relations*

For Porpora, it seems, social structure *is* social relations, and so he finds it odd that I speak of structure as if it is something else (Porpora, 2007, p. 198). The first source of misunderstanding over these sorts of questions, however, is the remarkable diversity of meanings attributed to these terms in the literature. There are at least two senses of *social relations* abroad in the literature, and many more of *social structure*. It is impossible to make sense of the relationship between the two until we have clarified what we mean by each of them.

Let me begin with social relations. In an earlier paper, Porpora has adopted a concept of social relations drawn from a Marxist tradition (Porpora, 1993). But even in the Marxist tradition, there are at least two versions of the concept, as Ollman makes very clear:

I shall use the term ‘relation’ in two different senses: first, to refer to a factor itself, as when I call capital a relation, and also as a synonym of ‘connection’, as in speaking of the relation between different factors. Marx and Engels do the same (Ollman, 2003, p. 26).

Ollman distinguishes the two by capitalising the initial R when using *relation* in the first sense. In my terms, then, a *Relation* is an entity, a whole, that is composed of its parts plus the *relations* (with a small *r*) between them. For clarity, where the usage is ambiguous, I will refer to these two alternative meanings using the terms *relations-as-wholes* and *relations-as-connections*.

These two usages continue today. The sense of a relation as referring merely to the connection between two different factors is, I believe, more common, and it is this sense that Porpora seems to intend when he refers to *social relations*. But the second sense is still widespread. This may be what Varela intends, for example, in his own response when he refers to social relations as “people plus relations” (Varela, 2007, pp. 203, 204). Here, it seems, the “relations” in “social relations” refer to relations-as-wholes, or entities, or Relations as Ollman puts it, since they are composed of *both* people and the connections between them, whereas the “relations” in “people plus relations” refer to just the relations-as-connections (though I shall suggest an alternative interpretation of Varela’s use of the term below).

The situation with *structure* is more complex. As I argued in my original paper, the emergentist analysis of causal power depends on the ontological claim that *powers* (or emergent properties) are possessed by *entities*, which are composed of

parts in particular characteristic *relations* to each other (relations-as-connections, of course). Each of the italicised terms in the previous sentence stands for a different type of *structural element* in an emergentist ontology. Unfortunately, the term *social structure* has been used in the literature to refer to (almost) all of these different structural elements, and indeed to patterns of behaviour that are not structural elements at all, but the *product* of structural causes, if there are such.

Even in everyday language, as Raymond Williams has shown, *structure* refers sometimes to structured wholes, and at other times to the connections or relations that structure such wholes – what I shall call *structure-as-whole* and *structure-as-relations* respectively (Crothers, 2002: 7; Williams, 1976: 253). As I have argued elsewhere (Elder-Vass, 2006; Elder-Vass, under consideration), both of these usages are at large in the sociological literature, but so are several others. At times, for example, social structure seems to refer to what we might call *structure-as-empirical-regularity* and at others, to refer to *structure-as-properties*. Furthermore, *structure-as-properties* may refer to properties of a social whole, or to properties of human individuals, as for example, when Bourdieu argues that social structure is embodied in the *habitus* (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 54-5).

One consequence of all this is that there are two different ways in which we might identify social structure with social relations: social structures-as-relations would be the same thing as social relations-as-connections, and social structures-as-wholes would be the same thing as social relations-as-wholes. I believe that Porpora is suggesting the former, and of course he is right, if we give *structure* and *relations* these particular readings. I don't think we can understand the debate, however, without keeping in mind the many different readings these terms can have, and on the whole it seems to me more useful to use *relations* to refer to relations-as-connections and to avoid using *structure* to refer to *structure-as-relations*.

If the story so far is not confusing enough, different writers often have not only different structural elements but also entirely different referents in mind when they discuss social structures. Restricting ourselves to scholars whose names have appeared in this particular exchange, these referents include, for example, organisations, normative institutions, demographic distributions, education systems, social classes, and whole societies. It is hardly surprising, then, that as Porpora says,

“there continues to be a certain blurriness in the way we speak of social structure” (Porpora, 2007, p. 195).

Such blurriness can only be avoided by being very specific about which referents and which structural elements we are referring to on each occasion. I am tempted to suggest that the term *social structure* might best be reserved as nothing more than the name of this debate, since any attempt to legislate on what it actually refers to in more specific terms is doomed to failure. Rather than plumping for one meaning over the others, let me try to clarify the core of my argument without using the terms *social structure* and *social relations* at all (for the moment, at least): *social entities such as organisations and normative communities, composed of people, have the causal power to influence the behaviour of human individuals.*

I hesitate to make the move from this claim to the argument that *social structure* should properly refer to social wholes and nothing else, simply because of the confusion this would cause when dealing with referents like normative institutions. In this case, I argue, it is not the institution as such but rather the normative community concerned, that is the whole with causal power – and yet it is the institution that is usually referred to as the social structure. To put it a little differently, I suggest it is best to accept the blurriness of the term *social structure*, and therefore to avoid confusion by always qualifying which structural element and which type of social referent we are applying it to.

The power of social wholes

This brings us to another of Porpora’s concerns, his uneasiness over my “allusions to social wholes”, which he believes that neither critical realism nor Archer and Bhaskar in particular are committed to (Porpora, 2007, pp. 198,199). I agree that social wholes are rarely referred to in critical realist accounts of the social world, but highlighting their importance is a central part of the refinement I am offering to Archer’s thinking. As I understand the ontology of critical realism, wholes play a crucial role, and so any critical realist account of society must be *implicitly* committed to recognising such a role. I am merely seeking to make this commitment explicit.

Consider Bhaskar’s account of ‘real’ causal powers: Bhaskar identifies these with “relatively enduring structures and mechanisms” that are “nothing other than the

ways of acting of things” (Bhaskar, 1978); or in other words, “the generative mechanisms of nature exist as the causal powers of things” (Bhaskar, 1978); cf. (Lawson, 1997). These things “are complex objects, in virtue of which they possess an ensemble of tendencies, liabilities and powers” (Bhaskar, 1978). Although this formulation does not directly invoke the concept of emergence, the relationship with emergence is clear: the powers and properties of an object or entity can be ascribed to the organisation of its parts into a particular kind of complex whole. In other words, real causal powers are emergent properties of entities or wholes.² And Collier makes the connection still clearer:

As against atomism and holism, Bhaskar's emergence theory allows us to conceive of real, irreducible wholes which are both composed of parts that are themselves real irreducible wholes, and are in turn parts of larger wholes, with each level of this hierarchy of composition having its own peculiar mechanisms and emergent powers (Collier, 1994).

The implication is clear: causal powers are emergent properties of things, arising from their structure. Despite this, there seems to be a great deal of resistance to the idea that social structure refers to the causal powers of social entities. This seems to me perverse, particularly amongst realists. When we discuss non-social causal powers we refer to the entities that possess them - we would not discuss physics without attributing the causal powers concerned to particular particles, or chemistry without molecules, or biochemistry without cells or psychology without people. Why, then, is it assumed that we can discuss 'social structure' as a genus of causal powers while ignoring the entities that such talk implicitly depends upon? What is the point of critical realism's ontology of entities, powers, and mechanisms if we don't apply it as soon as we get to the case that interests us most?

Perhaps the reason is that there is a persistent assumption amongst social scientists that if *social structure* refers to the structure of an entity, that entity can be nothing other than *society as a whole*. Bhaskar himself occasionally gives this impression (e.g. Harré and Bhaskar, 2001, p. 30) though elsewhere he describes society as “an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 36), suggesting that he might see social entities as occurring at a lower level than society as a whole.

And it is just this assumption – that social structure is a property of society as a whole – that permeates King’s critique of the concept. In his book *The Structure of Social Theory*, for example, he writes “The claim that society consists of more than its

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members is plainly problematic” (King, 2004, p. 69); and “Society is certainly more than any one particular individual but it is never more than all the members of this society bound together in complex webs of social relations” (King, 2004, p. 79). And in criticising my analogy of the barking dog, he writes “social reality as a whole is not fundamentally different from the groups and institutions of which it is comprised” (King, 2007, p. 215). Similarly, in their critique of Bhaskar, Varela and Harré argue that “it is a mistake to ascribe causal efficacy to ‘society’” (Varela and Harre, 1996).

But my argument is not that ‘society’ has causal efficacy. It is that specific types of social entity with identifiable human members and characteristic types of relations between them have causal efficacy. Those types of social entity are organisations and normative communities. There may also be other types, but their identification and analysis is an area where further work is required. The concept of social structure as ‘the structure of society’ is not being invoked here; what is being invoked is the causal powers of specific social entities. And the emergence relation is not between “social reality as a whole” and “the groups and institutions of which it is comprised” but between those very groups and the *people* of which they are comprised.³

The notion of structure, then, that King is attacking is not the same one that I am defending. At the very least, our referents are different. King, I believe, uses the term *social structure* to refer to society as a whole, and argues that to ascribe causal power to such a structure is to reify society. But King himself sometimes seems to ascribe causal powers to just the same social entities as those for which I *do* claim emergent powers, for example when he “recognises the extraordinary powers of modern states and multinational corporations but explains these powers in terms of the social networks of which these entities consist” (King, 2004, p. 18).

Evaluating claims of causal powers

As Varela points out, claims for the causal efficacy of entities of any kind must be justified, and to be convincing, such justifications need to rest on a principled understanding of the nature of causal efficacy itself. He criticises Bhaskar for his “seriously limited understanding of causal powers” on the grounds that (although he does have a theory of causal powers) he lacks a theory of what Harré has called

plausibility, and thus criteria for “making principled judgments of the ascription of ...unconscious agency” to structures (Varela, 2007, p. 203). This argument also seems to underpin his suggestion that my own paper neglects “the logic of the realist theory of causation (powers and plausibility) and the correlative question of disciplined ascription” (Varela, 2007, p. 205). He also criticises me for separating the questions of emergence and ascription of causal powers “as if principled imputation of causal powers... is *another* issue” (Varela, 2007, p. 205).

I find one part of this argument surprising, in that I believe I did advance an, admittedly brief, overview of the critical realist theory of causal powers in my paper (an overview that is expanded in Elder-Vass, 2005). The essential point is that causal powers are the emergent properties of entities, which they possess because of causal mechanisms, which are themselves processes that depend upon the particular sorts of parts that make up entities of this type and the particular sorts of relations between those parts that are found in entities of this type. The *existence* of causal powers is therefore inseparable from the question of emergence. While I have argued elsewhere that the role of emergence has not been fully theorised in the critical realist tradition, I have sought to fill some of that gap myself, and it does seem to me that on such a basis the critical realist account of emergent causal powers is coherent and persuasive (Elder-Vass, 2005). I am less persuaded that Harré has a consistent and stable account of causal powers, given that this account has moved through a number of apparently incompatible stages, as documented recently by Kaidesoja in this journal (Kaidesoja, 2007). This is not the place for a full critique, but I am particularly concerned by the reductionist approach that Harré takes towards physical causation, and the dualism of treating human agency as being somehow distinct from physical causation.

Whether the *ascription* of causal powers is separable from their emergence depends (yet again) on our definitions: if *ascription* refers to an epistemological process in which we claim the existence of a causal power then this clearly *is* distinct from the ontological question of whether the causal power concerned exists. When we ascribe a causal power to an entity we are making a knowledge claim, and as all good realists know, all such claims are fallible since the thing we purport to know exists (or does not) independently of what we purport to know about it. Ascription of causal powers is therefore distinct from their existence, and so we need criteria by which to assess such ascriptions.

Given that Harré's concept of *plausibility* refers to a property (or rather a series of properties) of theories (Harré, 1986, p. 60), or of theory-families (Harré, 1986, p. 207), rather than to a property of things, then it too would appear to belong to such an epistemological process, offering as it does criteria by which to test knowledge claims. Plausibility, as Harré describes it, corresponds to a series of tests of a theory (including, most relevantly, any theory that a type of entity possesses a causal power), most of which revolve around the appropriateness of the metaphors it uses.

My concern with this approach is that, despite Varela and Harré's argument that "the ascription of causal powers depends on satisfying certain stringent ontological conditions derived from the logic of causal powers" (Varela and Harre, 1996, p. 318), the criteria that Harré offers are in fact *ad hoc* with respect to the question under examination: they are derived from his views on the role of metaphor in theory-building, and not from his theory of causal powers. I agree that the criteria by which we assess a claim for causal powers must be derived from our understanding of the ontology of causal powers, and I have tentatively offered a set of such criteria elsewhere (Elder-Vass, 2007b).⁴ These include, for example, the need to identify the mechanism that underpins the causal power, the need to identify what set of parts and relations the mechanism depends on, the need to demonstrate that the claimed parts themselves are entities with their own parts and structure, and the need to validate claims about mechanisms through the usual methods of empirical theory-testing.

The mechanisms of social structure

One consequence of this line of thinking is to reinforce Varela's own argument that claims for the causal efficacy of social structure must be backed with a description of the mechanism that underpins it (Varela, 2007, pp. 205-6). Varela, however, expresses this argument in a way that reflects quite a different ontology than the one I am advocating. Varela asks me to identify "*the mechanism that connects the agency of structure and the agency of persons in relations*" but this reflects a Meadian commitment to a "social relational theory of mind, self, and therefore society" (Varela, 2007, p. 206).

If I have understood Varela correctly, his argument is that *persons* are human individuals who have in effect internalised the social as a result of their interaction with their social environment. He contrasts the biological “asocial and material organism” (Varela, 1995, p. 369) or “natural individual” with the “cultural person” (Varela, 1995, p. 377), and argues that “environmental activity constitutes the acquired powers of human agency: the proper location of personal agency is the grounding site of the social activity of the local culture. The enactment of personal agency is therefore accomplished *socially and never individualistically*” (Varela, 1995, p. 369). And these social persons are contrasted with the “structurally based capacity [that] constitutes the natural powers of human agency” (Varela, 1995, p. 369). The argument would seem to be that biological humans have powers that derive from their composition and structure, while social persons are somehow different entities with powers that derive from their enmeshment in a web of social relations. So on this account, it seems that persons in a sense already include social relations within them, and there is no need for social structure to explain how this could occur.⁵

One of the benefits of emergence theory is that it helps us to see the crucial ontological difference between *composition* and *causation*; a difference that is obscured in many conflationist ontologies by the liberal use of the word “constituted”. To say that our natural powers are constituted by our structure and then to move on to say that personal agency is constituted by environmental activity, for example, is to obscure an essential ontological difference. In the emergentist perspective, there is a sharp distinction to be made here: our powers are founded upon mechanisms that depend upon our structure, upon our *synchronic composition* from parts and the relations between them, but they are also *diachronically causally influenced* by our social environment. These two claims are reconciled by accepting that our composition itself is also causally influenced by our social environment, with the result that when the social environment causally influences our composition it also alters the ways in which we exercise our agency. To be more specific: our social experience affects our dispositions and beliefs by prompting processes that alter our neurological structure. The consequence is that we act differently, having been influenced socially, but *still* on the basis of causal mechanisms that are rooted in our physical composition.⁶ There is therefore no difference between a given biological

human individual and the corresponding social person. Both have been affected by their social experience, and neither has social relations as their parts.

The mechanism that I take to be necessary, then, in accounting for social structure, is one that connects structure with individual human agents. However, as I have argued, there are potentially many different types of social entity with causal powers, and the mechanism of each type of causal power is different (though there may be some similarities between them). I make no claim to have identified and catalogued these mechanisms exhaustively; but the argument for the causal effectiveness of social entities can be made initially with just one example. The example I will be examining here is normative social institutions (fuller versions of the argument can be found in Elder-Vass, 2006; Elder-Vass, 2007b; Elder-Vass, under consideration).

A social institution, I argue, is the causal power of a norm group or normative community to tend to induce conformance with a normative standard, or adherence to a particular social practice, by members of that community.^{7 8} The parts of the group are the individuals who are its members. These individuals share the same belief that this practice is appropriate in certain circumstances, but this is a purely formal similarity between them. The relation between them that matters to the mechanism is not this shared belief but the commitment that the members of the group have to *endorse* the practice with each other, whether by advocating it, by praising or rewarding those who enact it, by criticising or punishing those who fail to enact it, or even just by ostentatiously enacting it themselves. The consequence is that the members of the group know that they face a systematic incentive to enact the practice. Not only will other individual members of the group take an incentivising stance, but when they do so they will be taken to be acting on behalf of the group as a whole and will be supported by other members of the group.

As a consequence of being members of a norm group, then, these individuals act differently than they would if they were not such members.⁹ Even if they held the same normative belief, they would not necessarily act in the same ways regarding it (either endorsing it so strongly or enacting it so frequently) if they were not part of a group that shares a commitment to endorse and observe the norm. And it is not the mere aggregation of other people's beliefs that makes the norm group effective; it is the commitment to mutual *interaction* between the members in support of the

practice, and the knowledge that they can rely on the support of others in such action, that makes the norm group more effective in enforcing the norm than the same number of individuals would be if they did not share this mutual commitment. These relations, then, when combined with these sorts of parts, provide a generative mechanism that gives the norm group an emergent property or causal power: the effect that it has on the behaviour of its members.

Now, this is not to deny any significance to the normative beliefs of the individuals concerned. Indeed, it is one of the strengths of the emergentist perspective that it accepts that entities at many levels can simultaneously have causal powers, and that these powers may interact to produce actual events. On this view, it is not only true that individual beliefs themselves are causally effective but also that they are a crucial part of the mechanism underpinning the causal power of the larger group. At the level of the individual, social institutions work because the individual knows both what the expected behaviour is, and the pattern of incentives their behaviour is likely to confront. These beliefs tend to encourage the enactment of the practice concerned; but they take the form they do at least in part because of the emergent causal effect of the norm group. Individual beliefs, then, mediate between social institution and individual behaviour. Social institutions have a causal effect on beliefs, (and indeed on subconscious dispositions, as stressed in Bourdieu's account of the *habitus*) and these in turn have a causal effect on individual behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2007c).^{10 11}

The effect of social institutions on behaviour is therefore a two-stage causal process. It may be compared with an example of Porpora's: "If I am unaware of a ditch, I may trip and fall; this is one causal effect of the ditch. If I am aware of the ditch, however, I will walk around it, in which case it has had another, but different, causal effect" (Porpora, 1993, p. 215). The effect of social institutions on individual behaviour is mostly of this second variety: they affect our behaviour by affecting our beliefs. But they affect our beliefs because they can also have effects of the first variety: when we are unaware of a social institution (or if we choose to ignore it) and offend against the norm concerned, we suffer sanctions from members of the norm group.

This account is very close to Anthony King's understanding of social institutions. He relates, for example, "the social institution of chess playing" to "the world community of chess players" (King, 2006, p. 470), though he sees the

institution as the same thing as the norm group, rather than as a property of the norm group as I do. He also argues that “humans constantly re-affirm with each other what constitutes appropriate rule-following through practice” (King, 2006, p. 470), that “humans act in predictable ways because they are members of groups” (King, 2006, p. 475), and that “humans mutually pressurise each other into coherent and predictable social action out of fear of being excluded from the collective benefits of group membership” (King, 2006, p. 476). Given that he accords this level of causal influence to groups, it is hard to see how King can resist the emergentist argument that social entities have causal powers – unless it is because he is determined to identify social structure exclusively with some sort of causal influence of ‘society as a whole’.

And this account also has a great deal in common with Porpora’s argument that the effectiveness of rules depends on a dialectical relationship between (cultural) rules and social relations (relations-as-connections, I believe). Our experience of endorsing/enforcing relations with members of the norm group concerned produces our understanding of the norms we face; and our understanding of the norms contributes to our reproduction of those same endorsing/enforcing relations. Rules and relations, as Porpora says, are both inter-related but also analytically distinct (Porpora, 2007, p. 196).¹² Both are parts of the mechanism by which a third analytically distinct element – the norm group – acquires the causal power to influence individual behaviour. Structure, then, is much more than the rules emphasised by Giddens, but those rules do have a part to play.

Causal powers and the causation of social events

Now the argument so far has focussed on the identification of particular causal powers and the mechanisms that drive them - what Bhaskar calls *retroduction* (Lawson, 1997, p. 24). But in focussing on this side of the argument I may have inadvertently neglected the equally important question of analysing how those powers or mechanisms interact in the causation of individual actual events (*retrodiction*) (Lawson, 1997, p. 221). It is crucial to an understanding of the critical realist position to recognise the force of what Bhaskar calls the *multiple determination* of actual events (Bhaskar, 1978, pp. 110-111). In the natural sciences, experiments are

conducted that attempt to isolate individual causal powers by eliminating the effects of other causes that might otherwise interfere. But outside the laboratory, multiple causal powers constantly interact with each other. Tony Lawson likes to illustrate this with the example of the falling leaf. Gravity operates on the leaf and tends to make it fall directly towards the surface of the earth, but few leaves fall in the straight line this might lead us to expect, since the aerodynamic properties of the leaf and the resistance of the air (magnified enormously when there happens to be a wind blowing) tend to alter the direction of fall. In other words, if we want to understand particular events, we need to understand much more than one particular causal power; we need to understand all of the causal powers that are interacting to produce the event, and how they affect each other.

In my original paper, I used the example of buying a television from a sales assistant to illustrate the causal power of organisations. But it is impossible to explain an event such as this solely in terms of a single causal power, and so I also mentioned some ways in which this transaction might be affected by other causal powers that properly belong to the individuals concerned, arguing for example that the sales assistant chooses in some respects *how* to enact her role in the organisation. In the absence of an explanation of multiple determination, and of why this demands explanations in terms of multiple interacting causal powers, it is easy to see how this might seem confused or unclear.

King's reaction to this example was to criticise me for individualising the sales assistant:

The sales assistant becomes an isolated individual agent... Yet in reality, sales assistants do not work alone but in teams with colleagues, who have decisive influence on the way that each individual salesperson operates; sales assistants do not personally choose how to enact their roles. Sales assistants often unconsciously imitate the styles of dress, speech and gesture of their colleagues but they also consciously enforce norms of customer treatment on each other (King, 2007, p. 216).

King follows this with two perceptive and useful examples of how normative pressures may work in retail businesses to influence how sales assistants behave. And Porpora also makes some related criticisms, suggesting that I have neglected other sorts of influences on the sales assistant's behaviour, notably incentive schemes designed to encourage sales, and the assistant's moral resistance to unethical behaviour in pursuit of sales (Porpora, 2007, p. 196).

Now the ontological framework provided by the critical realist account of causal powers and multiple determination makes it possible to accept that *all* of these factors simultaneously influence the sales assistant's behaviour. The sales assistant, in dealing with my interest in purchasing a television, may be affected at one and the same time by (a) their role in the organisation, which requires them to sell products to customers on behalf of the organisation; (b) styles of speech and gesture unconsciously imitated from their colleagues; (c) norms of customer treatment that are prevalent in the organisation, or in that particular shop; (d) incentive schemes; (e) norms of ethical treatment of people absorbed from some wider normative community, e.g. a religious community of which the sales assistant is a member; and (f) the sales assistant's own decisions about how to accommodate these sometimes conflicting pressures. Her behaviour is therefore multiply determined by the interacting causal powers of (i) the organisation; (ii) a number of distinct norm groups; and (iii) the individual herself. The influence of organisations and norm groups is mediated through the individual's beliefs about the normative environment that they face, and the dispositions they have formed due to unanalysed environmental pressures. Where these are in conflict with each other or with other elements of the situation the assistant faces, she does indeed make decisions on how to resolve these difficulties: decisions on how to enact her role.

King's argument that sales assistants do not personally choose how to enact their roles certainly seems to confirm his assertions that he is not a methodological individualist. Other arguments in his work perhaps clarify the point. Elsewhere he "denies the validity of individual, autonomous agency. In every case, human agency is a collective product, germinated with others and dependent upon the social networks in which we all exist" (King, 2006, p. 475). And he has argued that "it is an error to conceive of the modern individual as genuinely autonomous... the modern individual is a product of new kinds of social relations which emerged in the modern period" (King, 2004, p. 17). Like Varela, it seems, King is adopting a Meadian conception of the social person and counterposing it to "individual autonomous agency" – a distinction that, as I have argued above, depends upon conflating causation and composition and thus cannot be sustained.

It seems that King wishes to insist, on the one hand, on the causal influence of the Meadian social person, while on the other criticising realists for ascribing causal

powers to individuals (King, 2007, p. 215). Methodological individualism usually entails advocating the causal efficacy of human individuals while denying the causal efficacy of social structure, so it is odd to apply the label to realists when we insist on the causal efficacy of *both*. It seems even odder, when King himself seems to ascribe causal power to social persons, unless he goes a step further and conflates social persons with social relations. I sometimes wonder whether this is what King and Varela both intend: to ascribe causal power to neither individuals nor structures, but to *social relations* in a different sense than either of those defined above. In this putative sense, *social relations* refers to neither social relations-as-wholes, since King (sometimes) denies the causal influence of wholes, nor merely social relations-as-connections, since it includes the socialised person, but rather some sort of ontological mixture of people and connections that nevertheless doesn't achieve the status of a structured whole.

Perhaps this is not King's intention, but it is difficult to see how he can accuse realists of individualism unless he himself advocates a view in which the causal powers of persons is ontologically inseparable from the causal influence of social relations; and it is difficult to see why he would accuse us of dualism unless he sees social causal powers as being concentrated in a *single* type of entity.

Dualists, King has suggested, "need to explain how structure imposes upon individuals without reducing them to 'cultural dopes'. Dualistic theories often find it difficult not to oscillate between voluntarism and determinism in describing this relationship" (King, 2006, p. 469). But the critical realist ontology does not commit us to this sort of dualism. Because it allows for multiple determination and the interacting powers of both individuals and social entities, it enables us to show that structure can *influence* individuals without *imposing upon* them or reducing them to dopes, since they maintain the capability of choosing to do otherwise. Nor does this commit us to voluntarism, since those choices are themselves causally influenced by the set of dispositions and beliefs that the individual has acquired from their past social experience.

To be accused of dualism of this sort, of course, also implies an accusation of sociological holism, and Porpora also suggests a criticism of this sort in his response, rejecting the notion of a "level of social wholes autonomous of individuals" and arguing that "the behavior of social wholes in relation to each other is not governed by

a logic that supercedes individual human thought and action” (Porpora, 2007, p. 199). I hope it is clear that I have not suggested any such thing. When individuals become parts of social groups, they do not lose the powers they have as individuals, but those powers are channelled and constrained as a result of the relations those individuals now have with others in the group. The consequence is that this group of people, structured as it now is by the relations between those people, has as a social entity powers that none of the individuals would otherwise have. For the relational emergentist, this means that the group has emergent causal powers – powers that it possesses in its own right, but not powers that are autonomous of the people and relations of which it is composed.

Conclusion

Perhaps I can close by returning to the concepts of social structure and social relations. In these two papers I have argued that social entities like organisations and normative communities have causal powers in their own right – powers that their human members would not have if they were not organised into such entities. These social entities are *social structures-as-wholes*, powerful particulars in the terminology of Harré and Varela, and their causal powers include the ability to influence – but not to *determine* – the behaviour of human individuals.¹³ This does not entail support for other notions of social structure, such as the idea that society as a whole somehow has causal effects; nor does it entail denying causal powers to human individuals. Indeed, the causal powers of social entities rest upon such individuals and the *social relations-as-connections* between them. Once we have understood the various entities and powers at work, we can then begin to understand social events by examining how these different powers of different entities interact to produce them.

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¹ I have, for example, neglected the intriguing conflicts of opinion on the role of Durkheim in this debate. He is attributed at least two different perspectives by my respondents, but there is also at least one more that is worth exploring: Keith Sawyer makes a convincing argument that Durkheim should be seen as an early emergentist (Sawyer, 2002; Sawyer, 2005, ch. 6).

² This paragraph is drawn from (Elder-Vass, 2005, pp. 331-2).

³ A similar argument has been made recently by Hodgson (2007, p. 221), who also offers an analogue of my redescription argument: “explanations in terms of individuals plus relations between them amounts to the introduction of social structure alongside individuals in the *explanantia*” (Hodgson, 2007, p. 211).

⁴ This is not to say that Harré’s criteria are of no value: they may well be useful for assessing other aspects of a theory, such as its clarity and persuasiveness, but they do not help us in assessing whether the theory is ontologically sound.

⁵ Archer has also criticised Mead’s over-socialisation of agency (Archer, 2003, pp. 78-84).

⁶ The argument of these two sentences is expanded at length in (Elder-Vass, 2007c).

⁷ Like all causal powers in the critical realist model, norms do not *determine* behaviour but *contribute* causally to its determination, alongside other causal factors, and hence they only *tend* to produce a given outcome. See (Bhaskar, 1978; Elder-Vass, 2005).

⁸ The argument of this and the two following paragraphs is drawn from (Elder-Vass, under consideration).

⁹ This also seems to be endorsed by a number of philosophers working on collective behaviour (see Shockley, 2006: 75, fn 6).

¹⁰ A similar mechanism is at work in organisations, which are partly institutional structures for the enforcement of norms or rules, but are also structured by further sets of relations, notably authority relations.

¹¹ Let me reaffirm that this constitutes an ontological argument for the possession of causal powers by the group. As I mentioned in my earlier paper, once we have made such an argument, it may sometimes be useful to abstract from the mechanism and refer to the power of the norm group or organisation directly. But this does not mean that I am offering a “purely methodological” argument for appeals to structure (King, 2007, p. 214); the methodological question is purely the question of when it is necessary to elucidate the mechanism behind the structural power and when this can be taken as read.

¹² The ontological status of rules themselves also requires some attention; I assume that they can exist in one of two forms: (a) as knowledge in individuals; and (b) as cultural artefacts, e.g. in rule books. The argument here focuses on the former case.

¹³ These powers are of course powers *of* the entities or particulars concerned; there is no question of them being detached from these particulars, which Varela suggests is implicit in my argument (Varela, 2007, p. 208).