

**Integrating institutional, relational and embodied structure:
an emergentist perspective**

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Abstract

This paper begins to develop an emergentist and realist account of normative social institutions. The argument is developed as a response to Lopez and Scott's historical portrait of the debate on social structure as a dialogue between two different concepts of structure: *institutional structure* and *relational structure*, integrated more recently through the concept of *embodied structure*. The paper argues that all these approaches tend to neglect the idea of structure as a whole and suggests that we cannot understand social structures without recognizing the nature of the corresponding wholes, and how they relate to the human individuals that comprise them. Such a perspective makes clear that embodiment alone is inadequate as a means of integrating institutional and relational conceptions of structure. For a fuller resolution, we must set social structure in an emergentist framework, which can reconcile the complementary roles of institutional structure, relational structure, and indeed embodiment, as aspects of the production of social structures as wholes.

Keywords: Social structure; institutions; structuration; emergence; embodiment

Integrating institutional, relational, and embodied structure: an emergentist perspective

This paper engages with the long running debate on social structure, using Lopez and Scott's typology of social structure as a starting point (Lopez and Scott 2000). In their useful summary of this debate, they have portrayed the history of this concept as a dialogue between two different concepts or facets of structure, both with roots in Durkheim. On the one hand, *institutional structure* is comprised by the cultural or normative expectations that guide agents' relations with each other. On the other, *relational structure* is composed of the social relations themselves – causal interconnections and interdependences between agents. More recently, a third facet has come to the fore: *embodied structure*, and Lopez and Scott suggest that embodied structure can play a key role in reconciling and integrating the earlier institutional and relational views. Nevertheless, they recognize that this synthesis is incomplete, and call for continued work on building 'conceptual and theoretical links among the different facets of social structure that we have examined' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 105). This paper takes up their challenge. It will argue that embodiment alone is inadequate as a means of integrating institutional and relational conceptions of structure. It does provide a part of the solution, but if we are to make sense of social structure we must also introduce a fourth facet: the idea that social structure is always a feature of *emergent social entities*, of which we humans are merely parts. It is only when we recognize the existence of real, material, causally effective social *wholes* that we can reconcile the other features of social structure.

This emphasis on social wholes, however, should not be read as an endorsement of the doctrine of methodological collectivism or sociological holism,

which sees ‘structure as law-like relations among social facts’ (Porpora 2002: 44) to the exclusion of individual agency. The emergentist approach explored in this paper sees *both* embodied human individuals *and* social structures – and indeed cultural constructs – as causally effective, with all three interacting in the causation of social events (Archer 1995: 324). It is thus an example of what Porpora refers to as a realist approach to structure in his own typology of these debates (Porpora 1998). It differs from most recent critical realist accounts in examining institutions – normative structures tending to encourage particular practices – as an example of social structure. This does not imply that such institutions are the *only* type of social structure; elsewhere I have discussed organizations as a type of social structure (Elder-Vass 2005b; Elder-Vass 2007a), and other types may include more challenging complexes of normative and organizational interaction, such as education systems (Archer 1979) and political systems (see the discussion of immigration policy in Carter 2000) (to avoid confusion I avoid referring to these other types of structure as *institutions*, though the term is sometimes used this way). But the focus of *this* paper is to contribute to an emergentist and realist account of specifically normative social institutions.

The paper begins by briefly outlining Lopez and Scott’s three facets of social structure, then introduces the concept of emergence and some of the different senses of structure that it implies. It moves on to discuss social institutions, showing why we need the idea of emergent social entities to understand them, arguing the case in part through a critique of one aspect of the ontology of Giddens’ structuration theory. The threads of the argument are then drawn together by showing how the causal contribution of the three facets of structure depends on the existence of real social entities. Finally, the paper returns to structuration theory. An emphasis on

embodiment to the exclusion of social wholes may encourage a structurationist view of social ontology, but when we recognize the complementary importance of social wholes the flaws in this view are revealed, and instead we are drawn towards a realist ontology – but one that provides some opportunity for synthesis with the *theoretical* work of structurationist thinkers.²

Three facets of structure

Lopez and Scott argue that:

the history of sociology shows the long-term coexistence of two different conceptions of social structure. On the one hand, there is that which we identify as the idea of *institutional structure*. Here, social structure is seen as comprising 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. On the other hand, there is the idea of what we call *relational structure*. Here, social structure is seen as comprising 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 and Scott 2000: 3).

They attribute the roots of both of these conceptions of structure to the work of Durkheim. On one hand, they see the idea of *institutional structure* as deriving from Durkheim's *collective representations* – from systems of shared norms, values, and ideas that shape social behaviour. As Parsons put it, institutions 'are complexes of normative rules and principles which, either through law or other mechanisms of social control, serve to regulate social action and relationships' (Parsons 1976: 97). Institutional structure was most characteristically advocated by Parsons and the structural functionalists, and examples include both large-scale institutions like marriage, patriarchy, property, and contract, and also 'the micro-institutions of day-to-day existence, such as those concerned with queuing, turn taking in conversations, dinner party entertaining, and gift giving' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 23).

On the other hand, they argue that *relational structure* is based in Durkheim's *collective relationships*. Relational structure was most characteristically advocated by

Simmel, for whom ‘“society” had no substantial existence of its own; it is simply the dynamic relations that exist among individuals’ (Lopez and Scott 2000: 81), and Radcliffe-Brown, for whom social structure is ‘the sum total of all the social relationships of all individuals at a given moment in time’ (Radcliffe-Brown, quoted in Lopez and Scott 2000: 46). There are, however, some significant divergences between thinkers within this tradition, to the extent that we might even consider this as two traditions, as Crothers does. He identifies one variety (the ‘Social Organization’ tradition) concerned with structure as ‘the concrete relations amongst concrete individuals and concrete groups, e.g. networks’ and one (the ‘Social Background Characteristics’ tradition) concerned with structure as the relations between people and systems of social differentiation or stratification (Crothers 2002: 4). These two approaches can, for example, be found more recently in the work of Emirbayer and Blau respectively (Emirbayer 1997; Blau 1976).

Each of these schools of thought largely ignores the concept of structure implicit in the other, although there have also been thinkers who seek to *link* institutional and relational structure, such as Mauss and Levi-Strauss. With the work of Giddens, Foucault and Bourdieu, though, there appears what Lopez and Scott see as a third conception of social structure (Lopez and Scott 2000: 17-18, 90):

According to this point of view, patterns of institutions and relations result from the actions of individuals who are endowed with the capacities or competencies that enable them to produce them by acting in organized ways. These capacities are behavioural dispositions, and so social structure has to be seen as an *embodied structure*. Embodied structures are found in 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 and Scott 2000: 4).

For Lopez and Scott, despite the past disagreements between advocates of these different conceptions, they represent not mutually exclusive approaches, but rather potentially complementary facets of social structure. By implication, this

argument rests on the belief that embodied structure provides a linkage between institutional structure, relational structure, and individual agency. ‘For both Foucault and Bourdieu,’ for example, ‘bodies are seen as the carriers of relational and institutional structures’ (Lopez and Scott 2000: 98). Lopez and Scott, however, remain cautious about the potential of embodied structure, refusing to ‘set out a new and fully integrated model of social structure’ on its basis (Lopez and Scott 2000: 106). They are particularly cautious about the claim that embodied structure is the most fundamental or even the only incarnation of structure (Lopez and Scott 2000: 4-5).

As I shall argue below, their caution is justified. Although embodiment represents a necessary element in the explanation of social structure, it is incapable of reconciling the other two approaches without a fourth facet: emergent social wholes.³

Emergence and social wholes

There is a substantial literature on emergence, but for the purposes of this paper emergence can be summarized relatively simply.⁴ Wholes are emergent when they possess emergent properties, and properties of wholes are emergent if they would not be possessed by their parts, were those parts not organized into such a whole. In the relational version of emergence I advocate, these emergent properties may be explainable in terms of the way the parts are organized, or related to each other, when they are formed into the relevant sort of whole.⁵ This account is equivalent to the critical realist account of causation, since emergent properties are essentially causal powers of the whole concerned, and when we explain a causal power in terms of the parts of the whole and the way they are organized, we are describing what Bhaskar calls the generative mechanism that underlies the power (Bhaskar 1978: 46-7).

Whichever terminology we use, the point is that these properties or powers depend on the existence of the emergent whole, and not just on the existence of the parts. It is the particular relations that exist between the parts when they are organized into just this sort of whole that lead to the whole being more than the sum of its parts, in the sense that the whole has properties that the parts would not have if they were not organized into this sort of whole.

Let me illustrate the point with one simple example from the natural world. Dogs usually have the emergent power to bark (the property of being able to bark). The dog's vocal cords, windpipe, lungs, mouth, and brain are all required to make this happen, but none of these parts, or even all of them linked together, would have the power to bark if they were not organized (along with its other parts) into the anatomical relations required to form them into a living dog. We could explain how these parts, combined in this way, generate the power to bark, but this does not take away the fact that this power can only be possessed by a whole living dog, and not by the parts as such.

One implication of this general understanding of emergence is that if we want to explain the causal effectiveness of a particular emergent property or power, then, we need to identify a number of different structural elements: the *whole* to which it belongs, the kinds of *parts* and *relations* that make up this kind of whole, and the *mechanism* by which these parts and relations combine to produce the *property*. For a complete explanation of the existence of the property we would also need to understand the causal history that has brought about the physical existence of these parts in the required relations – what Archer, following Buckley, calls their *morphogenesis* – and indeed how that existence is sustained over time – its *morphostasis* (Archer 1982: 480; Buckley 1967: 58-9).

This is a general ontological framework, and emergentism claims that it is applicable to both the natural and the social world, although there are also differences between types of entity and property that do affect the way we study them, some of which I have discussed elsewhere (Elder-Vass 2005b). We can apply this framework to the social world by examining how social entities and properties fit into it (see Elder-Vass 2007b).

Structure as different structural elements

This paper seeks to relate this framework back to the concept of social structure. One of the first difficulties we encounter in doing so is that even at the most general level there are different ways of fitting the concept of structure into the ontological model I have just described. These arise from the ‘persistent ambiguity’ in the meaning of *structure* identified by Raymond Williams (Crothers 2002: 7; Williams 1976: 253).

As Williams explains, the word originally referred to the process of building, but:

The word was notably developed in C17, in two main directions: (i) towards the whole product of building, as still in ‘a wooden structure’; (ii) towards the manner of construction, not only in buildings but in extended and figurative applications (Williams 1976: 253).

It is clear from the history of structure and structural that the words can be used with either emphasis: to include the actual construction with special reference to its mode of construction; or to isolate the mode of construction in such a way as to exclude both ends of the process – the producers... and the product, in its substantive sense (Williams 1976: 257).

In other words, the label *structure* can be used to refer to different structural elements. It can, for example, refer to a whole entity that is structured by the relations between its parts ((i) in Williams), 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 ((ii) in Williams), which I shall call *structure-as-relations*.

Now many accounts of social structure use *structure* in the sense of structure-as-relations. Thus, for example, we have seen Lopez and Scott describing *relational structure* as ‘the social relations themselves, understood as patterns of causal interconnection and interdependence among agents and their actions’ (Lopez and Scott 2000: 3). This is a perfectly legitimate use of *structure*, although the ambiguity described by Williams means that even this usage can cause confusion. For example, it may be implied that social structure-as-relations can be causally effective. Yet relations alone can have no causal effect; indeed the idea of a relation existing at all without the things related is simply incoherent. It is only when specific entities (and thus specific causal powers) enter into a relationship that causal consequences can follow.

But there are also still more confusing (and confused) readings of structure at large in the sociological literature. Sometimes *social structure* is used to refer to *neither* structure-as-relations *nor* structure-as-whole. At times, as we shall see below, social structure seems to refer to what we might call *structure-as-empirical-regularity* and at others, to refer to *structure-as-properties*. The more these different senses of structure are mixed up, the harder it becomes to make sense of claims that social structure can be causally effective.

Social structures-as-wholes

Perhaps the most neglected sense of structure in the sociological literature is structure-as-whole. There are some theorists who have used structure in this sense, such as Nadel and Tonnies (Lopez and Scott 2000: 47, 52). But it is more common to deny the existence or causal value of social wholes, or to assume that it is of little importance to the study of social structure. Interpreting Parsons, for example, Lopez

and Scott say that ‘social institutions and institutional clusters must not be reified by the investigator. As cultural phenomena, they have a virtual and not a material existence’ (Lopez and Scott 2000: 23). And they tell us that ‘A structure of social institutions... is an objective, but non-substantial reality’ (Lopez and Scott 2000: 25). This seems to leave no room for any sort of social structures-as-wholes.⁶

This paper will argue not only that there *are* social structures-as-wholes, and that they are causally efficacious, but also that they *are* substantial and material as well as real. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to seeing this, as we shall see below, is that many of these writers are thinking of relations or properties rather than entities when they use the word *structure*. But relations and properties cannot have a substantial existence in any domain; only entities have substance. The picture becomes much clearer, I argue, when we read structure as structure-as-whole, and thus seek to identify the social *entities* that can possess causal powers. These are the entities that are *structured by* structure-as-relations, that *possess* the properties sometimes misleadingly identified as structures themselves, and that *cause* those (partial) empirical regularities sometimes misidentified as structures.

But what exactly are these social entities? In so far as they consider this question at all, the commonest response amongst sociological theorists is that to be found in the *Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*: ‘In social structure the parts are relationships among persons and the organized body of the parts may be considered to be coincident with the society as a whole’ (Heer 2003). But the concept of *society* generally seems to stand for a poorly bounded and unclearly defined agglomeration that is more analogous to portfolio terms like *nature* or *humanity* than to any causally effective natural entity. I do not suggest that there is no such thing as society, but the coherence of any bounded concept of society is extremely

problematic. States are a different matter; states are organizations, usually with well-defined boundaries and memberships, at least in some respects. But they do not map neatly onto *societies*; there are many social entities that cut across state boundaries (Walby 2005).

Instead, I suggest, most of the powers that have been attributed to societies belong to somewhat lower-level social entities. If we are to explain the impact of social structure on human beings, then we must find some more determinate sorts of structures at an intermediate level between individual and society that can have more specific effects. The neglect of these intermediate levels is a common problem in treatments of social structure. Mouzelis points out, for example, that ‘Parsons, following Durkheim, operates within a society-individual scheme that systematically ignores the complex hierarchy of actors that provides the bridge between individual role players on the micro-level, and systematic incompatibilities on the macro-level’ (Mouzelis 1991: 18-19).⁷

As I have argued previously, organizations are a good example of such intermediate structures (Elder-Vass 2005b; Elder-Vass 2007a). They are social entities, composed of human individuals (their parts), organized through the roles they occupy in the organization (which define the relations between them), and the consequence of these people acting in these roles (the generative mechanism) is to produce the capabilities of the organization as a whole. Here, however, I want to illustrate the argument with a different example: normative social institutions.

Social institutions

The concept of *social institution* is almost as diverse in its referents as the concept of *social structure*. The *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, for example, begins its

definition: ‘an established order comprising rule-bound and standardized behaviour patterns. The term is widely acknowledged to be used in a variety of ways, and hence often ambiguously. *Social institution* refers to arrangements involving large numbers of people whose behaviour is guided by *norms* and *roles*’ (Jary and Jary 2000: 302).

Despite its acknowledgement of conceptual diversity, this definition leans towards the idea that social institutions are to be identified with patterns of behaviour, and thus represents an example of what I have called structure-as-empirical-regularity. Empirical regularities in themselves, however, are not causes; they are effects; and so, if social institutions are to play a causal structural role, they must be something more than such regularities.

For Parsons, on the other hand, social institutions ‘define what are felt to be, in the given society, proper, legitimate or expected modes of action or of social relationship’ (Parsons 1954: 53). Parsons thus identifies social institutions with the *norms* that produce empirical regularities of social practices. But what exactly *are* norms, and how could they possibly be causally effective social structures? Broadly speaking, there are two sorts of answer to this question in the literature, and again both can be traced back to Durkheim: individual representations and collective representations.

Both accounts assume that individuals enact particular practices because of the particular normative beliefs they hold, and that the standardization of these practices arises at least in part from the fact that the corresponding normative beliefs are shared by members of the cultural community concerned. However, there are two distinct ways of theorizing this causal role. The first argues that these normative beliefs are only causally effective as items of knowledge or belief held by individual human agents. The second, however, argues that it is not individual normative beliefs but

collective ones that are causally effective here: that individual-level normative beliefs, related to each other in the sense of being shared over a certain community, form the parts of a *collective representation*, to use Durkheim's phrase, and that it is this collective representation that is causally effective. One could argue, for example, that the *commonality* of social practices cannot be explained by the causal effects of individual norms and values, but only by the commonality of those norms and values across the community, and hence that it is the collective norm or value that produces *standardized* behaviour and not the individual one.

Giddens on institutions

Giddens' structuration theory seems ambivalent with regard to this question. He simultaneously claims that structure 'makes it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist' but also that it 'exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces' (Giddens 1984: 17). Thus, on the one hand, he claims that structure makes possible the commonality of practices, which would appear to require a quasi-Durkheimian notion of structure as something that is wider than the beliefs of individual human beings. This is the view that also seems implicit when he defines structure as 'rules and resources, organized as properties of *social* systems' (Giddens 1979: 66, emphasis added). Yet on the other hand he insists that structure exists only as instantiations in the practices and minds of individual human beings, and thus denies the existence of collective representations as such (Giddens 1984: 25-6).

Reading Giddens' structuration theory as an account of the structure of institutions, then, seems to leave us with a contradiction. He wants norms and values simultaneously to be more widely binding than their individual instantiations because

of their collective character, but also nothing more than their individual instantiations in ontological terms. The former depends upon accepting the claim that ‘collective representations’ have a causal effect in their own right, while the latter depends upon denying it. And each of these claims seems to depend upon a different way of understanding what a ‘collective representation’ really is: in the first case, there seems to be an implication that collectives as such can *have* representations, whereas in the second, collective representations are nothing more than a group of individual representations that happen to be similar.

Yet Giddens’ ambivalence is perhaps understandable, as neither of these understandings seems satisfactory. On the one hand, it seems necessary to have a mind, or at least a brain, to form a representation, and collectives as such don’t have them, only individuals do.⁸ On the other, the second option does not seem to provide an explanation of the commonality of practices at all.

Norms and norm groups

There is, however, a way out of this conundrum, which can be found by carefully applying the emergentist ontological framework introduced earlier to the familiar facts of the process by which social practices are produced. It begins by accepting that norms are not collective representations at all; the only representations or beliefs involved in social institutions are those of the individuals concerned. Nor are institutions social entities. Although we may be accustomed to talking about social institutions in entity terms, I will argue that they are actually *properties* of social groups.

Let me clarify this by discussing the case of a single social institution, in which a single norm tends to produce a single social practice. Part of the mechanism

by which the practice is produced is that each member of the group that enacts this practice (which I shall call the *norm group*) holds a normative belief endorsing the practice. For the purposes of this exposition, I am therefore assuming a rather simple sort of social institution: one in which every member of the norm group both endorses the norm and is expected to observe it. In doing so, I abstract from certain questions that a fuller account of social institutions would need to address, most particularly the question of differences of social power between members of the group and therefore the possibility that the group could be used to enforce social practices that advantaged some at the expense of others – a question that becomes particularly salient, for example, in groups where those who are expected to comply with a norm are only a subset of the community.

In this emergentist account, the institution is the power of this group which tends to produce the practice concerned. Like all causal powers in the critical realist model, normative institutions do not *determine* behaviour but only *contribute* causally to its determination, alongside other causal factors, and hence they only *tend* to produce a given outcome (Bhaskar 1978; Elder-Vass 2005a). The parts of the group are clearly 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 makes a difference, I suggest, 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 criticizing 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 incentivizing 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 property is the institution, and the causal power is the effect that the institution has on the behaviour of members of the norm group.

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 lead directly to their 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).

This would seem to fit well with Archer's argument that 'where any form of Social Elaboration is concerned, then structure, culture and agency are always involved' (Archer 1995: 324). The elaboration of the structure of social institutions depends upon the establishment of certain cultural beliefs and their adoption and *public* endorsement by human individuals. It is, however, worth distinguishing this argument from the suggestion that normative institutions necessarily rest on evaluative *consensus*. The argument does entail that members of the norm group share a similar understanding of the norms they are expected to observe and the array of likely responses to their observation or non-observation of them. But there is no necessity that those affected by any given institution agree with the norm concerned in the sense of being *privately* committed to it as a just standard of behaviour. This therefore leaves open two important possibilities: (a) that conformance with norms may sometimes be a consequence of prudential behaviour in the face of unequal power relations rather than consensus over the value of the norm; and (b) that members of the norm group who disagree with its standards (even if they do actually conform with them) may take action directed towards changing those standards, thus initiating the morphogenetic cycle of structural (and indeed cultural) change analysed by Archer (Archer 1995: e.g. ch. 3; 192-4).

In this emergentist view of social institutions, then, this type of social structure is causally effective because real social entities (norm groups) have emergent

properties (institutions) that arise from the way their parts (human individuals) are related to each other (through their mutual commitment to endorse and enforce the practice concerned). Equipped with this explanation, we can now return to the issue with which we began: the possibility of synthesizing the different conceptions of structure that have dominated the sociological literature.

Fitting the pieces together

This section, then, will examine each of the three complementary facets of structure identified by Lopez and Scott, and show how their causal contribution depends upon the fourth facet: the existence of whole social entities. Thus it will both clarify the need for this fourth facet, and also show how the emergentist account succeeds in unifying institutional, relational, and embodied structure.

Relational structure fits quite simply into the emergentist view of social structure, since it corresponds more or less exactly to one of its general structural elements: the relations between, or the organization of, the parts of a whole. This correspondence may be obscured, however, in many accounts of social structure by a failure to recognize that there *is* a whole of which any particular relational structure is the organization. This tends to encourage a reductionist approach as a result of seeing the parts, not as parts at all, but simply as separate entities (generally human individuals).

In other accounts, the correspondence may be obscured more subtly by the common assumption that the whole to which relational social structure in general relates is *society as a whole* rather than more specific social entities. This approach breaks the link between relational structure and the existence (and powers) of social entities at a lower level than the whole society. There is at best a tenuous link between

society as a whole and particular effects of structure on individuals, whereas the links between, say, a government and its effects, or a norm group and its effects, are often much clearer. Hence to see structure as the structure of society as a whole is to eliminate the very social entities whose causal powers must feature in an emergent account of social structure.

Relational structure, as the significant relations between individuals who are parts of structures like organizations, plays a clear role in the emergence of the causal powers of those structures. But, as we have seen, relations alone cannot cause anything; we need a combination of both the relations and the things related in order to produce a causal effect. And when a combination of relations and the things related has an emergent causal power – a power that the things related would not have without the relation – then that combination *is* an entity in its own right. Hence relational structure is only effective as a contributor to the causal power of whole social entities.

Institutional structure bears a different sort of relationship to an emergentist ontology. Rather than corresponding to a structural element in the general theory of emergence, like relational structure, institutional structure is a particular, uniquely social, kind of structure – that of social institutions. The previous section has analysed the nature of institutions and the basis of their causal effectiveness in some detail, and for my present purposes there are two key points to be drawn from that analysis. First, in the terms of the emergentist social ontology sketched out in an earlier section, institutions are *properties*. Secondly, as properties, their causal effectiveness derives from the existence of the entity possessing the property – in this case a norm group – and thus from the parts and relations that make up that group. Without the norm group there can be no institution, and hence institutional structure depends on the existence

of a whole social entity. Furthermore, without the relations between the members of the norm group that make an institution something more than just a collection of individuals' normative beliefs, there can be no norm – and so this emergentist perspective also helps us to fit together relational and institutional structure.

Embodiment also has a useful part to play in the explanation of social structure, although I have some concerns about representing it by the term *embodied structure*. I do so here only for compatibility with Lopez and Scott's argument, because the term seems seriously misleading to me, implying as it does that structure itself can become part of the individual. This is a characteristically structurationist argument. As Stones puts it, 'structuration theory conceptualizes structure as being partly within the agent as knowledgeability or memory traces' (Stones 2001: 184). Bourdieu expresses a similar argument, describing the dispositions that make up our *habitus* as 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1990: 53) and as 'the internalization of externality' (Bourdieu 1990: 55). Taken literally, the suggestion that a higher level whole (here, social structure) could be a part of its own parts (human individuals) appears to be an ontological error in terms of the realist/emergentist perspective advocated here. As Shilling has put it, we need 'to analyse the interaction over time of the generative properties of the body and the constraining features of society without reducing one to the other' (Shilling 2005: 12). Shilling's important analysis of corporeal realism parallels the argument of this paper in criticizing structurationist accounts of the body and instead portraying 'the *embodied subject* as an emergent, causally consequent phenomenon' with powers that cannot be reduced to those of its biological parts (Shilling 2005: 13). In just the same way, social institutions are causally consequent wholes with powers that cannot be reduced to those of their human parts.

It is, however, entirely consistent with such a perspective to see those parts and their properties as being implicated in the *mechanisms* that underpin the properties of the higher level whole. In the account of institutions in the previous section, for example, we saw that individual normative beliefs are an essential part of the mechanism that underlies the causal power of institutions. These institutions also have a causal effect on the beliefs or dispositions concerned, but, to mirror an argument of Parker's, the fact that structures are involved in the process of producing knowledge does not mean that these structures necessarily migrate to or inhere in their products.¹⁰ Embodied beliefs have a crucial role to play in the mechanisms underpinning social structure, but this does not make them *embodied structure*, at least not in anything more than a metaphorical sense.

The more extreme advocates of embodied structure also seem to suggest that *relational* structure can be embodied (Lopez and Scott 2000: 90, 98). Lopez and Scott interpret Bourdieu, for example, to say 'The objective relations and institutions are incorporated – taken into the corpse or body – as subjective dispositions to act' (Lopez and Scott 2000: 101). But the idea that relational structure as such can be embodied seems incoherent: individuals may embody attitudes to their relations to others, and beliefs about those relations, but the relations themselves are inherently external to them. Hence any explanation of the behaviour of a social entity made purely in terms of what is embodied in the individuals concerned will always be incomplete.

The notion of embodiment, then, like those of relational and institutional structure, describes one facet of the operation of social structure, but must be complemented by an analysis of those facets that can not be embodied. This includes not only the relations between individuals, but also, therefore, those elements that

arise from the combination of the individuals and these relations: the whole social entity and its properties. Any attempt to see social structure as *only* embodied structure is inherently reductionist, and indeed methodologically individualist. We reject this move as soon as we recognize that embodiment is only a part of what constitutes the structure of social institutions.

With the addition of the fourth facet of social structure – the whole social entity – it therefore becomes possible to understand more fully how the three facets of social structure identified by Lopez and Scott relate to each other. Although the term *social structure* is used ambiguously, it always refers to some feature or other of a whole social entity. Yet in most accounts of social structure, the whole social entity remains nothing more than a ghost at the feast. Unless and until its presence is recognized, it is hard to make sense of the influences of its properties, its parts, and the relations between those parts.

Social structure is substantial

Let me finally relate this argument briefly to one aspect of the contemporary debate between structuration theorists and emergence theorists, and particularly to Rob Stones' suggestion that there is an opportunity 'for systematic articulation of the two theories at both the ontological and the methodological level' (Stones 2001: 177) (and see Stones 2005). The aspect I want to focus on is Giddens' claim that social structure has only a *virtual* existence, and related claims that social structure is non-substantial. The account of social structure given in this paper contradicts the apparent intent of these claims: the suggestion that social structures are somehow less real, or less substantial, than natural structures.

There are two variants of the argument, depending upon what sort of structural element *structure* is taken to refer to. First, consider the case in which *structure* refers to structure-as-wholes. In the social world, this can be illustrated with the case of organizations (though the argument works equally well for norm groups). Organizations are composed of people, related to each other in the ways specified in descriptions of their roles. Organizations are therefore real and persistent, and even substantial in the full physical sense of the term, in a similar sense to any natural entity: they have persistent physical parts. We don't say that people, for example, are not substantial because they are nothing more than a collection of cells, so why should we believe that organizations are not substantial because they are nothing more than a collection of people? Of course, there are times when the people who are the parts of the organization are not enacting their organizational roles, but it is equally true that there are times when the parts of natural entities are not enacting theirs. The dog's vocal cords remain a part of the dog even when the dog is not barking, and in a similar way a company's employees remain a part of the company even when they are on vacation.

There are also, of course, important *differences* between social and natural entities. One of the most interesting is that the parts of social entities are not necessarily physically contiguous or clearly bounded, because they do not depend structurally on locational relations. One consequence is that the same individual can be a part of many similar social structures, unlike most cases in the natural sciences. These differences do not make social structures any less substantial, but they are perhaps one reason why it is difficult to *see* that they are substantial (see Elder-Vass 2005b).

The second variant of the argument is relevant when *structure* refers to structure-as-relations (as in cases of relational structure), or to structural properties of social wholes (as in the case of institutions). When it is used in this sense, it is indeed true that structure does not refer directly to entities with substance. Nevertheless, it is misleading to call such structures *virtual* or non-substantial, if this is taken to entail that they are somehow less real than equivalent structures in the natural world. Relations are never substantial, and nor are properties. An institution stands in a similar relation to a substantial social whole – a norm group – as the colour green, for example, does to a blade of grass. Both are properties of a substantial entity, but properties themselves never have substance.

Virtual, however, may mean something subtly different for Giddens than *non-substantial*. Structural properties are virtual for Giddens because he argues that they exist as practices when they are enacted by individuals, but only as memory traces in those individuals in between such enactments. The virtuality of these properties, then, may consist in them seeming to disappear (or at least to be reduced to mere traces at the mental level) in between enactments. On the realist/emergentist account, however, this confuses the continual possession of a causal power by an entity with the intermittent occurrence of its being exercised or realized. A property, such as an institution or a colour, is the capability that an entity has of producing a certain sort of effect. The blade of grass is green, for example, because it is capable of reflecting green light (but not complementary wavelengths), and as long as it remains a healthy blade of grass it has this property or power. But it only exercises that power when light in the relevant part of the spectrum is shining on it. It is still green in the middle of the night, it just doesn't look green because it cannot *exercise* this property in the dark.

In a precisely analogous way, an institution continues to exist as a property of the norm group whether or not the corresponding practice is being enacted by any of its members at the time. The norm group and the institution are no more nor less virtual than the blade of grass and its colour. Both are potentials or capabilities of real material entities to have a causal effect when the appropriate circumstances are instantiated.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper, then, implies that we must reject at least this element of Giddens' structurationist ontology – that social structure is virtual in some sense that distinguishes it from structural properties found in nature. Hence this paper complements the rejection of his ontology by other realist thinkers (e.g. Archer 1982; Mouzelis 2000; Parker 2000). Unlike Stones, then, I see no hope for a reconciliation between emergentism and structuration theory that is premised on accepting a structurationist ontology.

Despite this, however, I do see some hope for reconciliation at a different level. The opportunity for reconciliation arises if we can disarticulate structuration theory and its ontology. This paper has argued that we cannot fully explain emergent social structures without theorizing the mechanisms at the level of the individual that combine to generate them. If we read Giddens as presenting a causal story about these mechanisms, and disregard his conflationist ontology, it becomes possible to extract some value from his work as a *theoretical* account of the embodied facet of social structure. In other words, there may be significant value in Giddens' *theory* even if we reject his *ontology*. Similarly, we can detach Bourdieu's theoretical account of the *habitus* from the conflationist ontology he seems to espouse, and integrate it into a

realist view of agency, as I have done elsewhere (Elder-Vass 2007c). If structuration theorists are prepared to abandon their ontological claims there is room for a theoretical dialogue with emergence theorists about the processes by which structure and agency interact.

Embodiment, then, as Lopez and Scott argue, has a useful role to play in understanding social structure, but embodiment alone does not provide all that we need to integrate the understandings of social structure that have dominated the literature. For a fuller understanding, we must set social structure in an emergentist framework, which provides the tools to explain the complementary roles of institutional structure, relational structure, and embodiment itself. Above all, social structure cannot be adequately explained unless and until we recognize that it is whole social entities and their properties that give it causal significance.

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Notes

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² As Shilling has shown with his *corporeal realism*, it is entirely possible to theorize the role of the body in sociology in emergentist terms without conflating social structure with individuals (Shilling 2005, e.g. pp. 12-15).

³ Durkheim is also the key historical source of the emergentist approach to social structure, although this aspect of his work has been widely neglected (Sawyer 2005: 100-101).

⁴ I have discussed the general theory of emergence and its relation to cause in more detail in (Elder-Vass 2005a).

⁵ There are other variations on the theory of emergence. In sociology, for example, Sawyer presents an interesting alternative view (Sawyer 2001).

⁶ Ironically, perhaps, one of the clearer statements of the need for structure-as-whole comes from Anthony Giddens, defending himself against the charge that he neglects this aspect: ‘In structuration theory, the concept of “structure” presumes that of “system”: it is only social systems or collectivities which have structural properties’ (Giddens 1993, Introduction to second edition: 7). Here, structure-as-whole appears in the guise of the concept of *system*.

⁷ Though Parsons also seems to have recognized this point, in principle if not in practice (Parsons 1951: 101).

⁸ Durkheim’s emergentism has always been criticized on the grounds that it seems to attribute subjectivity to groups (e.g. Catlin 1964: xiv) (and see Lopez and Scott 2000: 108-9, en 2).

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

¹⁰ In a critique of Giddens and Stones, Parker writes ‘the fact that subjectivity is involved in the process of producing outcomes does not mean that this subjectivity necessarily migrates to or inheres in its products’ (Parker 2006: 135).