

Agency as an Explanatory Key: Theoretical Issues

RICHARD BIERNACKI and TAD SKOTNICKI

Abstract

In philosophy agency designates the inalienable ability of individuals to make choices about their conduct that are not determined by the environment. In empirical social science, however, agency designates not autonomous free will but the launching of patterned action that surpasses constraints in the setting and that directs the course of institutional change. Many social scientists have limited the explanatory task they take on to show that agency is an indispensable part of ongoing social life. They have also reasoned that portrayals of institutional structures alone or even of the cultural resources that accompany them, such as shared scripts for social interaction, are inadequate for explaining important changes. It is typical therefore to feature agency as a logically necessary contributor. Study of agency can be improved by specifying affirmatively when and how action is in decisive ways organized independently of the constraints in the setting and this sense transcends them. This sharper requirement for positive demonstration of how agency brought about change is satisfied by reconstructing the actors' independent invention of a new master problem that guides their conduct. This promising approach to explaining transformative action has disseminated from study of artistic and scientific innovation to that of institutional change.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginnings of social scientists' attempt to explain historical transformation, the puzzle of how human agency contributes to change apart from ineluctable economic and social structures has been implicit in most studies (Marx, 1935, p. 13). Yet how is agency different from action in general? It is helpful to use the term action to characterize undertakings that are both meaningful and voluntary. By meaningful we indicate purposively designed actions that fit into a project that is subjectively fulfilling for the actor. Actions are voluntary in so far as the perpetrators figure their actions as belonging to themselves as their own. But in contrast, behavior refers to the mere fact of an action, such as a commercial purchase, registered by an analyst without attributing motivational meanings to the actor. If we describe an act merely

as an event that took place (a purchase), we treat that act as sheer behavior. By contrast, we could also describe that purchase as a trip to the supermarket to buy as the parent a loved one's favorite food. Then we treat the act as an undertaking in a web of human circumstances and we analyze it as an action. Of special interest are innovative actions not derived from institutions that explain institutional change. These "explanatory actions" comprise agency.

Yet inquiry into how agency explains the features of historical transformation has been hampered by theoretical disquisitions that conceive of agency as a logically necessary coconstituent of institutions. The theorists Anthony Giddens and William Sewell, Jr. reason that vibrant institutions function because actors deploy with agentic ingenuity the schemas and scripts available to them in the setting (Giddens, 1976, p. 161; Sewell, 2005, p. 143). Institutions in their perspective are not merely constraining but also enabling. This theoretical insight that agency always calls upon the resources given by established structures sponsored a long stall in empirical research into agency as an explanatory variable. For it misled investigators into assuming on principle that agency could not be separated in concrete instances as a cause apart from the structures in which it was embedded (Archer, 1996). To be sure, this theorized duality of structure and agency has permitted organizational sociologists to underscore that social structures are the objects of constant maintenance and modification even when people's interventions rely on scripts at hand in the setting (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). This overriding theoretical interest in affirming that structures are activity-dependent rendered agency an umbrella term that included empirical cases of action that reproduced constraining structures (Howard-Grenville, 2005). For example, in Britain, lower-class lads who defied middle-class school authorities by autonomously affirming the superiority of male manual labor also sorted themselves into jobs that reproduced the class structure (Willis, 1977). A positive emerging trend is for research to establish more specifically how and when human actions transcend structures in the environment (Seo & Creed, 2002; Stark, 2009).

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Max Weber's classic study of how capitalist conduct was transformed by strands of Protestantism that arose in Europe's Reformation remains a landmark for its comparative analysis of autonomous agency. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber relied on vignettes of traditional hand workers and merchants to reason that neither the carrot of monetary bonuses nor the stick of market competition could have motivated the ascetic labor in a calling that characterized the early modern period of economic takeoff (Weber, 1958, pp. 62, 67). Nor was the Protestant commitment to a calling

sufficient to motivate this obsessive labor, Weber showed via the example of Lutheranism (Weber, 1958, p. 85). Instead, Calvinism's innovative denial of the reassurance of salvation combined with its vision of rational organization as a homage to God motivated an unremitting pursuit of profit even in adverse social and economic circumstances (Weber, 1958, p. 109). Plagued by anxiety about their spiritual fate, the believers organized their economic conduct to obtain signs that God had destined them for salvation. This pursuit creatively remade the bearing of theology on action. Weber's account of ethically stringent agency was logically honed for a positive demonstration that action sponsored by theological innovations transcended the usually static functioning of capitalist institutions.

To be sure, Weber never completed his evidentiary picture by documenting that Calvinist-based religion was associated in large sample populations with ascetic business practices. Contemporary discussion of agency and transformation nonetheless take his essay on the Protestant Ethic as an absolutely current touchstone (Jepperson & Meyer, 2011, p. 58). Weber's demonstration implicitly defined agency as subjectively meaningful action that steers institutional change and by its own principles (Weber, 1958, pp. 181, 232). Agentic initiatives do not just make use of the culture and resources of the setting, but reassemble and thereby remake these means for a creatively redefined end. Such mobilization overcomes an old set of constraints and installs a new array of them for the future (Elster, 1993, p. 162; Padgett & Powell, 2012, p. 5).

Research into agency is among the few domains of sociological inquiry to have suffered from lapses in progress due to many investigators' treatment of agency as such a universal that they neglected to specify how it is distinguished empirically from any other sort of behavior or action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Fuchs, 2001). It seems inadequate to identify agency with how the ingenious actors who "inhabit" institutions maintain or change established protocols (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Even quantitative sociologists with snapshot data agree that the vibrancy of an emotional frame or the resilience of a social network is only a residue of how people have acted up to the instant of measurement (Burt, 2010, pp. 221, 243). What exactly became the identifying marks of agency's contribution in the period in which research into agency focused unprofitably on the inseparable interdependence of agency and social structures? Organizational researchers focused in effect on three signposts: whether action locks in a new institutional order, whether it lends agents differential abilities to exploit opportunities, or whether it sponsors departures from social processes theorized as relatively uniform or stable.

ACTION LOCKS IN AN INSTITUTIONAL ORDER

Studies of path dependency clarify when actors' contingent choices are able to install a new institutional order versus when choices are more constrained and of lesser impact (Pierson, 1994; Thelen, 2004). A path dependent explanation refers to "a specific type of sequence in which early contingent events set into motion event chains or sequences that have highly predictable features" (Mahoney, 2006, p. 130). For example, choosing a particular kind of rail infrastructure is an investment event that creates a predictable sequence for the future because it is difficult for actors to remake the rail grid (Veblen, 1915). James Mahoney's (2001) classic study of political regimes in Central America shows how the political character of twentieth century regimes were locked in by nineteenth century politicians' responses to modernization. Government politicians' early decisions about agricultural modernization constrained later changes. Were the politicians' actions governed by an autonomous purpose not dictated by the setting? Mahoney is explicit about his narrow interest in showing the consequences of action crucially mattered, not that action was independent: "although the (politicians') choice itself may have been caused by prior events, it is the variables activated by the choice, not the antecedent conditions that led to the choice, that predict final outcomes" (Mahoney, 2001, p. 7). While recent work in path dependence has stressed contingencies in organizational reproduction (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004), they still subordinate action to structure because they define action by its consequences for structure. When Mahoney restricts his account to the fact of an act's occurrence, his study treats it as sheer behavior observed from the outside.

ACTION LENDS AGENTS DIFFERENTIAL ABILITIES TO EXPLOIT OPPORTUNITIES

One approach to operationalizing agency is to treat it as individual competency in the pursuit of social advantage (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). This emphasis on planful consistency has been applied to explain variation in adolescent negotiation of transitions to adulthood as well as to historical studies of maneuvers in social networks (McLean, 1998; Shanahan & Hood, 2000). However its focus on the differential deployment of individuals' competencies is not specifically geared to innovative action that remakes institutions. By focusing on opportunities given in the setting at hand, furthermore, it is unable to isolate the effect of agency versus differential access to the cultural tools of success. "Agency can be put aside if it is coincident with opportunity," Ronald Burt once explained in a diagnosis of the underlying explanatory challenges. "The result is the same as assuming agency away; agency can be put aside to focus on performance associations with network structure" (Burt, 2010, p. 222). Burt's study of networks sought to show

therefore that occupying a linking position between contrasting clusters of network ties also permitted agents greater flexibility to pursue advantages without fear of failure (Burt, 2010, p. 253). But people's increase in flexibility was an intervening variable between the variety of network ties and the types of competitive pressures they faced versus the resulting behavior. The research design does not recognize action's autonomous power (Burt, 2012, p. 586). Indeed, this treatment of action almost turns it into sheer behavior because we do not appreciate people's subjectively meaningful agendas.

Neil Fligstein's research on fields of action also illustrates the difficulty in parsing the explanatory contribution of actors versus their settings. He identifies creative action as the invention of actors with special "social skill" (Fligstein, 2001, p. 113). These actors appreciate others' perspectives, manipulate cultural frameworks, and persuade others to cooperate in joint ventures: this for Fligstein instantiates agency (2001, p. 107). But this "can-do" view of agency does not isolate the independent effect of skill versus that of the ready made cultural frameworks that activate the use of skill. To reconsider one of Fligstein's weighty case examples, during the Depression there was a pressing need for new economic initiatives coupled with a ready-made set of prescriptions on tap from the Keynesians (Fligstein, 2001, p. 120). Given these two elements in the setting of the 1930s, investigators may rhetorically highlight agency in the explanation of increases in government outlays, but it is unclear whether decision makers merely responded to the pressures and potentials immanent in the setting or whether agency apart from the setting organized the course of change.

ACTION SPONSORS DEPARTURES FROM SOCIAL PROCESSES THEORIZED AS UNIFORM AND CONSTRAINING

Investigators who adopt this signpost have focused on showing that action departed from a theory's specification of structural forces. To elaborate a striking example, Catherine Turco marshaled field observations of how "employee agency" torpedoed a store's attempt to commercialize support services for new mothers (Turco, 2012, p. 383). Turco found that retail clerks at this "Motherhood Inc" fought against managerial expectations that they persuade mothers to purchase high-end clothing and pricey gadgets (pp. 407, 409). The employees' refusal to endorse the commercialization of services for mothers was part of their workplace defense against exhausting protocols and speedups. Most concretely, the clerks preferred having desks that let them get off their feet (Turco, 2012, p. 406). Their opposition to management ironically used the company's own justification for its commercial enterprise. The company's legitimating rationale was that it provided people (customers in the first instance) with care and emotional support.

The clerks' protest picked up on this ready-made template to achieve almost obviously fixed ends, however. In that respects it lacks the agentic quality of transcending circumstances except by contrast to a reified view of commercialization as a structurally dominant steamroller that uniformly shapes action.

The foundational research confirms that agency is a complex concept that refers both to individuals' autonomous organization of action as well as to the action's consequential effects. "Individuals are purposeful in their actions," Calvin Morrill wrote of operatic dramas of conflict in corporations, yet for him "such purposes express the social structures and cultural arrangements in which they act" (Morrill, 1995, p. 9). In short, organizational researchers often subordinate purposeful action to the circumstances or settings in which the action occurs. "Change is derivative of structure. Recognizable forms of agency take a shape that 'fits' the geometry of gaps in institutional structure," Gerald Berk and Dennis Galvan wrote of this unwittingly reductive tradition (Berk & Galvan, p. 575). To sum up the logic of the reduction that casts the setting as primary for explanation: if we assume firstly that the setting and action always conjoin to produce outcomes, and secondly that the institutional setting includes the opportunities and cognitive scripts agents use, then the setting alone pinpoints variation in how people act. For then action is present but analytically it is a constant that only actualizes the opportunities defined by the setting.

EMERGING TRENDS

Useful initiatives for explaining how action may surpass and transform the circumstances out of which it emerges developed in art history to make extreme episodes of creativity tractable (Biernacki, 2005). Art historians showed that action which appears inexplicably transformative can be decomposed into a sequence of problem-solving initiatives that follow from actors' creative redefinition of the problem situation that their conduct should address (Baxandall, 1987). As philosopher of science Karl Popper first used the term, a problem situation includes a set of heuristics for the way things can get done and a corollary local objective that represents the optimal engagement with the situation (Worrall, 2003, p. 81). Innovators often seize on an anomaly as an exemplar that poses a new range of challenges as well as the means for working them out, similar to how scientist land in a new paradigm for puzzle-solving in Thomas Kuhn's histories of science (Kuhn, 1970). Even in the extreme case of the overthrow of conventional perspective by Cubism, for instance, investigators such as T.J. Clark and Michael Baxandall have retraced the master problem that Picasso set for himself and the heuristics he followed for solving it (Baxandall, 1987; Clark,

2013, p. 77). Picasso saw his master problem as that of showing how the world appears thing-like or three-dimensionally substantial to the extent that people contain it in borders and solidify it. Picasso even alluded to the way that he was carried along as an executor once he formulated the problem situation for his Cubist period (Clark, 2013, p. 72).

The problem-solving approach to agency has drawn inspiration from both philosophical and empirical traditions of research. In the tradition of American pragmatism the problem situation was the basic unit for analyzing action, as goals were conceived as shifting proximate responses to ongoing engagements with the setting (Joas, 1996, p. 160). In the sociology of organizations, researchers conceived of agency as the ability to conceive alternative rationalities that do not just improve decision-making but that install fresh definitions of the problem that action was to solve and fresh criteria for judging success (Stark, 2010; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Each of these currents converged on the view that agency is neither the recycling of old means to pursue a shift in goals nor the adoption of new means for old goals (such as maximizing profit). At its source agency is the recasting of both means and proximate ends in a new package (Stark, 2010).

The problem-solving approach to agency has an epistemological advantage because it does not found explanations on the agents' hypothesized ultimate goals, such as pursuit of money, that are so causally distant and overarching they cannot account for the specific innovations that comprise the exercise of agency (Jacobides & Winter, 2012). A problem-solving approach converges more exactly on the more easily observable or traceable problem in a setting that is proximate to the organization of action and that better accounts for varying features of people's conduct (Levi Martin, 2011, p. 310). Nor do investigators have to remain wholly faithful to the actors' self-reports of what they are up to. For people's definition of the problem to be solved is partly incarnated in the tangible organization of their action, ranging from how they construct gothic cathedrals to how they prepare their evening dinner (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 186; Panofsky, 1957).

The problem-solving approach also cuts through theorists' problem of explaining how agents whose outlooks and practices are molded by an environment have the ability to transform it. For the problem situation that agents formulate for themselves always draws on cognitive trends and inherited practices, but these are reshaped as they are incorporated into a new problem situation (Archer, 2010, p. 278).

Historians of military reorganization have long crafted their narratives to demonstrate the recasting of components in a new problem situation. Napoleon Bonaparte's accomplishments followed from specifying the task of engagement as that that of maneuvering to break down the ability of an

opponent to coordinate forces (Chandler, 1966, p. 149). For the old regimes of the eighteenth century, military strategy concerned the control of geographic points considered statically. Correlatively, army logistics were designed to channel supplies to maintain forces lodged at fixed points or encamped in formations (Béraud, 1996, p. 133). The troops that Napoleon inherited had prior experience with marching briskly without supply trains owing to the breakdown of central requisitioning in the dire days of the revolutionary French republic. Napoleon used the new possibility for dispersed maneuver to organize independent marching routes for units, so they avoided delays of marching in formation until they reached a strategic staging area (Béraud, 2007, p. 156). He expected his units to travel even more lightly than before (Béraud, 1996, p. 54; Béraud, 2007, pp. 66–68). He formalized a modular organization so units were more independent until they solidified for battle (Béraud, 2007, pp. 156, 164). This military reorganization did not just assemble existing components, but reshaped them. It derived from the master problem of defeating adversaries by speed, flexibility, and rapid concentration, a breakthrough that turned a collection of tactical possibilities inherited from the Revolution into a strategic machine that long triumphed against the numerically superior forces of the Continent's old regimes (Béraud, 2007, p. 324).

Even with the case of Napoleon, an analysis that retraces how agents pursued a problem also guards against the tendency to associate agency with unusual heroism or genius. As the art historian Baxandall wrote of breakthroughs, once we understand the agents' formulation of their problem, "[t]here is often a curious impersonality about the actual working out of a solution in the medium" (Baxandall, p. 47). Pursuit of the problem lets an agent engage the setting but the problem does not conform to the setting.

The master problem that agents try to solve is rarely given entirely prior to a sequence of action by ratiocination, like a blueprint readied for execution. It is only through the ongoing action of engaging the world to change it that the problems to be solved come to be formulated (Lester & Piore, 2004; Trotsky, 1969). Easy access to multiple resources may deter agency if it obscures possibilities for creative problem specifications, whereas imposing stringent constraints on an enterprise may provide the focus necessary for rethinking the design of action (Stark, 2007). Specific limits on the use of resources may even set up the "scaffolding" for novel problem specifications, as in Popper's account of the rise of polyphonic music out of Gregorian canons (Popper, 1982). The effective agent may be either an individual or an organization, depending on whether group discussion deliberately articulates the problem to be solved.

METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research into agency comprises a special case in which a primary obstacle to progress is a premature rush to categorization and generalization, exemplified by recent claims that action in recent decades has become globally more reflexive (Archer, 2010). The exercise of agency resists ahistorical modeling because people do not choose between known alternatives specifiable before the action unfolds (Volbera, 2003). To assess whether an action proceeded from novel problem solving or instead realized potentials immanent in the setting depends on historically specific reconstructions (Skocpol, 1979; Weber, 1982, pp. 290–293, 324). Familiarity with documentary sources is indispensable because the very success of agency in installing new practices and world views tends to erase revolutionary action's original design even to those who carry the action out. The autonomous moral agency that installed the cultural landscape of modern capitalism's "iron cage," for example, is retrospectively unintelligible unless one recovers the now-buried problem of salvation that Calvinist reformers set for themselves (Weber, 1958, p. 233).

Careful reconstruction of case history is necessary therefore to guard against the reification of structures and correlatively of how people have transformed them. Management analysts landed in this reification when they subsumed the innovations at Japanese automobile corporations in the 1980s under the rubric of "lean production," which they in turn associated with the generic goal of maximizing profit in the long run. In truth each Japanese auto firm concocted its own package of means and ends in response to differently envisioned business problems (Pilkington, 1998). At Toyota, now-celebrated "just in time" techniques were designed to feed materials into the production process only in response to a customer order of a particular permutation of one of its vehicles. They minimized unsold vehicles and use of scarce materials. At Honda, practice also tended to reduce inventory on hand. But it resulted from a focus on streamlining the parts and from planning in advance exactly when they were needed for a finely engineered fleet. The rigid Honda solution, which was also intended to perfect net engineering quality, led to the purchase of parts for a production schedule that was fixed up to six months in advance (Pilkington, 1998, p. 36). Toyoto's practices proved more difficult to assimilate abroad and in Japan never worked well at Nissan (Cusumano, 1985, p. 383; Fujimoto, 1999, p. 158). If we reify lean production as a generic "best practice" for improving capital turnover, we do not grasp the specific redefinitions of problems that permitted only a few Japanese automobile manufacturers in the 1980s to break ahead of the international pack (Pilkington, 1998, p. 40).

Research into agency has often identified it with innate or recurrent features of action such as people's use of readily available scripts for getting

things done to surmount local contingencies (Sewell, 2005, p. 141; Clemens, 1997, p. 189). However the reuse of recipes of action may also characterize nontransformative action that on inspection uses pre-given tools for unchanged goals (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83). To identify agency more reliably therefore requires case-specific knowledge of the agents' definitions of the new problem situation contrasted to the old. Agency is an indispensable concept for dissecting the complex record of cultural and institutional change, but one cannot reach generalizations about agency with transhistorical empirical indicators (Hargadon, 2003, p. 11). Instead, one must identify agency in historical context by reconstructing transformations in agents' own problem-solving projects.

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RICHARD BIERNACKI SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Richard Biernacki is a Professor of Sociology, University of California, San Diego. He is a former Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford. His research uses archival evidence for the comparative sociology of labor in commercial exchange, an agenda launched in his 1995 book *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany Britain, 1640–1914*. His 2012 work *Reinventing Evidence in Social Inquiry: Decoding Facts and Variables* critiqued the methods for interpreting primary documents in sociology was a Times Literary Supplement book of the year.

TAD SKOTNICKI SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Tad Skotnicki is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of California, San Diego. He is currently completing his dissertation, *Ethical Purchasing and Values in Action: Consumer Activism in Early Twentieth-Century England and the United States*. His dissertation is based on primary source research into groups that sought to mobilize consumers for the purpose of ending tenement and sweatshop labor.

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