RYOT Network

Research on Youth's Opportunities and Transitions

# Working Paper

## BEYOND THE UNPRODUCTIVE DUALISM – DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDINGS OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN YOUTH STUDIES AND LIFE COURSE RESEARCH

This RYOT working paper presents some of the many definitions and understandings of social structures and individual agency together with a short overview of the perennial sociological debate about their relationship. The focus of the paper is on the recent changes in and the current state of the structure-agency relationship in today's societies – and on the ways it is understood and applied particularly in the fields of youth studies and life course research.

**April 2021**

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## INTRODUCTION

This working paper of the RYOT working group *Structure, Agency, and the Life Course* aims, firstly, to set a frame for a common understanding of the complex relationship between structure and agency, and, secondly, to aid us in asking relevant and topical questions in our research activities. The paper briefly presents and discusses both some of the most important theoretical contributions made to the topic, and the impacts of the contemporary societal changes on those theoretical understandings. We underscore the need of going beyond the structure-agency dualism – as we argue that these kinds of dichotomies are very unproductive – by using more nuanced approaches to their unbreakable relationship. The paper also takes a glance at the way the theoretical approaches to the structure-agency relationship have been developed particularly within the fields of youth studies and life course research.

We are interested in questions related, for example, to the ways the current macro-social changes influence young people's life course construction, to the different mechanisms producing and reproducing social inequalities in individualised societies, to the social and intrapersonal resources young people need to cope with the various challenges increased societal uncertainty and intensified demands of individual responsibility pose on them, and to the interrelations of young people's life courses and the surrounding institutional, discursive, and socio-relational opportunity structures. With regard to our theoretical approach, we build on Bourdieu's theory of practice and those

sociological approaches that have combined some of the main tenets of the individualisation thesis with the work of Bourdieu.

While social structure as a concept might be seemingly clear and straightforward, it has many definitions. For example, Bell (2013) defines structures as the complex and stable framework of society influencing all individuals and groups through the relationship between institutions, such as economy and politics, and social practices including behaviours, norms, and values. Stauber (2015) views social structures as rules according to which societal fields (e.g., educational systems, labour markets), institutions, and the distribution of and access to resources are organised building social inequalities and hierarchies. One of the most influential perspectives on social structures has been proposed by Giddens, who highlights their 'duality', which refers to their nature as 'both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems' (Giddens, 1981, p. 27). According to him, structures, which consist of a rules and resources, do not only shape people's practices, but also are constituted and reproduced by them. Rules are a normative structure according to which the procedures of action in social situations are interpreted. Resources are the collection of actions that an individual can perform to influence or transform their surroundings. (Lippuner & Wernel, 2009.) The duality of structures means that structures do only exist in so far as they are produced and reproduced by (individual or collective) agency, which means that the structures are not unchanging and static but that there is always a potential for change (Stauber, 2015).

There is also a plethora of ways in which the concept of agency has been defined and applied in research. On a very general level, it can be defined as a resource that individuals develop and that varies across social strata, personal experiences, and life courses. (Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015, p. 1431.) Emirbayer and Mische (1998 p. 970), for example, offer a conceptualisation of agency in which they highlight its temporality and relationship to structures: 'The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situation'. Overall, the different definitions of agency vary from perceiving it merely as rational and intentional activity to viewing it as a temporally broad perspective covering individual development and encompassing different dimensions of the individual's relations with the world. Furthermore, assumptions about the relationship between agency and structures range from analytical inseparability to separateness with varying degrees of contextual influence. (Eteläpelto et al., 2013.)

Despite its significant role in sociology, the concept of agency remains elusive and often under-defined (e.g., Campbell, 2009; Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Spencer & Doull, 2015). Campbell (2009) argues that the fact that the concept of agency has become so closely bound up with the heated structure-agency debate is causing much of this ambiguity and confusion. In the debate, the dualism is often harnessed to highlight agency either as an intrinsic quality residing within individuals or as a product of and a response to the social context (Spencer & Doull, 2015). Moreover, Campbell (2009) identifies two contrasting general conceptions of agency, which further complicate the issue. He emphasises the importance of making a distinction between agency as an actor's ability to initiate and maintain a programme of action (power of agency) and agency as an actor's ability to act independently of social structures (agentic power). These conceptions are often not distinguished from each other clearly, and agency is routinely used to refer to both, even though they have no given logical relationship as one can have considerable power of agency while lacking agentic power and vice versa (Campbell, 2009). Distinctions have also been made between agency as an affect ('feeling powerful') and agency as an effect ('being powerful') (Spencer & Doull, 2015) and between the actor's actual and self-perceived agentic capacities and resources (Hitlin & Long, 2009).

## CONTESTED RELATIONSHIP OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

In Europe, as elsewhere in the Western world, societies have undergone significant structural, cultural, and economic changes over the last decades. These changes have been argued to affect the 'traditional' social structures and, thus, the 'relationship' between structure and agency. In other words, the extent to which individual are sorted by structural forces associated with factors such as social class and gender, and the extent to which they can influence or determine the formation of their life courses. Many prominent scholars, such as Beck, Giddens, and Bauman, have argued that the contemporary (late/post) modern condition is characterised by processes of individualisation in which traditional social certainties of simple modernity become replaced with choice, fluidity, and fragmentation. As the previously stable and coherent roles and positions are breaking down, identities and biographies are transformed from being prescribed by social structures to a project for individuals to create themselves (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). Individualisation is, hence, characterised by an increasing individual freedom – but also obligation – to take an active role in making life course choices and constructing one's own identity being neither bound nor guided by the social roles and constraints of industrial society.

At the same time, individuals are not only expected to seek biographical solutions to society's structural problems but also considered personally responsible of their successes and failures in this task (Bauman, 2007, pp. 3–4). Therefore, individuals are freed only to the turbulence and risks of contemporary society in which institutions impose new and often contradictory demands and controls on them. To cope with the changing institutional constraints and ever-present risks and uncertainties, individuals need to be reflexive in building and adjusting their identities and biographies. Instead of deriving from individuals' conscious choice or preference, individualisation is imposed on them by modern institutions, and individual reflexivity, which emerges as a response to structural contradictions and insecurities, does not offer them autonomy or freedom from institutional structures (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 2003). As individualisation is supposed/expected to liberate people from the traditional social ordering, it is argued to lead to nationally fixed social categories of industrial society being culturally dissolved or transformed because the traditional social roles also become a matter of choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 49). The emphasis on individual choice, identity, and reflexivity shared by Beck, Giddens, and Bauman has led several commentators to group their works together under an umbrella term 'individualisation thesis' (Howard, 2007a, 25).

Despite the remarkable influence of the works of these scholars, they have also been subjected to considerable criticism. This is particularly the case with Beck's infamous argument about social class having become a 'zombie' category, void of meaning but kept artificially alive by sociologists insisting on still using it. While Beck's claim is not that the end of social class means the end of social inequality (e.g., Beck, 1992, p. 35), he has faced vehement criticism from those who assert – drawing often on the work of Pierre Bourdieu – that inequality is still very much determined by structural factors instead of depending only, or even mainly, on individual actions and decisions (see Dawson, 2012; Howard, 2007b).

Indeed, the individualisation theorists, particularly Beck and Giddens, have encountered substantial criticism from those who see them to suggest that inequality in late modern societies is determined by individual actions and decisions instead of structural factors. The critics argue that these factors still have significant effects on the experiences and life chances of individuals. (Howard, 2007b, pp. 17–20.) Furthermore, there is no agreement about the extent to which experiences of individualisation are (un)equally distributed. There are arguments that individualisation, itself seen as a key dimension of inequality, is a privileged form of subjectivity, an experience of white middle-class men, and that the individualisation thesis universalises particular middle-class ideals of self-expression and autonomy (e.g., Skeggs, 2004, pp. 52–54). Especially with regard to the argument that social class is no longer relevant in late modernity, a frequent criticism is that there is not only a serious lack of empirical evidence to back up this claim (see Cortois, 2017) but also that the empirical evidence actually points in the opposite direction (e.g., Brannen & Nilsen, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel,

2007; Reay, 2006; Savage, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). Curran (2018) distinguishes two main arguments made against Beck's view on the disappearance of social class, which Beck sees to be partly a result of the equalising effect of the distribution of risks. The first one claims that the distribution of risk also continues to be heavily shaped by class in late modernity. The second argument focuses on the distribution of goods, which is seen still to be fundamentally significant for individuals' life chances, and, hence, the importance of which cannot be overpowered by the distribution of risk. Furlong and Cartmel (2007, pp. 2–3, 138–139) suggest an explanation for the seemingly decreasing relevance of social structures. They accept some of the main arguments of the individualisation thesis but argue that late modernity involves an essential continuity with the previous stage of modernity in that economic and cultural resources are still pivotal for life chances and experiences. For them, late modernity revolves around an epistemological fallacy: although social structures, such as class, have become more obscure due to the weakening collectivist traditions and intensifying individualist values, they continue to significantly shape and constrain individuals' lives. In other words, although social structures continue to influence life chances, individuals tend not to recognise their effects.

There are sociological approaches that have combined some of the main tenets of the individualisation thesis with the work of Bourdieu. This is typically done either by analysing the way class inequalities have become individualised or by linking reflexivity, a central aspect of the individualisation thesis, with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. These different theoretical approaches do not reject individualisation per se but argue that the individualisation thesis overlooks the ways in which individualisation is socially situated (Dawson, 2012). For example, there is an approach to class analysis that examines inter-relationships between class, identities, and inequalities as well as recognises the fundamental nature of contemporary social and cultural changes (e.g., Devine & Savage, 2000; Reay, 2006; Savage, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). Individualisation is argued to involve a manifestation of novel forms of class inequality, and, hence, it is seen to imply a need to re-work class in a more nuanced way rather than a cause for eradicating it. (Curran, 2018; Savage, 2003.) This 'cultural analysis of class' (Reay, 2006), or 'culturalist class analysis' (Devine & Savage, 2000), focuses on class processes and practices with the aim to develop conceptualisations of class that address how processes of inequality are produced and reproduced in a routine way that involves both economic and cultural practices. Hence, it moves beyond an understanding of class based solely on economic factors. This kind of class analysis focuses on the ways class is made and given value through culture and on uncovering 'the unacknowledged normality of the middle-classes […] and its corollary, the equally unacknowledged pathologisation and diminishing of the working-classes' (Reay, 2006, p. 289). In other words, as Savage (2003, p. 536) phrases it: 'Socially recognized class conflict dissipates into individualized identities in which those who live up to middle-class norms see themselves as "normal" people while those who do not see themselves (and are seen by the powerful) as individual failures'.

Theorists adopting this kind of an approach to class place issues of cultural identity at the heart of class theory, emphasise processes of culture and lifestyle, and recognise that the tools provided by traditional class analysis are not sufficient for theorising such issues (Bottero, 2004). Hence, the work of Bourdieu is drawn upon. For Bourdieu, power operates through the 'naturalisation' of social relations, and socially and politically constructed divisions can be interpreted as results of natural differences. When inequalities are naturalised as the product of differing amounts of motivation, skill, or ability, they are typically not acknowledged to be a product of social class. (Savage, 2016, p. 67.) This interpretation of the relation between power and inequalities provides a mechanism for explaining the paradox of class in late modernity: 'the structural importance of class to people's lives appears not to be recognized by the people themselves. Culturally, class does not appear to be a self-conscious principle of social inequality. Structurally, however, it appears to be highly pertinent.' (Savage, 2000, p. xii; c.f. Furlong & Cartmel, 2007.) Regarding this paradox of class, Savage (2000) highlights the importance of acknowledging that the weakening or disappearance of direct class consciousness does not in any way mean that social class has lost its emotional significance for individuals as a part of their sense of self (see also Atkinson, 2007; Roberts, 2010).

## BOURDIEU BREAKING AWAY FROM THE STRUCTURE-AGENCY DUALISM

The main focus of Bourdieu's work is on understanding 'the clash between enduring ways of life and larger systems of power and capital, the ways in which cultural and social structures are reproduced even amid dramatic change, and the ways in which action and structure are not simply opposed but depend on each other' (Calhoun et al., 2012, pp. 325–326). Bourdieu's theory of practice, which he developed and revised throughout his career, breaks with the objectivism-subjectivism and structure-action dualisms and emphasises that it is crucial to see how both sides of the issues are inseparably related (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For Bourdieu, a relational analysis of social tastes and practices is a way to achieve an empirical understanding of the dynamic relationship between structure and action. This analysis is organised by three central elements: positions, dispositions, and position-taking (i.e. practices). In social space, actors occupy positions relative to one another, and these positions are defined, for example, by occupation, education, or proximity to power, and actors maintain and signal their positions through practices (e.g., style of dress, consumer choices). While there is no direct connection between positions and the practices attached to them, what ties them together is habitus, which is the site of the interplay between structure and practice. (Calhoun et al., 2012, pp. 328–329.) Habitus is Bourdieu's analytical tool for overcoming the dualism of structure and agency, and, together with the concepts of field and capital, it forms the basis of Bourdieu's theory of practice (see e.g., Bourdieu, 1986, 1990, 1993). Bourdieu constructed the following model to convey this relationship: [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101).

Fields are relatively autonomous social worlds that are structured spaces of positions occupied by individuals according to the principles of differentiation and distribution of capital. Hence, a field can be understood as a setting where individuals are allocated to their social positions through an interaction between the individual's habitus, their possessed capital, and the rules of the field. One's success in a field is dependent on having the kinds of capital valued in that field as well as on the compatibility of one's habitus with the rules of the field. (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992.) While fields limit what actors can do and make some actions more possible than others, there is often an opportunity to 'play the game' in more ways than one (Adams, 2006, p. 515).

Without underestimating the importance of economic capital in social formation and relationships, Bourdieu (1986) extends the concept of capital by also constructing other forms, such as cultural, social, and symbolic capital. The possession of different forms of capital provides the basic structure both for the way fields are organised and for the generation of the habitus and practices associated with it (Calhoun et al., 2012, p. 330). Cultural capital is composed of a body of symbolic resources, such as education, knowledge, skills, and family background. It exists in three forms: embodied as a disposition of the mind and body, objectified as cultural goods, and institutionalised as, for example, educational qualifications. Social capital, which is generated through social processes between the family and wider society, refers to networks of permanent and fixed social relationships that are, firstly, beneficial and productive for their 'participants' and, secondly, linked to integration into a group. Symbolic capital, in turn, is manifested in individual prestige and personal qualities, such as authority and charisma. (Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014, p. 124; Nash, 1990; Reay, 2004.) The fact that capital can and does take many different forms highlights that individuals accumulate many kinds of resources, that these resources are inextricably social as they derive their meaning from the social relationships constituting fields, and that, in addition to the struggle of accumulating capital, the struggle to reproduce capital is equally central. (Calhoun et al., 2012, pp. 330–331.) The habitus can be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class.

> Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86)

## STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN YOUTH STUDIES AND LIFE COURSE RESEARCH

There are so-called middle ground positions or approaches to the structure-agency debate. One very influential one, which has been widely applied especially in the field of youth studies, is Evans's concept of bounded agency that claims to fill in the gap between the 'free agency' of the individualisation thesis and the 'structural determinism' of Bourdieu's work. The concept of bounded agency, which focuses on individuals as actors, refers to socially situated agency that is influenced but not determined by environments. The concept emphasises both internalised frames of reference and external actions. Individuals are seen to have a past and imagined future possibilities that, together with subjective perceptions of structures and social landscapes, shape their actions in the present. (Evans, 2002, 2007, pp. 92–93.) Evans and other proponents of this approach perceive agency to be something that individuals possess but which is bound by society placing restrictions on individual identities and biographies (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014).

Even though Evans's work and other middle ground positions have been highly influential, they also have opponents. In addition to being accused of misreading Beck and using him as a 'straw man' (Woodman 2009), the middle ground positions – and Evans's bounded agency in particular – have been criticised, for example, for applying a 'modernist' theory of subjectivity resting upon an ontological separation between subjectivity and society and for using agency as 'a catch-all term that can be used to explain anything' (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014, p. 466). Coffey and Farrugia argue that this approach is an example of unproductive ontological dualisms and a move away from more nuanced understandings of agency and contemporary youth inequalities, which they claim to be typical of many present-day youth studies. Furthermore, they view that, in youth studies, there is a very problematic tendency to define agency in advance as actions that go against certain power structures, which the research itself sets out to critique. In addition to seeing this as a normative solution for defining agency, they argue that there is no reason why macro-level structural changes could not create conditions for unexpected idiosyncrasies in individual identities and biographies.

> Youth studies cannot simply continue to celebrate actions that resist existing power relationships as manifestations of agency. To do so results in conceptual frameworks that portray young people who do not resist as lacking active subjectivity, erases the efforts that these young people are making to build lives in conditions not of their own choosing, and imposes pre-existing normative commitments on young people to whom they may not be relevant. (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014, p. 472)

For them, finding a solution to the problem that the concept of agency poses to youth studies requires moving beyond a modernist assumption about agency and structure by rethinking the ontological relationship between power, subjectivity, and social practice. In their view, this task has already been taken up by researchers who, despite applying varying theoretical perspectives with varying views about the social world, are united by the aim of moving beyond unproductive ontological dualisms. In this regard, especially significant are those schools of thought that follow the contributions of Bourdieu and Foucault. Despite their many differences, both perspectives transcend dichotomies, such as that of structure and agency, and hold the view that power relations act as conditions for the possibility of subjectivity. Hence, the subject is not seen as an entity that is bounded by power but one that comes into being through an active engagement with systems of power relationships that pre-exist the individual. (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014, pp. 468–469.)

Life course research typically views structure and agency to be analytically clearly separate (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), counter-posed domains of freedom and constraint that are assumed to be two independent and often opposed and competing forces with the limits of agency determined by the strength of the structures (Dannefer et al., 2015, p. 92). This theoretically problematic tendency is also clearly visible in the definitions proposed in Elder's widely applied life course principles (e.g., Elder, 1998, 2007; Elder et al., 2015). However, here a more Bourdieuian understanding of the relationship of agency and structures (see Coffey & Farrugia, 2014) is adopted in the sense that

agency is not understood to simply be 'bound' by structures. Instead, an individual is seen to come into being through an active engagement with systems of power relationships. This is in line with those definitions of agency and its relation to structures applied in the field of life course research that are closer to what Bourdieu intends with the concept of habitus in the field of life course research, such as the following:

> [T]he role of social structure is not merely to constrain agency, thereby defining and limiting the options among which an otherwise 'free' actor may choose. Rather, what social structure does is to shape and define the individual's consciousness, within which intentions and purposes are externalised into agentic action. [---] [Agency] does not exist as the error term, relegated to the caprice of free choice. Rather, it is recognized as it empirically exists – as an expression of consciousness that is constituted by and typically integrated into the habitus in which it operates [---] Agentic expression also serves to create the social relationships that sustain the world. (Dannefer et al., 2015, p. 93)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Debates on whether the structure or the agency is the most central in the understanding and explaining social phenomena have given birth to some of the most important discussions in sociology of the last century. The structural, cultural, and economic changes that Western countries have experienced in the last decades have also shifted the ways sociological theories have faced this discussion. While some theoretical approaches highlight the increased ability of individuals to set their own life courses, others argue that the structural constrains prevail in shaping the limits for individual agency.

Through the examination of the most salient contributions to the debate, this RYOT working paper underscores the necessity to go beyond a dualistic understanding of the relationship between structure and agency. In our research in the fields of youth studies and life course research, based on the work of Bourdieu and on the more recent theorisations drawing upon and building on it, we aim to set up and apply a theoretical approach that pays due attention to the inseparable ways structure and agency interact.

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## RYOT NETWORK

The RYOT network aims to encourage and enable collaboration between young European researchers and to strengthen their professional connections, going beyond their local and national contexts. The network facilitates discussion and the sharing of ideas, questions, and concerns among early career researchers. RYOT network also aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of young Europeans' life course opportunities and transitions, which encompasses a range of highly important social justice and equality issues.

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### FURTHER READING

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### HOW TO CITE

Tikkanen, Jenni, & Jacovkis, Judith. (2021). Beyond the Unproductive Dualism – Developing Understandings of Structure and Agency in Youth Studies and Life Course Research. RYOT Working Paper. Zenodo. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4722916