Human Practices and the Observability of the ‘Macrosocial’

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Summary: How are we to conceive of the relationship(s) between classical depictions of „macrosocial“ phenomena and the empirically observable world of situated human practices and interactions? Sociologists since Weber have addressed this problem in a variety of ways, but persistent conceptual difficulties remain largely unresolved. In this discussion, the fundamental issue of the „observability“ of the „macrosocial“ will be the focus of analytical attention. In what ways do the putatively „macro“ phenomena become instantiated in, and in other ways observable through, practical human actions and interactions? Are „macro“ phenomena best construed as „containers“ of local, human practices, perhaps exercising independent „effects“ upon them? Or are „macro“ phenomena brought to life by, and thus made occasionally relevant in and through, the practices of people in analyseable ways? In pursuing the latter possibility, some of the work of Harvey Sacks on membership categorization practices is found to be useful.

Garfinkel’s remarkably innovative vision of a mode of sociological analysis he termed „ethnomethodology“ (1967/1984) has in recent years become detached from its historical relationship to key issues in social theory, in large measure due to the success of the technical field of „conversation analysis“ which owes its genesis to many of his theoretical contributions. However, an abiding issue within ethnomethodology broadly conceived has been the nature of social order and social organisation and the appropriate methods for investigating the properties of these phenomena. Among the primary problems confronted by contemporary social theorists has been the development of an adequate conceptual framework for the depiction of the nature of „macrosocial“ phenomena. I submit in this essay that various theses advanced within ethnomethodology permit us to cast this issue in a novel fashion, and enable us to approach some viable solutions to the problems which are generated by contemplations of the nature of macrosocial phenomena and their relationship(s) to quotidian human conduct.

The ‘micro-macro’ linkage problem, as it is called in contemporary sociological theory, is an issue which requires intensive logical analysis. However, notwithstanding various current treatments which it has received, I believe that a proper logical solution has not (yet) been forthcoming or. if it has, I am not aware of it. It is the purpose of this essay to argue for what I shall claim is a contribution to the solution to the core problems. Identifying what constitute the ‘core problems’ will itself require detailed discussion. In my view, this must involve, and in the first instance, an analysis of the ontological problems arising out of a consideration of the nature of macro- (as well as micro-) social phenomena, from the solution of which significant methodological implications may be derived. I have visited this issue before, although this earlier treatment was almost certainly considered (by those whom it sought to engage) as merely a reiteration of what was then taken to be a conventional ‘ethnomethodological’ position. In what follows, I shall advance a series of arguments designed to show that the proper route to a solution to the ‘micro-macro’ relationship problem is to be found in a systematic elucidation of the logic of our ordinary practices (including our communicative prac-

2 Coulter (1982). In this paper, I argued for the position that the clarification of the nature of „macro-social“ phenomena requires a fuller elucidation of the grammar of macro-concepts than has been entertained in the many controversies that have been stimulated by the putative „macro-micro relationship“ problem. For a more recent version of the ethnomethodological approach to the „problem of linkage“ between the „macro-social“ and „micro-social“, see Richard A. Hilbert (1990). In his subsequent book, (Hilbert 1992: pp. 189–97), Hilbert remarks that members of society „themselves orient to a macro-structural order and [...] reify and reproduce it in the course of their interpretive work, imposing its reality on each other as they go...“ (ibid., p. 192). I shall claim further on that such a view glosses over the essentially occasioned character of the relevance to members of a „macro“ order, as well as imputing a fallacious mode of objectification to us all as practical agents (after all, ‘reification’ is the fallacy of misplaced concreteness).

1 As this issue is identified in, e.g., Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Richard Munch & Neil J. Smelser (Eds.), (1987). For an earlier discussion of this issue, see Randall Collins (1981).

* Thanks to Stefan Hirschauer for his constructive criticism.
tics) in our ordinary life circumstances. If this means that we must re-visit the earlier 'ethnomethodological' themes, then all I can say is: better late than never.

1. 'Macrosocial' Phenomena

Reflecting upon the results of their intellectual-historical investigation of the concept of 'society' itself in the classical traditions of sociology, Frisby and Sayer concluded that:

"To the question, then, 'Does sociology need to ground itself in a concept of society?' an empirical answer would have to be resoundingly in the negative. Sociology can apparently get by perfectly well without society. Indeed a more than plausible case can be made for saying that sociological knowledge has progressed to the extent that the discipline has at last liberated itself from fruitless speculation on society as such – however conceived – and turned its attention to the empirical study of real instances of human sociation." (Frisby/Sayer 1986: 122, emphasis added).

While a good case may be made for this assessment of classical sociological work in relation to 'society' as its putatively central phenomenon of study, it is abundantly clear that many other 'macro-categories' enjoy a rich life in the research and theorising of contemporary sociologists, and many of these modern macro-level inquiries do not lend themselves generally to description as 'empirical studies of real instances of human sociation', in Frisby's and Sayer's terms. What are the putative 'macro-social' phenomena within modern sociological discourse? Any list of such phenomena would be bound to include at least the following: states, nations, governments, legal systems, health systems, corporations, firms, banks, universities, hospitals, armed forces, gangs, crowds, revolutions, social classes, and the like. Efforts to conceptualise modern (usually industrial) societies as holistic 'social systems' may have waned since Parsons (with the exception of some of the 'neo-functionalists' such as Luhmann and Alexander with their somewhat diverse emphases, and of the neo-Marxist tradition with its sustained treatment of capitalism as a 'system'), but there is still much study of the 'stratification system', for example, and analyses of bureaucracy, large-scale social organisations, the state, the military, the capitalist market (whether construed nationally – or internationally, especially after Mandel and Wallerstein, among others), etc., abound. The 'macro' level of inquiry is alive and well, and takes many forms.

One long-standing tradition of 'macro'-level analysis in sociology is the 'comparative-historical' approach, which traces its roots to the comparative institutional analyses of Max Weber. Often considered a classical proponent of 'methodological individualism', Weber's actual investigations show clearly that his central category of ('multicausal') analysis was not 'the individual' actor but the concept of the Träger, the bearer or 'carrier' of patterned action-orientations. In our re-analysis of the micro-macro linkage issue, we shall have occasion to return to this concept, albeit in a somewhat different sense than that employed by Weber. For him, as Kalberg has commented, 'carriers stand at the very center of his multicausality; he repeatedly calls attention to them". (Kalberg 1994: 58). Thus, in giving his account of the emergence of the distinctively 'formally rational' capitalist social organisation of the Northern European countries, Weber focussed upon the 'carriers' of the doctrines of ascetic Calvinist Protestantism: in discussing the persistence of Confucianism for two millennia in China, he stresses the role of the patronimial bureaucracy and the literati stratum, and in accounting for the persistence of Hinduism in India, he focusses upon the Brahmans as its carrier stratum. Rather than postulate mere 'material conditions' (in Marxist fashion) or disengaged 'ideational elements' as moving forces in history (after Hegel), Weber identifies the living, human embodiments of concrete action-orientations in specific groups of people, from named individuals (such as, inter alia, Franklin and Baxter in The Protestant Ethic thesis) to concretely identifiable, 'self-conscious' social 'strata' (such as political parties, churches, sects, states or voluntary enterprises comprising individuals too numerous – and frequently too distant in history – to identify enumeratively). Kalberg observes that in Weber's accounts:

"The doctrine of early Islam was deeply penetrated by the status ethic of its original carrier stratum: a knightly order of disciplined crusaders and conquerors. Christianity's belief system was shaped significantly in Antiquity by its original carriers: itinerant artisan journeymen, petty-bourgeois merchants, and, more generally, urban civic strata." (Ibid., p. 60).

For Weber, 'methodological individualism' meant eschewing the reification of 'structural entities' by referring whatever 'macro-categories' were being used to their actual bearers, even though these were not always nameable nor enumerable. Weber

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3 See Kalberg's discussion of these issues in „Social Carriers“, in ibid., pp. 58–62.
warned against the proclivity to reify structural concepts in sociology in the early passages of his magnum opus, _Economy and Society_. Discussing the categories of 'state', 'nation', 'corporation', 'family' and 'army corps', he wrote:

"These concepts of collective entities which are found both in common-sense and in juristic and other technical forms of thought, have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority. This is true not only of judges and officials, but of ordinary private individuals as well... Thus, for instance, one of the important aspects of the existence of a modern state, precisely as a complex of social interaction of individual persons, consists in the fact that the action of various individuals is oriented to the belief that it exists or should exist, thus that its acts and laws are valid in the legal sense." (Weber 1921/1978: 14).

A little further on, he remarks that:

"It is vital to be continually clear about this in order to avoid the 'reification' of these concepts. A 'state', for example, ceases to exist in a sociologically relevant sense whenever there is no longer a probability that certain kinds of meaningfully oriented action will take place." (ibid., p. 27).

We shall explore the ramifications of this point of view further, and take note of certain revisions to it which our analysis will be found to entail.

In another, although related, tradition of sociological inquiry, the 'micro' level, has long been characterised as the domain of the many modes of analysis of social (interpersonal) interaction, from the quantitative variety of 'social-psychological' studies to the (Chicago-inspired) ethnographic analyses of everyday interactions in diverse settings. Blumer's programmatic for what he called "symbolic interactionism" contained several attacks upon conventional macro-level modes of analysis, especially the practice of 'operationalisation' of ordinary 'macro'-concepts and the depiction of domains of social life as 'variables'.² For most symbolic interactionists, all 'macro' phenomena are either abstractions from, or actually consist in, patterns of social interaction between people.³ Some of the more 'radical' among them would argue that 'macro-categories' of analysis are essentially linked to Durkheimian or Marxist-inspired modes of structural investigation and theorising, and are occasionally claimed to be nothing more than 'reifications' (i.e., fallacious concretisations): no existential or ontological status is to be accorded to any of them, since all that exists sociologically is said to be social interaction in all of its forms. "Macro-social" phenomena are illegitimate objectifications of interactional processes from a strictly sociological point of view, no matter what their status is within the confines of everyday, common-sense reasoning. There is only the micro-level, they would assert.

Ethnomethodology has often been located at the 'micro' end of the spectrum, but this is, I shall argue at some length in this discussion, a misleading characterisation. Indeed, to the contrary, ethnomethodology's abiding interest in revealing the logic of peoples' practical conduct (including the logic of their everyday reasoning within and about their social environments) can be usefully elaborated so as to undermine the very initial generic dichotomy of 'macro' and 'micro' social phenomena here at issue. Indeed, much of the talk of "macro-social phenomena" as emergent from micro-interactional processes strikes me as misplaced, presupposing as it does the possibility of a discrete identification of different "levels", one level somehow emerging from the (lower?) level. This metaphorical construction raises more questions than it settles, and obscures an adequate characterisation of the various ways in which "macro" phenomena actually feature in our social world.

A major step in elucidating this issue is afforded by considering, first, the ways in which people routinely and unproblematically use the language of the macro level in the context of living their lives.

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² Blumer's famous essays on these issues were reproduced in his landmark collection (1969), but they are (regrettably) seldom addressed or discussed these days by modern macro-level analysts in sociology. A more recent, albeit related, conception of the micro-macro linkage, is that of Randall Collins, who argues that "macro" phenomena are "emergent" from the "micro-level" interactions between people. (Randall Collins 1981). I dispute this "emergence" thesis in the main text of this essay.

³ John Searle arrives at a very similar position (although he nowhere references the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism) in his recent book, (Searle 1995). On page 57, Searle writes: "What we think of as social objects, such as governments, money, and universities, are in fact just placeholders for patterns of activities. I hope it is clear that the whole operation of agentive functions and collective intentionality is a matter of ongoing activities and the creation of the possibility of more ongoing activities". We shall see further on that Searle's conception of such macrosocial phenomena as comprising merely 'placeholders' for patterns of activities misrepresents the logic of the linkage(s) between human practices and such macro-level phenomena.
as practical, social agents. It is above all immediately apparent to any user of the ordinary language that instances of so-called 'macro' phenomena exhibit significant differences in how their properties could be conceptualised and in what their 'existence' actually amounts to. Almost all of the macro-categories used by sociologists are ordinary-language concepts: such concepts as 'army', 'bank', 'state', 'legal system', 'class', 'bureaucracy', etc. are not (or not in the first instance) technical concepts whose meanings intendedly depart from their vernacular usage. Consequently, inspecting the rules of use of these categories will illuminate the logic of their conceptualisation. This is emphatically not an effort to avoid the ontological issues in favor of 'linguistic' ones: rather, it will be argued, the analysis of members' vernacular ways of conceptualising 'macro'-social phenomena will be instructive for us in dissolving ontological misconceptions often entertained by theorists (within both 'micro' and 'macro' sociology) and in obtaining a clearer view of the issues which divide them and of how they may be handled.

2. The 'Observability' of Macro-Phenomena

Because many of our macrosocial concepts designate institutions which are linked to geographical/architectural structures (e.g., cities, banks, universities, hospitals, police departments, etc.), an ambiguity can readily arise concerning the ways in which such macrosocial phenomena are actually observable within the world of everyday life. There is, of course, one sense in which one may "see" a city (e.g., by flying over it) or a college, bank or hospital (by walking around or through its grounds and inspecting its building(s)), but, sociologically speaking, the social institutions of cities or colleges, companies or consulates (etc.) are clearly not observable in this way. The tendency has been to envisage macrosocial phenomena linked to identifiable material structures as "contained" by or within such material structures. But, once this move is made, puzzles arise: in what sense is the

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6 One of the most succinct articulations of the theoretical consequences of this standpoint is to be found in the paper by Egon Bittner (1965: 239–55). Here, Bittner tracks down some of the implications of treating concepts such as "organization" and "bureaucracy" as components of members' everyday, practical resources for making sense of various events and for undertaking courses of practical action within which such concepts have their places.
instantiates that of the relevant macro-phenomenon. When Mayor Tom Menino and his financial advisers announce that: „the City of Boston is determined to lower property taxes“, and then these same personnel fix the rates and have them officially approved by the relevant ratifying body, this is the City of Boston lowering property taxes. The examples can be ramified. Under specific ranges of circumstances, when certain persons do and/or say specific sorts of things according to specific rules (rules constituting also under what identification auspices their conduct is to be construed – e.g., „Mayor“, „President“, „Pope“, etc.), then these cases instantiate the conduct of macro-phenomena. They bring these phenomena to life, they realise them, in occasional ways, such that they (again, recurrently) enter into our lives as part of our structures of relevant orientation. Perhaps these are examples of the kind of roles which Weber would have assigned to his Träger in his comparative institutional analyses.

Note, however, that in the case of many macrosocial phenomena, such Träger are either unavailable or only contestably available as such. (Many of the critics of Weber’s own ‘Protestant Ethnic thesis’ accused him of selectively and, thus, contentiously identifying Calvinism’s Träger). For example, whose deeds constitute the „proletariat’s“ doing something, or the „bourgeoisie’s“ having decided to X or to do Y are matters of quite extensive contention, largely because for these macro-concepts there are no formal Träger, and no ‘formal’ spokespeople or representatives. Marx’s famous distinction between a „Klasse-an-sich“ and a „Klasse-für-sich“ appears exactly to exhibit a sensitivity to this issue, where, for Marx, the transition from the former to the latter is largely a matter of the emergence of collective „self-consciousness“ (and, for Lenin, in the case of the ‘proletariat’, the rise of the „vanguard Party“). Of course, many groups, collectivities and institutions in contemporary societies comprise self-membership organisations (from the „Hell’s Angels“ to the „SPD“, from the „Chrysler Motor Corporation“ to „Oxford University“, and from the „British Medical Association“ to the „Church of Scientology“), with more or less circumscribed but broadly known and subscribed-to rules, credentials, role-allocations, and the rest of the familiar apparatus of „self-conscious“ collectivities. Other kinds of collectivities and institutions are non-self-membership, in the sense that membership itself is not such as to require or presuppose any actual self-conscious „self-organisation“ such as characterises the various self-membership collectivities. These latter would include „genders“, „ethnic groups“, „social classes“, „nations“ (excluding the phenomenon of „naturalisation“7), „religions“ (excluding the phenomena of „baptism“ or „conversion“8), and so on. In Jayus’s terms, we confront quite diverse „social organisations of categorial incumbency“ (Jayus 1984: Ch. 2) among these different collectivities. How do these distinctions relate to our general theme of the „praxiologically“ instantiation of „macro-social“ phenomena?

In order to address this question, we shall have to introduce some aspects of Harvey Sacks’s logical analysis of „membership categorisation practices“.9 This will comprise my major theme in this argument.

Sacks observed that any person is a possible incumbent of an indefinitely large array of equally but alternatively correct identification categories. Thus, a given ‘adult male’ can be correctly identified – although differentially for diverse purposes and in different contexts – as, alternatively, „a lawyer“, „a taxpayer“, „a Protestant“, „a liberal“, „an American“, „a ‘black’ [Afro-American]“, „a veteran“, „a bookworm“, „a father“, „a son“, „a socialite“, „a member of the ‘middle class’“, „a customer“, „a divorcee“ and so on. Among the many categories of personal identification are the „collectivity categories“ which may, also differentially, be ascribed to (and on occasion avowed by) people. E.g., „he’s French“, „she’s a Rotarian“, „they are Moslems“, „we are members of the faculty“, etc. Sacks drew a crucial distinction, then, between „correct categorisation“ of a person and „relevantly correct categorisation“ of a person (or persons), arguing that the satisfaction of criteria of correctness could not suffice to account for any actual case of membership categorisation. This is because, for example, as I write this paper, whilst it is in some sense „formally correct“ to classify me as „a father“ (I do indeed have a biologically related

7 It is worth taking note of the form of the word „naturalisation“: it is as if the natural state of a nation-state citizen were one of a person being born into such a role, with immigrants who are legally permitted to join such a „nationhood“ (and its role of „national citizen“) being somehow rendered „natural“ by the requisite legal and ceremonial procedures.

8 One can, after all, simply be „brought up as a Catholic (etc.)“.

daughter), that could not serve as the operationally relevant identification of me for this setting and for this activity. For this setting and for this activity, I am relevantly classifiable as, inter alia, and minimally, „an academic“, perhaps „a professor“, „an intellectual“ or „a sociologist“. It is qua „sociologist“ etc., but not qua „father“, that I am engaged right now in carrying out this intellectual activity. (Indeed, at least in Anglo-American culture, were you to report that you witnessed a „father“ produce a piece of written discourse, it would most naturally be heard to be a report on some kind of religiously-relevant literature).

Having sketched the bare essentials of (some of) Sacks’s arguments, let us see to what extent they can be brought to bear upon the issue before us: the „praxiological resolution of the micro-macro issue“

First of all, as we noted earlier, it would only be a gratuitous insistence upon the „fallacy of large numbers“ that might prohibit someone from agreeing that when Karol Woytyla „asserts Papal doctrine“ it is the Catholic Church’s position that is enunciated. (No poll of the 600-million-odd practising Catholics is at issue here). Provided that his papal incumbency has been legitimately brought about, this relation holds for that sort of activity on his part. Note, of course, the normative element at work here. Some people do and say things expecting to instantiate whole organizations or even whole „peoples“ where their widespread recognised illegitimacy either renders the claim ambiguous or downright absurd. Recall how long it took for Presidents Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat to become widely acknowledged (and not without some prevailent and continuing dissent) as the „legitimate leaders“ of the defined populations of the black South Africans and Palestinian Arabs respectively. There will, clearly, be contestable and borderline cases, cases fraught with struggle, political, religious, professional, and ethical, in respect of their actual or potential ratifiability. However, none of this gainsays the central point being advanced here: indeed, such instances merely reinforce its cogency. Collectivities have their life in and through their praxiological instantiations, and especially through the occasions which make relevant the instantiating membership categories. Thus, it really isn’t „Jane Doe“ calling „Jeff Coulter“ when it is „Bay Bank“ calling me, just as it really isn’t „Karol Woytyla“ qua private citizen who instantiates Catholicism on those occasions when the enunciations are formally produced. Jane Doe, and Karol Woytyla, may say and do a host of things in their lives, but only on occasions bounded by specific sorts of rules do their sayings/doings make relevant those categories such as to instantiate the action of a collectivity. Armies can plan coups d’état, companies can fix prices, governments can declare wars, and so forth, only insofar as the practices and praxis-relevant identities of persons, sometimes few and occasionally many, are recognisably invocable.

3. The „Occasional Relevance“ of the Macrosocial Order

Much of the foregoing will be anathema to theorists who subscribe to „structuralist“ conceptions of the macrosocial order, or to modes of sociological model-building we could call „externalist“. After all, the argument appears to posit nothing at all „behind“ or „over and above“ the properties of situated practices and the praxis-relevant identifications of their agents. Surely, it may be objected, macro-level phenomena „exist“ even when no single member is engaged in any kind of macro-instantiating conduct of the kind discussed here?

Isn’t this merely an „immanentist“ argument?

Suppose that no soldier in a given army engages for an entire day in, e.g., „saluting“, „drilling“, „weapons cleaning“, „combat manoeuvres“, even „combat“ itself, and so on, throughout the entire array of action predicates logically related to the category of „army“. Would this entail the disappearance or „dissolution“ of the „army“ itself?

This seems to be an absurd consequence. However, we may approach a resolution of this issue in the following way.

Consider the case of the „soldier“ who enters a store and becomes, for the purpose of a transaction, a „customer“. Does this mean that he is no longer a „soldier“? Or consider the case of the „soldier“ who is off-duty and is having a domestic quarrel about his family’s finances with his wife. Isn’t this „husband“ who is doing the quarelling also, and simultaneously, still a „soldier“ (i.e., an incumbent of a „macro-level“ category – the armed forces, the army, etc.)? Our intuitions are perhaps ambiguous on this issue. What may contribute to confusion is the fact that „soldiers“ (unlike „husbands“ and „customers“) are typically uniformed when behaving under such category-auspices, and thus they are incumbents of a restricted class of „membership categories“: those which are routinely „emblematically assignable“, or „perceptually recordable“ at a glance, so to speak. (Policemen, nuns, hospital physicians, traf-
fic wardens, firemen, etc., would be other instances). Feminists likewise speak of the „omnirelevance“ of gender categories, and some others make this claim for (certain) „racial“ or „ethnic“ categories.

The perceptual assignability of categories, however, does not entail their operational relevance. Unless the perceptually assignable membership category is somehow made or rendered operational in and through specific courses of action/activities, then claims for its relevance are either false or, at best, undecidable. Some psychological theorists are adamant that everything we do is a function of some assignable „personality type“, but similar arguments apply here as well.10

Where does this leave us in respect of the question: „is a soldier still a soldier when he is (e.g.) a ‘customer’ or a ‘husband‘, and, if so, then in what does this identity consist?“ This is a tricky issue, but I think that it can be resolved. ‘Being’ a soldier is a matter of being able legitimately and relevance to claim such a status, as well as a matter of others’ being able legitimately and relevantly to invoke it in ascriptive practices. In the first-person, it is an issue of a legitimate capacity which is exhibitible independently from the many other manifestations we could call „soldiering“. In the sense in which a legitimate capacity can be said to „exist“ independently from any local praxiological exhibition of it, then, in that specific sense, of course, one can „be“ a soldier when off-duty, not „soldiering“, and so on. And, similarly, „armies“ can be said still to „exist“ when no soldier at all is engaged in manifesting army-membership or army-relevant practices. Note, however, that being stripped of, or abandoning, the capacity of legitimate claim, if instantiated en masse, so to speak, does dissolve – render non-existent – the „army“ and all of its „soldiers“ (as when an army completely „de-mobilises“, or is forcibly dissolved, after a war). Such a collectivity has its „existence“ in these ways. And so do many others, although not all of them.

The central issue before us, then, is this: in what social circumstances can a (lay or professional) observer/reporter, who respects the logic of social situations, invoke collectivity-categories in assigning some such to an agent of an activity? It is to this issue that I shall now direct my attention.

4. ‘Category-Boundedness’ as a Constraint upon the ‘Relevance’ of the ‘Macro-Level’

In elaborating upon his analysis of the logic of the identification of persons in everyday life, Sacks (in Turner 1974) noted that any universe of human activities or practices may be partitioned into those which are „categorically-bound“ to some specific (or restricted set of) membership categories, and those which are not (i.e., those which are „categorically open“ in the sense that no relevant identity is entailed by the performance of the practice). Thus, for example, we can ascertain the category-bound status of an activity or practice by noting how straightforward it is to make an inference from the characterisation of an activity to a characterisation of the relevant identity of its „doer“. The simplest pronoun substitution test will suffice. Consider the following as serious and literal locutions produced in social-communicative relations: „He sentenced him to ten years’ imprisonment“, „She diagnosed lymphoma“, „He arrested them for disturbing the peace“, „She fired him on the spot“. In these cases, one can right away discern the relevant membership categories which apply to the persons represented purely pronominally in the examples: viz., „judge“, „physician“, „cop“, „employer“, or their cognates, respectively. Contrast such cases to the following: „He committed suicide“, „She interrupted them“ and „He complained about the heat“. No specific identification categories can be inferred in these instances (the pronominal exhibition of gender aside). „Committing suicide“, „interrupting“ and „complaining“ are categorically open activities. Of course, there are some cases which resist such a clean-cut partitioning, such as, e.g., „saluting“ or „teaching“, where in many cases the conventional ties between saluting and being a military person and between teaching and being a teacher do not constitute ties of strict categorial boundedness, since non-military personnel can salute others (and in various ways) and parents can teach their kids without eo ipso being ‘teachers’, etc. These complications aside, it is reasonably clear that many practices are quite simply institutional practices, presupposing and/or instantiating the operations of macrosocial phenomena, whilst others (most others, in fact) are not. I refer to this as the phenomenon of the „occasional relevance“ of the macrosocial level to our everyday lives, and offer it as a sharp contrast to perspectives and modes of theorising which insist upon the omnirelevance of

10 For a fuller discussion of this matter, see my „Praxis and Personality“ in Coulter (1989: Ch. 5).
a macro-sociological 'contextualisation' for everything we do.

Newspaper reportage\(^{11}\) is replete with efforts to contrive linkages between macrosocial identities and categorially open practices. „Ex-Green Beret goes on rampage“, „Black youths loot local video store“, „Government official caught with prostitute“, and so on, exemplify this form of contrived linkage, where the 'relevance' of the selected categorical identifications is clearly not derivable from criteria of correct identification alone, and is certainly not an invocation of a relationship of „category-boundedness“. In referring to such linkages as „contrived“, I do not mean to suggest that no relevance whatsoever can be attached to the categories selected to identify the producers of the activities in question. As an account unfolds, efforts may be made (and often enough successfully) to argue for, demonstrate or portray the possible relevance of the selected categories (as when, e.g., it is revealed that the identification of the 'John' in the 'prostitution' example as a „Government official“ has been made simply on the grounds that he is a „public figure“, or, more strongly perhaps, on the grounds that the prostitute he has been caught with has connections to a foreign intelligence service, etc.). On the other hand, however, the possibilities for „gratuitous“ linkages remain wide open: for example, the youths who looted the store were indeed 'black', but they were also, inter alia, 'unemployed', 'homeless' and 'hungry'. These are, exactly, issues within practical sociological reasoning.

In the space allotted to me, I cannot aspire to do justice to the full complexity of the issues which are enjoined when a fresh perspective is adopted for construing the micro-macro linkage issue in the social sciences. I shall, therefore, conclude this essay with some brief, but hopefully suggestive, points, which I believe should be borne in mind when this issue arises in our intellectual work as sociologists and behavioral scientists.

5. Concluding Remarks

Max Weber's „methodological individualism“ and Herbert Blumer's „symbolic interactionism“ both advocated de-reifying solutions to the problem of conceptualising „macrosocial“ phenomena, but neither adequately appreciated the complexity of the grammars of our macrosocial concepts. In particular, and notwithstanding their occasional programmatic declarations, neither furnished clear solutions to the problem of the relationship between everyday human conduct and the macrosocial order, because neither addressed the fundamental problem of the relevance of such concepts/phenomena to the organisation of our everyday activities and our practical reasoning about such activities. In particular, an adequate appreciation of the role of the „macro-order“ in our everyday lives reveals that such phenomena are variously instantiated in what we say and do and also that our conduct is by no means omnirelevantly linked to „macro-level“ considerations.

What needs to be addressed in this regard at a later point is the nature and role of „economic“ phenomena, a topic I cannot address in this schematic discussion. However, a first move in the right direction here is, I believe, a rejection of the notion that „the economy“ is a „system“ of interdeterministic „parts“ which works according to principles that can be discerned in complete („exogenous“) independence of our everyday (economic) practices of monetary reckoning, 'embedded' decision-making and sundry other contingencies so systematically neglected in economic models of our economic behavior.\(^{12}\) Developing this argument, however, is something I cannot pursue adequately here.

References


\(^{11}\) For a fascinating discussion of the utility of such reportage to illuminate many properties of membership categorization practices in everyday life, see Peter Eglin & Stephen Hester (1992: 243–68).

\(^{12}\) A very first step in this direction has been taken by Mark Granovetter (1985: 481–510). However, Granovetter's treatment exhibits an inadequate appreciation of the ways in which „social structures“ should be construed as real-worldy phenomena of practical action. One study which seeks to demonstrate how, in real-worldy activity and interaction, „prices“ are set, for example, is W. Sharrock, J.A. Hughes & R.J. Anderson (1989).


