

A simple but clear discussion of structure and agency.

## Everyday Sociology Blog

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### Dichotomous Thinking: Structure and Agency, Nature and Nurture

She never really defines "institution". We will do that elsewhere.upuu



By Sally Raskoff

There are many basic sociological concepts that we all use to help us explain the dynamics of humans in groups.

Social structure is a core sociological concept that explains how societies (and other entities) take shape and maintain a particular form. Social institutions are part of that structure—institutions like education, politics, families, media, and religion all maintain and challenge societal norms. Those norms (guidelines for expected behaviors) exist to create social order – which is also a primary function of those institutions. Take all those institutions and their impact on norms, add in the actual physical structures in which they exist, and you have many different levels of societal structures that maintain that society.



Families produce and socialize children who are further socialized within religious and educational organizations. Those religious and educational organizations tend to reinforce the societal practices that support the power structure in that society. The media reflects the power dynamics in society and typically reinforces the accepted practices.



While the media (and other institutions) may also challenge the status quo, it's often co-opted by it. Notice how the Internet can be used to share any information across space and time yet as time passes, it has become more commercialized and its uses have been circumscribed and diminished – and more regulated.

We spend a lot of time in sociology classes talking about how societal structures limit opportunities and life chances for people in disadvantaged positions. We also discuss the societal dysfunctions that occur when the larger structures (institutions) of society don't work as they should, thus signaling an imbalance that needs correction.

Structures may also propel people to behave in ways that are outside the society's dominant norms. When a large number of people face barriers, they often create new structures that can help them navigate through or around those barriers. The Underground Railroad that facilitated escape from slavery created networks and communication techniques in the form of quilts (which provided coded directions to freedom) that operated below the surface of the dominant society.

Agency is the flip side of the structure coin. Individuals do have the freedom to act on our own choices. Commonly referred to as free will, it is true that people can make a decision to do something or they may just do it no matter what societal norms had been guiding them. No matter how many norms may exist in a society, people often behave in ways that deviate from those norms. Even when norms are written into the legal code, people break laws. Whatever barriers society may place in the path of people to reinforce the social class or caste system, some people may either break through those systems or operate completely outside them.



People are not robots programmed to perform certain functions, no matter what science fiction says about it. (Donna Haraway has written some fascinating work about cyborgs if you'd like some dense and abstract feminist/post-modern theory to read.) () Even if we do move toward more bionic implants than we could have imagined, whether or not they can control our behavior to be entirely predictable will remain to be seen.

Sociology exists because people in groups create patterns that we can analyze scientifically. There is much variation in those patterns because of the diversity of factors and that thing called agency. Yes, people in groups create patterns (as do individuals) even as there is tremendous complexity and difference within those patterns. Both structure and agency are at work in all of the data we analyze.

The terms *nature* and *nurture* are often bandied about. Are these the same as structure and agency or are they parallel yet different issues? *Nature* implies that certain features or dynamics are innate or inevitably present while *nurture* links to the impact of treatment and social interaction in creating various features or dynamics. Nature seems a lot like structure as it exists as a given and seems impervious to change.

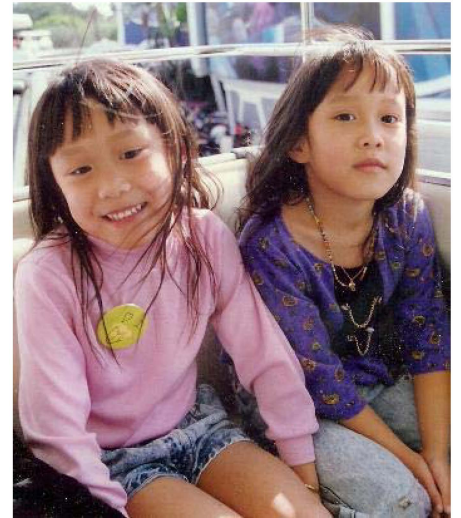
Nurture seems more like agency since it suggests that people have some 'say in how they affect and are affected by others.

In their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann discuss how people create societies and then consider them as existing outside themselves and hence beyond their control. But social structure doesn't just emerge from nowhere, it is built and maintained by the people in that society who conveniently forget or ignore that they created it. In this sense, *nature* could just be a term we use for phenomenon that seems given and unchangeable.

From scientific studies, we also know that our culture has a distinct fondness for dichotomous thinking. Moving between two extremes, our thoughts and discussions oscillate between right and wrong, good and bad, rich and poor, black and white, men and women. While being able to consider two things at a time may be a limitation of the human brain, a simplifying strategy, or a practice that society advocates to reinforce the amnesia that we create our society's structures, the world is so much more complex than two opposing categories.

Use your sociology education as an opportunity to explore these issues, to peel the onion of society. As you consider the issues behind societal features we take for granted using sociological perspectives, your critical thinking skills will deepen and you will understand much more about how society really works.

Posted by W. W. Norton on October 22, 2009 in [Sally Raskoff](#), [Theory](#)



"Nurture" sounds more like "agency" than does "Nature" (since it involves more human engagement than just genetic material or environment, but nurture, too, can be a strong form of external structure (at least from the child's perspective).