In Practice

Conceptuality for Reality

Languaging Ourselves into a New Way of Being

Purpose

The materials below are meant to support your understanding and use of three concepts--figuration, habitus, and socio-environmental—which are useful alternatives to conventional but inadequate terms for thinking and communicating about the dynamic and relational nature of ourselves, others, and the world

1. Draw It

Before introducing these alternative concepts, it's good to get a sense of how people currently understand and picture certain fundamental relationships. In any number of forms (e.g., pre-test, in-class activity, journal entry), this exercise asks students to create a simple sketch of how they envision the relationship between humans and the environment (I use this in Intro to Socio-Environmental Studies) and between themselves as individuals and society (in other classes).

Their pictures tend to take a few common forms, variations on a theme where "society" (or aspects of it) or "environment" are depicted as discrete entities, external to and separate from individuals and people, and sometimes connected with lines or arrows.

Admittedly, this is a challenging task! That's ok. I make it clear that there's no right answer they're supposed to get. The beauty of this exercise is that it gives us something real and personal to refer to throughout the course as we discuss dominant paradigms, the influence of mental models, and the power of concepts. It also provides a baseline against which they (and I) can compare the development of their ideas.

2. Definitions and Notes

Figuration: dynamic pattern of bonds formed out of human interdependencies *and* the process of that patterning

Figurations can range in size, from very small to very large. They furnish the dynamic structure of social conditions within which social learning occurs and individuals develop particular kinds of habitus.

Habitus: a group(s)-specific system of schemas shared by people developing within similar figurational and other conditions; "second nature" acquired through social learning

The capacity of habitus for generating products (i.e., thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions) is infinite and at the same time limited by the historically situated figurational and other conditions within which it develops.

Socio-environmental _____:

Impacts: effects of human activities which can be traced back to their origins in the collective expression of particular habitus qualities and figurational conditions

Studies: an interdisciplinary field of study concerned with the mutually conditioning relationship between people and social systems and their biophysical conditions, and especially with the impacts of human activities on certain biophysical conditions and, largely through those, on people and social systems

3. Further Insights: Excerpts from *Beyond the Knowledge Crisis*

On Figuration:

"With core sociological premises grounded in biophysical reality, it's easy to see functional interdependence as a natural aspect of multiperspectival human relationships. As such, it becomes clear that our fundamental connectedness with others is not something we can choose or forego. As social organisms, we are by nature inclined, able, and required to connect with other individuals and groups.

…the focus on particular types of interdependence that the concept of figuration suggests provides a basis for more empirical and actionable sociological inquiry. Being biologically other-directed in ways that serve the three categories of functions [survival and development, sexual and reproductive functions, emotional needs] people's bonds of interdependence form overall patterns. Though not directly visible, these linkages and the patterns they form are no less real or observable.

The smaller the numbers of people involved, the more directly can figurations be seen; the more numerous, long, and dense the links and chains connecting people to one another, the more indirectly they must be investigated. It would be fairly straightforward, for example, to map figurational patterns within smaller survival units, like the foraging societies that populated most of human history (and with neighboring tribes, bands, or clans too). Here, one person's web of relationships likely includes everyone in the unit, though the exact configuration of a person's valencies will differ from that of others. Larger patterns of interdependence, in villages, cities, or modern nation-states can also be detected, but mostly indirectly through indicators representing those at higher levels of synthesis. Four such qualities are discussed below" [degree of functional differentiation, degree of integration, power ratios, rates of change in these] (pp. 144-145).

On Habitus:

"Contrary to outmoded ideas about the self as complete, closed, and standing in opposition to society, available evidence allows us now to understand the individual self as inherently social. And because the conditions that make up a self are arising and re-arising each moment in ways that allow for continuity *and* freshness, we naturally exhibit qualities of stability *and* change. A person is socially conditioned and at the same time unique, a coherent whole and an unfolding process. To one habituated to either/or thinking, these statements may seem paradoxical, but with a view capable of seeing wholes simultaneously as parts within complex systems, there is no such problem.

With language biased toward dualism, however, this view can be difficult to sustain. To do so, we need a concept capable of expressing the natural simultaneity of one's individuality and sociality, a term which reflects the understanding that one's character, however unique, is necessarily "a network product formed in a continuous interplay of relationships to other people" (Elias 1991:26). We need a way to communicate that the individual form of a person is a society-specific form. Happily, we already have such a concept in *habitus*" (p. 167).

"Some of the activities habitus orients are more easily observable than others. One can see, for instance, characteristics of clothing, speech, bodily comportment, and other outwardly visible manifestations of a particular kind of second nature fairly directly, whereas activities of perception, thought, and judgment require some additional steps to detect. Overall, though, it is through its expression that habitus is empirically observable. At the same time, we cannot understand it without attending to the conditions which set the limits and opportunities of its formation. In contrast with conventional social science models, which seek to establish correlations between particular "internal" and "external" variables, the concept of habitus and the proposed framework naturally direct our attention to the biophysical and social circumstances underlying, conditioning, and orienting people's activities in particular ways" (p. 172).

On Socio-environmental impacts:

"…a more realistic view—encompassing the relationships between physical, biological, and social phenomena in a way that precludes the otherwise constant need to re-unite them—supports an upgraded understanding of our socio-environmental impacts. With this, we are better equipped to determine effective ways to lessen our negative impacts on other people and the world and to explore the rarely asked, but perhaps more important, question: What kinds of impacts do we want to have" (p. 181)?

"As far as we can tell, *Homo sapiens* is the only species capable of that kind of knowing and of exercising self-reflexive awareness of the transformative impacts of our activities and their long-term consequences for other beings. Alas, even as mounting scientific evidence adds ever greater detail to our understanding of those impacts, conventional thought patterns keep us ill-equipped to take the kinds of actions the situation calls for. Within the socio-environmental synthesis framework, however, we can recognize and correct key errors in our thinking in support of the ultimate goal of altering the socio-environmental impacts of human activities in the ways deemed necessary at this crucial juncture in human history" (p. 186).