

Sociology Shortcuts

C2. Structure and Action

One of the initial debates students come across at the start of a course is that of the relationship between **structure** and **action** – one frequently distilled into the relationship between:

- the **individual**: we are all uniquely different individuals who make conscious choices about our behaviour
- and **society**: we form large, highly complex, social groups and live our individual lives in regular and broadly predictable ways (through families, education, work and so forth).

Social Structure

It sometimes helps to visualise a social structure as a **framework of rules** - a rule being something you're supposed to obey and a framework being the way such rules are created, maintained and policed.

Think about how **everyday behaviour** is governed by **laws**, a *legal structure* involving:

- government making laws (formal, legal rules)
- a police force enforcing them
- a judicial system deciding whether or not the law has been broken
- prisons in which to lock-up those found guilty.

The idea of a *legal structure* helps us visualise social structures in a couple of ways:

1. Even though you may never break the law, it doesn't mean your behaviour is not *influenced* by the existence of legal rules; you may, for example, *consciously* choose not to break the law because you understand the possible consequences. Your awareness of the rule, therefore, influences your **actions**.

2. While a "legal rule" has **no physical existence** we experience its power "*in the breach*": if we break the law we run the risk of arrest and imprisonment.



Social behaviour is not simply a matter of formal, legal, rules. There are, for example, a variety of ways behaviour is influenced by *informal rules* or **norms**.

Every relationship we enter (such as with family, school, work and friends) involves playing a **role**, which in turn involves **values** and **norms** relating to the role; every time you play a role, therefore, you are experiencing, however unwittingly, the effect of **social structures** – behavioural *rules* that shape your **actions**.

When we talk about social structures the focus is generally on how our membership of very large groups - social **institutions** such as education, family, the legal system and so forth - impacts on our behaviour and an easy way to illustrate this is **Meighan's** (1981) concept of **haunting**.

He argues **social actions** are always surrounded by the **ghosts of social structures**. We are *haunted* by things we cannot see but which nevertheless affect our behaviour.

Meighan (1981)

The Ghosts of Educational Structures

When teachers and students enter a classroom the interaction between them is haunted by things like:

- **Physical environment:** Whether the room is warm and inviting or, alternatively, cold, dark and off-putting; whether the classroom resembles a prison cell or a bright, modern, learning lab – such things affect the teaching and learning process.
- **Knowledge being taught:** Classroom teaching reflects what our **culture** does and does not value. What and how you're taught and the ways you're allowed, as students, to demonstrate knowledge are all evidence of the impact of social structures.

Is *theoretical knowledge*, such as the ability to write essays about Shakespeare, more-valued than *practical knowledge*, such as the ability to build a brick wall?

- **Language of education:** The language we speak is structured in terms of both grammatical rules (mean what I know?) and in terms of how it can be used to communicate ideas.

At A-level, for example, you're expected to learn the **technical language** of the subjects (such as Sociology or Physics) you're studying if you want to pass exams. Speaking of which:

- **Demands of employers:** If *employers* require **qualifications**, *teachers* are haunted (in terms of what they teach, when they teach it and so forth) by **the ghost of examinations**. In our education system, for example, students have to be taught against a background of preparation for formal examinations: they have to learn the techniques involved, what constitutes knowledge acceptable to an examiner and so forth.

Social Action

The concept of *social action* focuses on our ability to make **choices** about how to behave, based on the fact we have **consciousness** - we are able to **act** in particular ways as well as **react** to the influence of structural forces and pressures.

Just as we make choices about such things as who will be our friends, so too, ultimately we make choices about the rules we obey or disobey - although there may be consequences, in the form of **negative social sanctions** or punishments, for choosing to disobey.

Weber (1922) made an important distinction between **behaviour** and **action**; behaviour becomes action when it is directed towards other people in such a way that it takes account of how others act. If this is a little unclear, think about the following ideas:

Weber argued the **animal world** was governed by **behaviour**, rather than action, because animal behaviour is not based on any understanding of how it might affect other animals.

The social world, however, is governed by **action**. Whenever we act, we do so in the knowledge of how our behaviour might impact on people at whom the action is directed. Whenever you have a conversation you're engaging in **social action** because you're **interacting** - how you behave is influenced by how the other person behaves and vice versa.

In this respect, social action involves a range of things, such as **meanings**, that simple behaviour excludes. Whatever we say or do means something to both ourselves and others - from the language we use to different people in different situations, to the clothes we wear and the work we do.

This isn't to say we always fully understand what our actions mean to others nor that our actions will mean the *same things* to others as they mean to us.

This follows because our behaviour is constantly open to **interpretation**, both by ourselves and others. Interpretations also **reflect back** on meaning: how I interpret your behaviour depends on what it means to me.

How people interact also involves a certain level of **negotiation**; we “discuss” (in the widest sense of the word) the meaning of our actions and how others *should* interpret them.

Social life and social interaction doesn't, therefore, simply involve obeying rules *without question* since the *meaning* of our behaviour to others can *change*, depending on the circumstances surrounding our behaviour. Your relationship with your teacher, for example, is different in the classroom to when you meet them on the street (unless, of course, you meet them on the street when you should be in someone's classroom...).

Social Structure and Social Action

We can use a simple **analogy** to clarify the relationship between structure and action by likening it to a game such as chess.

Chess has certain **physical boundaries** (the playing area). It also has **rules** governing how the game is played: these are both **technical** (relating to the basic mechanics of the game - the starting position of each playing piece, how different pieces are allowed to move, taking it in turn to move and so forth) and **cultural** (it's a competitive situation, with the objective being to beat your opponent). This represents the basic **structure** of the game - the *framework of rules* within which it is played.

However, each player is free to *choose* their own particular **strategies** and **moves**, based on their individual assessment of how to successfully play the game.

In chess, therefore, **structure and action** come together in the sense each player's behaviour (action) is limited, in some ways by rules. If one player decides to change or break the rules, their opponent will *react* to this **deviant** act (by refusing to continue playing, for example).

Regardless of how social structures try to influence our behaviour, we *always* have a choice about how to behave. However, although our choices are *potentially unlimited* - we are free to act in whatever way we choose - our actual behavioural choices are limited by the effects of social structures – by the framework of rules that characterise our relationships, our **culture** and our society.

Ideas about structure and action are fundamental to sociologists because they reflect two important ideas about social behaviour:

1. **Diversity**: People are free to make **choices** about their behaviour and this results in **cultural diversity** over how they organise their society and relationships. **Different cultures** may view the *same behaviour* - from sexuality to work and family life - very differently.

2. **Culture**: On the other hand, behavioural choices are influenced by both the society / culture into which we are born and our relationship to other people (whether as family, friends and work colleagues or simply on the basis of our awareness of sharing things – like a common **nationality** – with others in our society).

A key idea to understand, therefore, is that structure and action - although separated for theoretical purposes - are fundamentally connected: in order to engage in *social action* there must exist some sort of *framework* (or *structure*) within which that action can take place.

The key question, however, is which is more sociologically significant?

Do individuals create societies in their own image (as **Action theorists** suggest)?

Or:

Do societies shape individuals (as **Structural theorists** suggest)?