

**Unresolved tensions in sociocultural theory:
Analogies with contemporary sociological debates**

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Abstract

Socioculturalists are divided on two of the foundational theoretical claims of the paradigm: a process ontology of the social world, and the inseparability of the individual and the group. A process ontology holds that only processes are real; entities, structures, or patterns are ephemeral and do not really exist. Inseparability is the claim that the individual and the social cannot be methodologically or ontologically distinguished. To clarify the different stances toward these claims held by socioculturalists, I draw on the contemporary sociological debate between Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer. Giddens's structuration theory holds to a process ontology and to inseparability, while Archer's emergentist theory rejects both. I borrow the terms of this debate to clarify the tensions among several prominent socioculturalists, including Cole, Lave and Wenger, Rogoff, Shweder, Valsiner, and Wertsch. I argue that a strong form of inseparability is theoretically problematic and empirically untenable, and I conclude that socioculturalists can resolve these tensions by adopting an "analytic dualism" that retains key sociocultural commitments.

Key words: socioculturalism, sociological theory, structuration, emergence

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In this paper I closely examine two foundational theoretical assumptions of socioculturalism: a process ontology of the social world, and the inseparability of individual and social levels of analysis. A process ontology holds that only processes are real; entities, structures, or patterns are ephemeral and do not really exist. Inseparability is the claim that the individual and the social cannot be methodologically or ontologically distinguished. Socioculturalists argue that the individual learner cannot be meaningfully separated from the social and cultural context of learning, and they reject a traditional view of learning in which the learner is presumed to internalize knowledge presented from the external world. Rather than internalizing knowledge, the learner should be conceived of as appropriating or mastering patterns of participation in group activities. Learning involves a transformation of the social practices of the entire group, and thus cannot be reduced to an analysis of what any one participant in the group does or knows. Thus sociocultural method focuses on situated social practices, and denies that one can study individuals or social contexts separately.

To explore these two foundational assumptions, I draw on the contemporary sociological debate between Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer. Both have theorized the relation between the individual and the group in ways that are quite similar to various socioculturalists, but both of them view their theories to be opposed and incompatible. Thus the Giddens-Archer debate clarifies unresolved tensions surrounding these assumptions. I begin by presenting brief overviews of the relevant features of Giddens's and Archer's positions (this will necessarily be a brief summary, as each theorist has authored several dense books on these issues). Anthony Giddens's structuration model is founded on a process ontology and on inseparability. In rejecting both assumptions, Archer has criticized Giddens's model as "elisionist" for conflating the individual and the social, and has proposed an emergentist model which argues for

analytic dualism between individual action and social context. This sociological debate demonstrates the incompatibility between theories that argue for a process ontology and inseparability, and those that do not. After this summary, I examine the various stances toward a process ontology and toward inseparability held by several prominent socioculturalists, including Cole, Lave and Wenger, Rogoff, Shweder, Valsiner, and Wertsch, and I show that some hold to mutually incompatible theoretical positions. I identify several problems with inseparability claims, and I conclude with a section suggesting potential resolutions of these problems.

Two theoretical assumptions of socioculturalism

Sociocultural psychology is the most recent in a long history of attempts to study culture and psychology together (Cole, 1996). Within socioculturalism, I include cultural psychologists, Vygotskian educational theorists, and those studying situated action and cognition (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990; Suchman, 1987; Valsiner, 1998b; Wertsch, 1998). Rather than attempt to comprehensively summarize the school, in this section I focus on two foundational theoretical assumptions of socioculturalism: the emphasis on a process ontology and methodology, and the claim that the individual and the social are inseparable both in reality, or ontologically (distinct entities do not really exist) and in practice, or methodologically (the analyst cannot meaningfully distinguish between what is internal to the individual and what is external context).

Socioculturalists who accept inseparability reject two approaches to the study of human action associated with traditional psychology: (1) Methodological individualism, which among socioculturalists refers to the typical approach in experimental psychology of operationalizing variables and constructs associated with individual human subjects. In contrast, the objects of sociocultural study are events, activity, and practice, and they are considered to be irreducible to properties of individuals. (2) An ecological or “social influence” approach that conceives of the individual acting in, and influenced by, an

external context or environment. Such attempts to incorporate social context into psychology assume that the individual and the context can be analytically isolated and then the interaction between them studied. Inseparability is incompatible with conceptions of the relation between individual and sociocultural context which assume that the individual acts “in” a context, or that the individual is “influenced by” the context; such conceptions implicitly accept the possibility of methodological separability between individual and situation (cf. Rogoff, 1982, 1990, 1998). These theoretical assumptions lead to a distinctive methodology: a rejection of the individual subject as the unit of analysis in favor of an action or event unit of analysis. In practice this leads to close empirical study of symbolic interaction in naturally-occurring microsocial situations using ethnographic and qualitative methods.

Sociocultural theory is based on the pragmatism of Dewey and Mead, and on various strands of 20th century Marxian social theory including the Soviet school of psychology today associated with Vygotsky. The pragmatists Dewey and Mead elaborated the process ontology of Whitehead and Bergson; they were also influenced by Cooley, who may have been the first to argue the inseparability claim that “ ‘Society’ and ‘individuals’ do not denote separable phenomena” (1902, pp. 1-2). Most contemporary practice theories in sociology are based on a Marxian framework (e.g., Giddens, 1979, p. 4). The theoretical connections of socioculturalism to both Marxian theory (through Vygotsky) and to pragmatism have been widely noted (e.g., Cole, 1995, p. 112). Thus, the parallels I identify in the following are not incidental, but are based in broad historical currents.¹

Structuration theory

The relationship between the individual and the group has always been the most fundamental issue in sociological theory. This relationship was a central element in the theorizing of the 19th century founders of sociology, including Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Marx. In recent years, this relationship has become known as the micro-

macro link (Alexander, Giesen, Münch, & Smelser, 1987; Huber, 1991; Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel 1981; Ritzer 2000). Sociological theory has traditionally been split between individualists, who argue that a social group is nothing more than individuals, and sociological realists, who argue that groups are just as real as individuals because both are abstract, analytic units rather than concrete entities. Individualists claim that the foundational element of the social world is the individual; social structures and group properties do not really exist, but are merely ways to summarize individual behavior in the aggregate. This is often taken to imply that social structures and group properties can be reductively explained in terms of individual properties. In contrast, sociological realists hold that the group can be analyzed and explained solely in terms of sociological processes and variables, without reference to properties of individuals.

Process ontologies reject the terms of this debate in arguing that only process is real. Entities and objects are not the fundamental categories of being; rather, process is fundamental, and entities are derivative of or based in process: “the ultimate atoms of social reality are events...they are the only elementary ontological objects” (Sztompka, 1994, p. 275). Abbott, following Mead, argues that “the world is a world of events” (Mead, 1932, p. 1), and argues that the fundamental entities of sociological inquiry are “events, instantaneous and unique” (Abbott, 1995, p. 863). Inseparability is implied by a process ontology; because only process exists, individual and group cannot be separate entities.

Arguments for a process ontology and for individual-society inseparability have been most thoroughly developed in Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory. Giddens’s focus on practices is a form of process ontology. Giddens argues that practice is the fundamental category of being: “The basic domain of study of the social sciences ...[is] social practices ordered across space and time” (1984, p. 2). Giddens notes the close connection to the inseparability thesis: “I regard social practices...as crucial mediating moments” between “the dualism of the individual and society” (1979, p. 4). One must

reject a focus on either society or the individual as entities, in favor of “the analysis of recurrent social practices” (Giddens, 1989, p. 252). In place of the individual-society dualism, Giddens proposes the duality of structure: “structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (1979, p. 5). Social structure exists only in the activities of human agents (1989, p. 256); inseparability implies not only that social structure cannot be analytically isolated, but also that properties of individual activity (reasons, intentions, mental states) cannot be analytically isolated (1979, pp. 40, 56). Thus Giddens rejects a methodological individualism that would reduce analysis of social systems to individual psychology (1979, pp. 94-95). As early as 1979, this theory had led Giddens to a sociocultural conception of development: “Socialization is never anything like a passive imprinting of ‘society’ upon each ‘individual’. From its very earliest experiences, the infant is an active partner in the double contingency of interaction....the socialization involved is not simply that of the child, but of the parents and others with whom the child is in contact” (1979, pp. 129-130).

Individual and group cannot be analytically separated because “the notions of action and structure presuppose one another” (1979, p. 53). Thus Giddens rejects the language of the micro-macro debate because it presupposes that the individual and the social are two distinct ontological realms that causally interact with each other. In a process ontology, the relation between individual and group “is distinct from that involved in the relation of ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ (1979, p. 71). Giddens rejects forms of sociology in which social structure is conceived of as an external constraint on individuals (1984, p. 16) because “structure exists...only in its instantiations in [reproduced social] practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (1984, p. 17). Enduring social patterns that sociologists have conceptualized as external structures—race, class, cultural institutions, power asymmetries—are instead conceived of as “deeply-layered practices constitutive of social systems” (1979, p. 65).

Giddens argues that inseparability entails a rejection of social causation and social laws (1984, pp. 172-179, 343-347). Consequently he rejects structuralism (1979, Chapter 1) and structural sociology (1979, pp. 59-65; 1984, Chapter 4), both theories that posit irreducibly collective entities that have lawful causal influences over individuals. Instead, Giddens describes actors that consciously choose among available options rather than being unknowingly forced to act by external structure. He prefers to speak of structure as “enabling” rather than constraining, and this focus leads to an emphasis on agents’ knowledgeability or practical consciousness.

The implications of Giddens’s inseparability claim have been widely criticized by sociological theorists (Archer, 1988, 1995; Craib, 1992; Layder, 1987; Smith & Turner, 1986, Thompson, 1989). Giddens takes a strong stance on inseparability in rejecting “dualism”; however, somewhat paradoxically he retains a notion of “duality.” Many critics have argued that Giddens’s notion of a “duality” that is not a “dualism” is not theoretically substantive (e.g., Layder, 1987, p. 31); if “duality” means there are two analytically separable elements, then why isn’t this a “dualism”? “Duality” is problematic because inseparability implies that structure and agency “cannot refer to separate processes or separate structures” (Layder, 1981, p. 75). Archer likewise notes that

If someone were to insist in the Elisionists’ defence that an amalgam still has two constituents, it nevertheless remains the case that for them we are compelled to see the two only in combination and constrained to regard this combination of being of a particular kind....issues surrounding the relative independence, causal influence and temporal precedence of the components have been eliminated (1995, pp. 93-94).

Archer observes that structuration analyzes the social world by “considerably flattening out the ontological depth of the social world by denying the existence of

emergent properties which pertain to a 'higher stratum' when they do not obtain at a 'lower' one" (1995, p. 94; also Craib, 1992, pp. 145-155).

Giddens's ontology of practice is similar to the socioculturalist's focus on situated or mediated action and events as irreducible units of analysis. Both individual and society exist only in instantiated practices, and these social practices are the ultimate constituents of social reality. People only become real by drawing upon structural properties in social practices; structure only becomes real when instantiated by human action. Because social practices are the central concern, we cannot examine "heterogeneous constituents of social life" but rather we are concerned with "one homogenous though Janus-faced entity," social practices (Archer, 1995, p. 104). Thus, "inseparability" precludes just that examination of the interplay between structure and agency upon which practical social theorizing depends" (p. 64). Archer claims that such a stance is empirically and theoretically untenable, and that such a view "is always an error in social theory" (p. 101). Similarly, Layder proposes that social theory retain a dualism of individual and social structure that "does not necessarily imply opposition or unrelatedness" (1987, p. 31); such a mutually constitutive dualism achieves the same theoretical goals at lesser cost than inseparability (p. 32; cf. Craib, 1992, p. 165).²

Contextual influences

Inseparability does not allow the sociologist to account for the constraining power of external social forces, for macrosociological patterns, for history, or for material conditions: "The ontology of praxis constantly comes up against an interface with another level of social reality whose features cannot be construed as practices themselves, their unacknowledged conditions or unintended consequences" (Archer, 1995, p. 116). These features "are properties emergent from social relations which constitute a distinct stratum of social reality" (p. 117). Archer notes that inseparability even requires a dismissal of material entities as potentially constraining; yet a famine exists and has social consequences regardless of anyone's instantiated practice (p. 98). Layder likewise argues

that Giddens “does not properly account for the collectivist or objectivist moments of social reality” (1987, p. 26).

In contrast, Archer proposes an emergentist form of social realism in which emergent properties at both the collective and the individual level are “distinct from each other and irreducible to one another....the different strata are separable by definition precisely because of the properties and powers which only belong to each of them and whose emergence from one another justifies their differentiation as strata” (1995, p. 14). Layder also emphasizes that power structures are historically emergent and thus not simply a property of agency (1985, pp. 134, 143). Theories of sociological emergence have a long history in sociology (Sawyer, in press), and both Archer and Giddens agree that such theories are incompatible with inseparability.

However, Giddens at times uses emergentist language; for example, he accepts a conception of structure as “structural properties” of human action, the same claim made by emergentists (1979, pp. 64-66; 1984, pp. 17, 19, 185-191), and he acknowledges that “a range of unintended consequences of action feed back to reconstitute the initiating circumstances” (1984, p. 27). He cites Schelling’s (1971) checkerboard simulation of neighborhood segregation (1984, pp. 10, 13), a classic example of an emergent phenomenon. Yet, inseparability denies that the analyst can identify emergent social properties (Archer, 1995, p. 133). In rejecting any role for structural explanation, Giddens proposes to explain emergent social properties solely in terms of individuals’ motivations: “no explanatory variables are needed other than those which explain why individuals are motivated to engage in regularized social practices across time and space, and what consequences ensue” (Giddens, 1984, p. 14); ultimately “all [structural] explanations will involve at least implicit reference ... to the purposive, reasoning behavior of agents” (p. 179).³

Inseparability allows structuration theorists to transcend individual-social dualism. However, what is lost are “any autonomous features which could pertain

independently to either 'structure' or 'agency'. Otherwise such features could be investigated separately....[and then] dualism would once more be the name of the game" (Archer, 1995, p. 97). Because of this inseparability, structure cannot be emergent or autonomous nor have any causal powers over individuals. Layder likewise argues that Giddens cannot account for the causal role of social structures in individual action because he rejects a conception of "constraint" as external to social action (1987, p. 39); however, "there is no such thing as social constraint unless it is constituted outside the realm of human agency" (p. 41).

The theory of the individual

Structuration prevents one from acknowledging that individuals have properties, and requires one to deny the possibility of individual psychology. The self can only be formed through social practices; yet, which practices form which people? Inseparability prevents one from answering this question. Separability allows different individuals to have different properties which influence the social practices they are drawn to and which they can participate in; yet, inseparability cannot accept this because it holds that all individual properties are socially mediated, and to analyze different properties of different individuals would imply separability between the individual and the social. "The success of the Elisionists' enterprise depends upon their being able to eliminate any reference to selfhood which is independent of social mediation, for otherwise a stratum of individual features (personal psychology) would have to be acknowledged and its interplay with social properties would then require examination" (Archer, 1995, p. 121). In structuration, there can be no individual experience that is not socially mediated; the self is purely sociological (Archer, 1995, pp. 122, 126). Thus structuration rejects that action is motivated by internal intentions; intentions and reasons for actions are not properties of individuals but are "instantiated in that activity" (Giddens, 1979, p. 40). In sum, structuration cannot explain specific instances of human behavior because

inseparability rejects explanations both in terms of internal motivation and in terms of structural influences.

Tensions in sociocultural theory

Socioculturalism is based on both a process ontology and the inseparability of the individual and the social. In the above section, I discussed the centrality of these claims to Giddens's structuration theory. I then summarized several of the criticisms of these two claims, focusing on those of Margaret Archer.

In this section, I discuss a range of sociocultural statements of these two foundational assumptions. Although almost all sociocultural theorists can be found making claims for inseparability and for a process ontology, these claims take many diverse forms. The debate between Giddens and Archer suggests that some of these claims are mutually incompatible, resulting in unresolved tensions.

Process ontology

Developmentalists in some sense are always interested in process, because they focus on change over time. Socioculturalism differentiates itself from this general developmental orientation by making a stronger ontological claim: process is not only a guiding orientation, but is the fundamental nature of reality. This results in one of the unifying features of the paradigm: The unit of analysis is situated social practice, rather than the bounded individual as in traditional psychology (Hatano and Wertsch, 2001, p. 79). I begin by summarizing the strongest and most explicit statements of process ontology, and gradually move toward more nuanced and weaker statements.

Hutchins makes one of the most explicit statements of the process ontology underlying socioculturalism: "Culture is not any collection of things, whether tangible or abstract. Rather, it is a process....and the 'things' that appear on list-like definitions of culture are residua of the process" (1995, p. 354). Learning is conceived as a property of the group, not the individual participant, and this distributed cognition perspective was a central feature of Hutchins's 1995 study of ship navigation teams. However, Hutchins

finds it difficult to maintain this stance consistently; he also makes entity-implying statements like “humans are processors of symbolic structures” (p. 369) and “symbols are in the world first, and only later in the head” (p. 370), suggesting that individuals, symbols, and symbolic structures exist as entities in some sense.

Lave and Wenger (1991) also make strong collectivist claims for learning in their “social practice theory of learning” (p. 35). Learning is the process of reproduction of the social structure, as embodied in the participatory practices of the community (pp. 54-58). Lave and Wenger acknowledge debts to Giddens, Bauman, and Bourdieu, all practice theorists in the Marxist tradition (pp. 50-54).⁴ They claim that a focus on practice “suggests a very explicit focus on the person” (p. 52); this claim is in tension with their collectivist claims, because when focusing on the person, structural, institutional, and cultural factors are often neglected.⁵

Like Hutchins, Lave and Wenger demonstrate that a process ontology is difficult to maintain consistently in empirical practice. They discuss individuals as if they are analyzable entities, observing that “legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs” and that “apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community” (1991, p. 95). They define a person as “a member of a community of practice,” implying a stratified ontology of entities with individuals being members of larger entities called communities (p. 122). Such statements are inconsistent with a process ontology, in which there can be no such entities and no relation of membership (cf. Giddens, 1979, p. 71).

Other socioculturalists advocate an empirical focus on situated practice but without making strong claims for a process ontology. For example, Wertsch advocates a focus on mediated action; all action involves an individual in a social situation using cultural tools. Although Wertsch is not explicit on this point, he implies that individual agency cannot be analytically separated from the mediational means that individuals use in practice: “agency cannot be reduced further than that of ‘individual(s)-operating-with-

mediational-means' ” (1993, p. 170). Yet, his own discussions of “mastery” and “appropriation” often imply an analytic dualism, with entities called individuals appropriating entities called mediational means. Wertsch has not proposed a theory of how specific mediational means are organized and structured into larger complexes that others have called cultures, discourses, institutions, or social structures; and like other practice orientations, this results in a neglect of macrostructural forces.

Like Hatano and Wertsch (2001), Cole perceives the unifying thread of socioculturalism to be its focus on “cultural practices” (1995, p. 105). Yet as Cole notes, there is no consistent theoretical conception of what “cultural practices” are—they are variously interpreted as activity, context, event, and situation (1996, Chapter 5). Cole’s implicit process ontology, unlike Giddens’s, suggests that there may be multiple processes that somehow interact: “any psychological phenomenon emerges from interaction of processes” (1995, p. 191). Such language is problematic because it risks treating distinct processes as entities; a true process ontology is holistic and cannot distinguish between distinct processes which interact, without risking a return to entification. Giddens is consistent on this point, even holding that the analyst cannot identify discrete actions because human action is “a continuous flow of conduct” (1979, p. 55). A few other socioculturalists also refer to multiple interacting processes, but none has presented a corresponding ontological theory nor a causal theory of how processes could interact.

The above discussion reveals several distinct stances toward a process ontology and raises several issues. First, an empirical focus on practice does not require a process ontology. One could accept the traditional “entity” view that individuals and groups both exist and nonetheless argue that it is methodologically necessary to study situated practices. Wertsch and Cole take this approach, whereas Rogoff and Lave and Wenger take the stronger stance of a process ontology. Second, how can one study socially situated practice without analytically distinguishing among individuals? Most

socioculturalists study individuals and the relations among them, analytic observations that are disallowed in a strong inseparability theory (more below). Third, whose practice is being analyzed? Which individuals, and in which communities or societies?

Answering this question requires an analytic identification of distinct entities known as individuals, communities, and societies. A process ontology rejects the existence of such entities, making it difficult to theorize difference, heterogeneity, cultural tension, and conflict.

Inseparability

Inseparability is a second paradigm-defining feature of socioculturalism. Socioculturalists maintain a wide range of theoretically incompatible stances on inseparability, and this has resulted in an ongoing theoretical debate. All socioculturalists argue that the individual must be studied in social context, but their stances range from a “weak social interaction” view (Valsiner, 1991, 1998a; Wertsch, 1993, 1994; Cole, 1995, 1996), which accepts some form of separability, to a “strong” view, which holds to inseparability (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Matusov, 1998; Rogoff, 1990, 1997; Shweder, 1990). Valsiner further distinguishes two types of weak social interaction, which he calls “exclusive” and “inclusive” separation (1991, p. 314; 1998a). Exclusive separation corresponds to Rogoff’s “social influence” view (1998): The social context is reduced to variables that are measured only in the ways that they impact individual behavior. Inclusive separation is the sociogenetic claim that individuals and sociocultural setting are separate but interdependent.

Vygotsky introduced the concept of internalization to emphasize the socially embedded nature of human development. In Vygotsky’s theory, development involves a transfer of social patterns of interaction into the individual learner’s mind: “an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one” (1978, p. 57). Like Vygotsky, Lawrence and Valsiner (1993) propose a view of development as internalization: “what was originally in the interpersonal (or intermental) domain

becomes intra-personal (intra-mental) in the course of development” (p. 151). As constructivists, they reject a concept of internalization as transmission (“exclusive separation”), emphasizing Vygotsky’s claim that internalization involves transformation (see also Valsiner, 1989). Like all socioculturalists, this view rejects theories of development based on genetically pre-determined stages and theories of development that are not foundationally based on social interaction.

However, many socioculturalists have begun to reject the Vygotskian conception of learning and development as internalization, even when conceived of as constructivist transformation, because it proposes that the “social and psychological planes are separate” (Matusov, 1998, p. 329). Rogoff is one of the strongest advocates of inseparability; she was one of the first psychologists to view context and individual as “jointly producing psychological events” (1982, p. 132).⁶ This early statement was not an inseparability claim, because it accepted the value of “separating aspects of an event” (p. 132). By 1990, Rogoff had fully embraced the implications of inseparability, advancing a strong “mutual constitution” view: “The child and the social world are mutually involved to an extent that precludes regarding them as independently definable” (p. 28). Rogoff argues that “the boundary between individual and environment disappears” (1997, p. 267).⁷

However, in empirical practice Rogoff maintains a three-fold analytic distinction between individual, group, and community, referring to these as “angles,” “windows” (1990, p. 26), “lenses,” or “planes of analysis” (1997, pp. 267-268). These terms imply analytic separability although they avoid the ontological connotations of the conventional term “levels of analysis.” Although “the three planes cannot be isolated,” the analyst can nonetheless examine individual or social as a “current focus of attention” (1997, p. 269). In referring to these three as “perspectives” rather than entities, individuals and cultural contexts “can be considered separately without losing sight of the inherent involvement in the whole” (Rogoff, 1992, p. 317). These perspectives are separable in practice and

are in principle not reducible to each other (Rogoff, 1997, p. 269n3). This acceptance of analytic separability is difficult to reconcile with theoretical claims for analytic inseparability, as Archer argues.

The central questions from Rogoff's perspective seem to imply that the individual can be analytically distinguished (cf. Valsiner, 1998a): "What are the activities in which people participate? Why and with whom and with what?" (Rogoff, 1997, p. 271). Sociocultural analysis "examines individuals' roles in the context of their participation" and "how they coordinate with others" (p. 279). Such questions require an analytic focus on specific individuals, on relationships between distinguishable individuals, and on specific individuals in distinguishable contexts, all disallowed by inseparability. For example, Archer (1995) points out that Giddens has to reject a notion that structural properties inhere in relations among people (pp. 106-107). If the individual is not analytically separable, then one cannot study relationships between individuals; the only available object of study is undifferentiated social group practices.

Recently, Matusov elaborated the inseparability stance of Rogoff and Lave and Wenger, making more explicit its incompatibility with Vygotsky's internalization theory of development. Matusov rejects Vygotsky's internalization model because it "leads to a chain of mutually related dualisms between the social and the individual, the external and the internal" (1998, p. 331). In opposition, Matusov advocates Rogoff's participation antithesis that "social and psychological planes mutually constitute each other and are inseparable" (p. 329).

Rogoff, Lave and Wenger, and Matusov take a strong stance on inseparability, but this strong inseparability is not shared by all socioculturalists, many of whom continue in the Vygotskian framework of inclusive separation. Wertsch, for example, takes the Vygotskian view that "human action and sociocultural setting [are] analytically distinct, yet inherently interrelated levels of analysis" (1994, p. 203). Wertsch implicitly criticizes inseparability claims: "if we must take all dimensions of the phenomena into account

before we can examine any one of them, it seems that there is no manageable way to ‘break into’ the cycle of complex issues at hand” (p. 203). Wertsch defines sociocultural research as the study of “the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional setting, on the other” (1995, p. 56). Like Archer’s analytic dualism, he argues that individual and society are “analytically distinct, yet inherently interrelated levels of analysis,” in contrast to strict inseparability theorists (Wertsch, 1994, p. 203).

Although essentially Vygotskian, Wertsch argues that the term “internalization” is problematic because it presupposes a “dualism between the external and the internal” (1993, p. 168); he suggests that we can avoid this dualism using the term “mastery” (p. 169). However, Wertsch does not reject analytic dualism: development involves “transformations in individuals’ understanding (i.e., their mastery) of the meaning of cultural tools such as language” (p. 170). His rejection of the term “internalization” should be viewed as a matter of emphasis rather than an ontological stance; he is concerned that the term implies a passive learner, and may repeat the methodological individualist’s error of neglecting the interaction of learner and social context.

Cole (1995, 1996, p. 226), in acknowledging Bronfenbrenner as an influence, accepts the ecological psychology approach that Rogoff rejects (e.g., Rogoff, 1990, pp. 26-28; 1998). Cole implicitly accepts that the “cultural system” can be analyzed as a structure analytically distinct from instantiation in human action; he refers to such cultural systems as tertiary artifacts (following Wartofsky, 1979). A cultural system is “constituted jointly by artifact-mediated practices...and by the nature of its ecological setting” (1995, p. 197) but it can nonetheless be analyzed as independent (1995, p. 198, Figure 8.1). The experimental studies that he reports in (1996) are described as, for example, studies of “the impact of schooling on cognitive development” (p. 77), implying a causal relation between context and individual that Giddens explicitly rejects. He speaks of the cultural system being “appropriated” by individuals (1995, p. 203), of

“individual children’s ability to internalize the scripted roles” (1996, p. 281), and he analyzes cultural systems as distinct entities, as in a study with Nicolopoulou contrasting the library and the boy’s club settings of the Fifth Dimension (Nicolopoulou and Cole, 1993). His definition of cultural psychology is “the study of culture’s role in the mental life of human beings” (1996, p. 1), implying that an individual psychology is possible, which inseparability must deny (cf. Shweder, 1990).

Although socioculturalists disagree on inseparability, they rarely make these differences explicit. One exception has been Jaan Valsiner’s critiques of inseparability (1991, 1998a; also see Carelli, 1998, p. 358; Lave, 1993, pp. 17-20). Valsiner criticizes Rogoff’s inseparability claim in terms reminiscent of Archer’s critique of Giddens: “it is exactly the use of the fusion terminology that creates further obstacles for theory-building” (1991, p. 311). It prevents us from thinking about internal psychological functions: “reducing the domain of intrapsychological phenomena to the process of fusion with ‘sociocultural activity’ does not solve the fundamental problem of human psychology” (1991, p. 312), and in fact makes psychology impossible.

Regarding social and cultural contexts, Rogoff has no theory about social structure nor about activity structure, and thus she cannot theorize about how different structures result in different activities; she reduces these structures “to an endless unstructured variety of everyday events” (Valsiner, 1991, p. 313). This problem results from her inseparability claim: it is an unproductive “theoretical shortcut” to reduce “all intrapersonal psychological structure to external actions within socially supported contexts, and a similar reduction of the structure of the external social world to problem-solving settings” (1991, p. 313).

Valsiner, like Wertsch, objects that “if any distinction between two parts of a whole...is objected to as a ‘dualism’, then our knowledge construction may lead to overlooking the structure of the systems” (1998a, pp. 351-352). In contrast, Valsiner proposes an inclusive separation that distinguishes “the organism (person) from its

environment (social world) while maintaining their dynamic interdependence” (p. 352). Valsiner observes that Rogoff’s own analyses analytically separate the individual; her empirical work focuses on “a person’s contribution to sociocultural activity, responsibility, ownership of the activity, relations with other people” and each of these terms “entail inclusive separation of the participants and the field of participation” (1998a, p. 353; also see 1991, p. 312).

A resolution: Analytic dualism

I began by identifying two theoretical assumptions held by many socioculturalists and by structuration theorists: a process ontology and the analytic inseparability of individuals and sociocultural contexts. I briefly summarized the sociological debate surrounding these two aspects of structuration theory, revealing significant problems with both claims. I then used this debate as a backdrop for a discussion of the varying positions held by socioculturalists. There have been only a few references to these distinctions in the literature, with most socioculturalists assuming more theoretical unity than there actually is. How to resolve these differences and move forward?

All socioculturalists reject methodological individualism in favor of a theory and a methodology that incorporates both the individual and the social as foundational elements. All avoid reduction of the social to the individual, and all avoid a social determinism because they are constructivist, emphasizing the child’s creative role in transforming knowledge as it is acquired and in acting back on the social world. Most contemporary social theory likewise rejects the historical positions of both individualism and collectivism. Archer (1988, 1995) observes that contemporary attempts at unity have taken two forms: the inseparability and process ontology of Giddens’s structuration theory, and the emergentist and morphogenetic account of analytic dualism. Within socioculturalism, these two extremes are represented by Rogoff and Valsiner. Like both Giddens and Archer, both Rogoff and Valsiner transcend the traditional theoretical

positions of individualism and collectivism; this is what leads both to be identified as socioculturalists in spite of their theoretical differences.

Commenting on contemporary social theory, Archer notes that a “concern with interplay is what distinguishes the emergentist from the non-emergentist whose preoccupation is with interpenetration” (1995, p. 15). Many socioculturalists deny inseparability and analyze the interplay, and are thus emergentist, while those who emphasize interpenetration and inseparability are structuration theorists. Archer’s criticisms have not been successfully refuted by structuration theorists. If one accepts analytic dualism, one is required to theorize the nature of individuals, the nature of social environments, and the nature of their causal interaction. Socioculturalists who make strong claims for inseparability have naturally not developed such theories. Archer’s critique of structuration sounds quite similar to Valsiner’s critique of Rogoff: “the central question is whether ‘duality’ merely throws a blanket over the two constituents, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ which only serves to prevent us from examining what is going on beneath it” (Archer, 1995, p. 102).

The inseparability hypothesis entails that psychology cannot exist as a discipline apart from sociology and anthropology, and some socioculturalists have made this explicit: “The mind, according to cultural psychology, is content-driven, domain-specific, and constructively stimulus-bound; and it cannot be extricated from the historically variable and cross-culturally diverse intentional worlds in which it plays a coconstituting part” (Shweder, 1990, p. 13). These socioculturalists claim that there can be no universal laws or discoveries about human psychology, and they deny that there is a “central processing mechanism” that is essentially the same across cultures and environments (cf. Shweder, 1990, p. 24). The inseparability claim implies that individual psychology cannot, in principle, exist apart from the study of situated practice. Although many socioculturalists are self-consciously oppositional to mainstream psychology, many still think of themselves as psychologists and they may not be comfortable with the necessary

logical implication of inseparability: there can be no role whatsoever for the study of individual properties apart from social practice.

There are even suggestions that inseparability is foundationally incompatible with developmental science. Archer (1995, pp. 87-89) claims that inseparability theories cannot, in principle, explain structuring over time, because they require the analyst to focus on a time scale restricted to a small span around the present. And in fact many socioculturalists have focused on microgenesis rather than long-term development, because it is indeed difficult to study the latter through a microsociological study of situated social practice. If Archer's argument is sound, this is a particularly vexing problem for developmentalists.

The theoretical problems associated with inseparability have not had serious empirical consequences because in practice socioculturalists accept analytic separability. In fact, these theoretical tensions have been "a resource, not a shortcoming to be avoided" (Rogoff, 1998, p. 697); the dialogue among views has allowed scholars to compare and evaluate different stances on the individual-society relation. Socioculturalists have done excellent empirical work demonstrating transformations in social group participation over time, and documenting the intricate relations between individuals and contexts. Some of the most important empirical work has been done by those theorists who make the strongest inseparability claims, notably Rogoff and Hutchins; this work has had a broad influence on developmental psychology and educational theory. However, this empirical work is successful because it implicitly accepts analytic dualism. By rejecting the inseparability claim in their empirical studies, socioculturalists have been able to study (1) properties of individuals, thus at times connecting their work to cognitive psychology; (2) properties of different contexts, such as different family arrangements, different activity frameworks in classrooms, and different peer group structures; and (3) the forms of microsociological practice that mediate between these two. Yet inseparability entails that such analytic distinctions are impossible to make. The short history of

socioculturalism demonstrates the difficulty of applying Giddens's inseparability claim to empirical work (as argued by Domingues, 1995, pp. 35-38; Gregson, 1989; Smith & Turner, 1986, p. 126). Sociocultural methodology belies its strongest claims for inseparability, and it succeeds best when it accepts analytic dualism.

All of the socioculturalists discussed above agree that individual and group cannot be studied in isolation but only in situated practice, and that the individual and the group are inextricably linked. The theoretical differences relate to analytic, or methodological, separability, and there are two possible positions on this issue: either individual properties and group properties of situated practice can be analytically distinguished, or they cannot. If they are inseparable, then theoretical consistency with a process ontology is assured; however, one is prevented from any form of empirical study which presumes that properties of specific individuals can be isolated, even when they are studied in context.

Yet the empirical studies even of strong inseparability theorists like Rogoff and Hutchins identify distinct properties of individuals and groups. If individual and group properties are analytically distinguished, then it becomes necessary to specify with some precision one's theory of how they are related. To be complete, a theory that accepts analytic dualism must include postulates about the two-way causal relationship between individual and social properties, including the internalization processes associated with development and the externalization processes whereby individuals affect social structure (Valsiner, 1998b). Is it a relationship of deterministic internalization? This extreme, accepted by many macrosociologists, is generally rejected by socioculturalists. Is it a relation where individuals are never constrained by social structures but are rather "enabled" to act consciously and strategically? This extreme is held by structuration theorists and by interpretivists, including ethnomethodologists, and is implied by individualist psychologists as well. There are a wide range of potential positions between these two extremes, and I have shown that socioculturalists are spread throughout this

hybrid territory. Although these theoretical tensions have generally not interfered with the progress of important empirical work, the situation is unstable; a field's theoretical framework should be consistent with its empirical practice.

Conclusion

An empirical emphasis on individual actions in small groups necessarily neglects the broader, larger-scale influences studied by macrosociology. The process orientation inevitably focuses on human action to the neglect of social-structural factors (see note 5). For example, inseparability theorists in sociology have frequently been criticized for their inability to account for power and differential access to power (as in Layder's critique of Giddens, 1987). The emphasis on small groups leads many socioculturalists into what sociologists call the "displacement of scope" error: assuming that theories developed from micro-sociological observation can be used to explain macro-sociological phenomena, or vice versa (Wagner, 1964). The sociocultural version of this error is similar to that made by ethnomethodologists and other interpretivist schools in sociology: to assume that "society is simply the small group writ large" (Archer, 1995, p. 8). Thus, we see socioculturalists examining small group interaction, but neglecting to study large-scale patterns of macrosociology—social class, networks of role positions, institutions, long-term social history, or cultural symbol systems. Interpretivism has influenced Giddens and socioculturalism alike (another parallel that space prevents me from elaborating in this paper), so it is not surprising that both share a similar interpretivist emphasis.

Socioculturalists do not have an adequate theory of social structure and how it constrains and enables individuals. Because most socioculturalists are psychologists or anthropologists, it's not surprising that they neglect macrosocial concerns in favor of a focus on individual action and small group behavior. Socioculturalists have rarely drawn substantively on sociology, political science, or history—disciplines that argue for the irreducibility of macro level entities or structures such as social class, educational level,

geographic region, race and ethnicity, social networks and institutional structures, and social power and its forms.

I have argued that the best way to resolve the theoretical tensions surrounding inseparability and process ontology is to reject strong inseparability and accept analytic dualism. This resolution would allow socioculturalism to better connect with individual psychology on the one hand and macrosociology on the other. Socioculturalism could then more fully participate in the major theoretical issues of contemporary social science: what is the best theory of processes, individuals, and groups? What is the nature of the regularities holding between individuals and groups? To what extent does this relationship require psychology to incorporate theoretical models from sociology, and require sociology to incorporate psychological models of individuals?

Endnotes

¹ Several socioculturalists have briefly acknowledged parallels with Giddens. Miller (1995, pp. 72, 77) comments on Giddens's process ontology and its relationship to socioculturalism; Lave and Wenger (1991, pp. 50-54) note similarities with Giddens, Bourdieu, and Bauman. Cole (1996, p. 358n10) also notes his "close affinity" with Giddens, although I challenge this in the following.

² Other critics who note that this is not a resolution of the structure-agency problem, but simply a "dissolution" of it, include (Smith and Turner, 1986; Thompson, 1989).

³ Space limitations prevent me from elaborating the implicit methodological individualism of such passages; compare note 5.

⁴ Archer critiques Bauman's (1973) theory of mutual constitution on much the same grounds as Giddens, in (1988, pp. 72-96).

⁵ Although such passages are explicit about the individualist orientation of socioculturalism, most socioculturalists claim to reject methodological individualism. One exception is Shweder, who explicitly acknowledges that the action orientation of his cultural psychology is methodologically individualist (1995), because intentionality is "action responsive to and directed at mental objects or representations" (1990, p. 26), and culture is "an intentional world composed of conceptions, evaluations, judgments, goals, and other mental representations" (1990, p. 26). Note that Shweder also claims that Wertsch's theory of mediated action is methodologically individualist, and that his definition also seems to apply to Giddens's focus on subjective intentionality.

⁶ Like Rogoff, Lave and Wenger (1991) take a strong inseparability position: "agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (p. 33). They reject the term "situated learning" because it seems to separate learning from context; rather,

“social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics” (p. 34).

⁷ Rogoff has often commented on her own theoretical development (e.g., 1998, p. 687).

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