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What Is Agency?¹

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This article aims (1) to analytically disaggregate agency into its several component elements (though these are interrelated empirically), (2) to demonstrate the ways in which these agentic dimensions interpenetrate with forms of structure, and (3) to point out the implications of such a conception of agency for empirical research. The authors conceptualize agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its “iterational” or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a “projective” capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a “practical-evaluative” capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

The concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought. Variants of action theory, normative theory, and political-institutional analysis have defended, attacked, buried, and resuscitated the concept in often contradictory and overlapping ways. At the center of the debate, the term *agency* itself has maintained an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness; it has all too seldom inspired systematic analysis, despite the long list of terms with which it has been associated: selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity. Moreover, in the struggle to demonstrate the interpenetration of agency and structure, many theorists have failed to dis-

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tinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right—with distinctive theoretical dimensions and temporally variable social manifestations. The result has been a flat and impoverished conception that, when it escapes the abstract voluntarism of rational choice theory, tends to remain so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action.

We argue that each of the most significant recent attempts to theorize agency has neglected crucial aspects of the problem. In distinguishing (and showing the interplay) between different dimensions of agency, we seek to go beyond these various one-sided points of view. “Theorists of practice” such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, for example, have given selective attention to the role of habitus and routinized practices; their perspective (perhaps the dominant one in contemporary American sociology) sees human agency as habitual, repetitive, and taken for granted—a view shared by ethnomethodologists, new institutionalists in organizational theory, and many others. Alternative approaches have similarly relied upon one-sided conceptions of agency; for example, traditions as different from one another as rational choice theory and phenomenology have stressed goal seeking and purposivity, while theories of publicity and communication, as well as certain feminist theories, have overemphasized deliberation and judgment. While routine, purpose, and judgment all constitute important dimensions of agency, none by itself captures its full complexity. Moreover, when one or another is conflated with agency itself, we lose a sense of the dynamic *interplay* among these dimensions and of how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action.

Our immediate aims in this article, then, are threefold: (1) to analytically disaggregate agency into its several component elements (even though these are clearly interrelated empirically), (2) to demonstrate the different ways in which the dimensions of agency interpenetrate with diverse forms of structure, and (3) to point out the implications of such a differentiated conception of agency for empirical research.

Theoretically, our central contribution is to begin to reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity, we argue, if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. More radically, we also argue that the structural contexts of action are themselves temporal as well as relational fields—multiple, overlapping *ways of ordering time* toward

which social actors can assume different simultaneous agentic orientations. Since social actors are embedded within many such temporalities at once, they can be said to be oriented toward the past, the future, and the present at any given moment, although they may be primarily oriented toward one or another of these within any one emergent situation. As actors move within and among these different unfolding contexts, they switch between (or “recompose”) their temporal orientations—as constructed within and by means of those contexts—and thus are capable of changing their relationship to structure. We claim that, in examining changes in agentic orientation, we can gain crucial analytical leverage for charting varying degrees of maneuverability, inventiveness, and reflective choice shown by social actors in relation to the constraining and enabling contexts of action.

Most broadly, our guiding concerns in this article are moral and practical in nature. We contend that reconceptualizing agency as an internally complex temporal dynamic makes possible a new perspective upon the age-old problem of free will and determinism. How are social actors, we ask, capable (at least in principle) of critically evaluating and reconstructing the conditions of their own lives? If *structural contexts* are analytically separable from (and stand over against) capacities for *human agency*, how is it possible for actors ever to mediate or to transform their own relationships to these contexts? Without disaggregating the concept of agency into its most important analytical dimensions, we cannot ever hope to find satisfactory answers to these questions. The key to grasping the dynamic possibilities of human agency is to view it as composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time. Only then will it be clear how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency—by actors capable of formulating projects for the future and realizing them, even if only in small part, and with unforeseen outcomes, in the present.

THEORIZING AGENCY

Many of the tensions in present-day conceptions of human agency can be traced back to the Enlightenment debate over whether instrumental rationality or moral and norm-based action is the truest expression of human freedom. Teleological and instrumentalist conceptions of action fueled the philosophical individualism of the early Enlightenment, which, while still grounded in the religious morality of the times, allowed for the subsequent invention of the individual as a “free agent” able to make rational choices for (him)self and society (Lukes 1973). With John Locke’s (1978) rejection of the binding power of tradition, his location of beliefs in individual experience, and his grounding of society in the social contract

between individuals, a new conception of agency emerged that affirmed the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live. This faith subsequently sustained a long line of social thinkers, including Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, and embedded agency in an individualist and calculative conception of action that still underlies many Western accounts of freedom and progress.

In response to this association of freedom with rational self-interest, other Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, anticipated the later Romantics by exploring instead such alternative conceptions of freedom as the ascendancy of conscience and moral will, of a self-legislating morality. Their perspective underscored the importance of the transcendental imagination as well as that of instrumental reason. These two points of view both found their way into Immanuel Kant's (1965, 1956, 1951) critical philosophy, which saw freedom as normatively grounded individual will, governed by the categorical imperative rather than by material necessity (or interest). Kant bifurcated all of reality into two opposing orders: the conditional and the normative, necessity and freedom—the latter conceived of as the pure unconditioned activity of autonomous moral beings. His rendering of the ancient question of free will versus necessity became in classical sociological theory the point of departure for a concern with nonrational norm-oriented action—in contradistinction to the rational instrumental action emphasized by economic analysts of society (Habermas 1984–89; Münch 1981, 1994). In Hans Joas's (1993, p. 247) words, "As a safeguard against the utilitarian dangers of the theory of rational action, the founding theorists of sociology [had] recourse to Kant and his notion of free, moral action." In this line, the early action theory of Talcott Parsons can be read as a Kant-inspired attempt to synthesize the rational-utilitarian and nonrational-normative dimensions of action. In *The Structure of Social Action*, for example, Parsons (1968, p. 732) argued that "conditions may be conceived at one pole, ends and normative rules at another, means and effort as the connecting link between them." Agency, for Parsons, was captured in the notion of *effort*, as the force that achieves, in Kantian terminology, the interpenetration of means-ends rationality and categorical obligation.

Parsons's early attention to the temporal dimension of action (subsequently discarded in his later structural-functionalist work) also remained caught within Kantian dualisms. He noted that all social action, whether instrumental or normative, is teleological in structure: "An act is always a process in time. . . . The concept end always implies a future reference, to a state which is . . . not yet in existence, and which would not come into existence if something were not done about it by the actor" (Parsons 1968, p. 45). In none of his writings, on the other hand, did Parsons elaborate a fully temporal theory of agency (or, indeed, of structure): agency

remained “outside” of time (as in Kant’s own conception of the “unconditioned”), while structure remained a spatial category rather than (also) a temporal construction. Moreover, in none of his writings did Parsons devote much systematic attention to disaggregating the crucial concept of effort itself—to opening up the “black box” of human agency.

Agency in Social Theory

In explicit dialogue with Parsonian (and Kantian) theories of agency, both James Coleman and Jeffrey Alexander have recently presented attempts to join instrumental and normative approaches, although with strikingly different results. Responding to the disappearance of agency in later versions of structural-functionalism, rational choice advocates have followed George Homans’s (1964) call to “bring men back in” and to return to an action theory firmly grounded in the purposive, instrumental, and calculating orientations of individuals. In his major synthetic work, *Foundations of Social Theory*, Coleman (1990) tries to overcome the Kantian division between interests and norms by arguing that rational choice assumptions can provide the underpinnings for a normative theory based upon power-weighted social influence. Coleman counters the decontextualized individualism of many rational actor perspectives by linking purposive activity at the micro level to systemic interdependencies at the macro level, thereby showing that action is always a complex social and interactive phenomenon. However, he fails to address the problem at the heart of rational choice explanations: the (clearly acknowledged) decision to bracket the question of how temporally embedded actors actually reach decisions that can retrospectively be interpreted as rational. By assuming that “actions are ‘caused’ by their (anticipated) consequences” Coleman (1986, p. 1312) attributes the impulse to action to a means-ends rationality abstracted from the human experience of time. While this bracketing of subjective temporality does in fact lead to the prediction of an impressive range of social phenomena resulting from individual choices, it does not allow us to understand the interpretive processes whereby choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations. The post hoc causal attribution implicit in rational choice conceptions of agency leaves Parsons’s black box untouched.²

² We acknowledge that many rational choice theorists have made great strides in accounting for the contingencies and uncertainties involved in choice making (March and Simon 1958; March and Olsen 1976; March 1978), as well as in attempting to explore the role of values, norms, and other cultural elements (Elster 1989; Hechter 1992, 1994; see also the essays in Cook and Levi [1990]). However, we maintain that even these more sophisticated versions of rational actor models are still grounded in presuppositions that prevent them from adequately theorizing the interpretive inter-

A more promising initiative in the analytic exploration of agency can be seen in the recent work of Jeffrey Alexander (1988, esp. pp. 301–33; 1992). Although a neo-Parsonian himself in many respects, and thus influenced in the deep structure of his thought by Kantian categories (he continues to take as his frame of reference the dichotomy between the conditional and the normative), Alexander advances considerably beyond both Kant and Parsons in thematizing the ways in which human agency engages with its structural contexts. He is the first major theorist to systematically disaggregate the concept of agency itself, probing into its inner structure and delineating categories of agentic processes. In *Action and Its Environments*, Alexander (1988) proposes that action be conceived of in terms of two basic dimensions, which he calls *interpretation* (further subdivided into *typification* and *invention*) and *strategization*. He intends by these analytical categories to synthesize, as did Parsons before him, the normative and utilitarian perspectives by presenting them as complementary but analytically distinguishable dimensions of human action. But Alexander's multidimensional theory also goes much further than Parsonian theory in providing insight into precisely that element bracketed by Coleman, that is, the interpretive processes of contextually embedded actors. In what follows, we build upon Alexander's highly useful categorization, which opens up theoretical space for analyzing the inventive and critical aspects of agency. We contend, however, that because his analysis remains subsumed under a broader category of normativity, he has little to say about invention's constitutive features and, specifically, its pragmatic and experimental dimensions. Even more important, Alexander neglects to situate his analysis of agency within a specifically temporal framework. We argue, by contrast, that agentic processes can only be understood if they are linked intrinsically to the changing temporal orientations of situated actors.

To place agency within such a temporal framework, and to move effectively beyond the division between instrumental and normative action, we must turn to the philosophical school that most consistently challenges such dualisms, notably American pragmatism (with its close ties to Continental phenomenology). In response to the utilitarian model of rational action, pragmatist thinkers such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, as well as social phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz, insist that action not be perceived as the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but rather that ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the re-

subjective construction of choices from the temporal vantage points of contextually embedded actors.

flective intelligence. Moreover, pragmatists reject the Kantian response to utilitarianism by condemning the false distinction between material interests and transcendental values, since all human objects and purposes are necessarily constructed out of social meanings and values. These basic premises allow the pragmatist thinkers to sidestep many of the conundrums that dominate sociological thought and to lay the foundations for a theory of action that analyzes the “conditions of possibility” (Joas 1993, p. 250) for the evaluative, experimental, and constructive dimensions of perception and action, within the contexts of social experience.

While we draw upon a variety of pragmatist and phenomenological thinkers in the sections to come, it is the work of George Herbert Mead that offers us the most compelling tools for overcoming the inadequate conceptions of agency in both rational choice and norm-oriented approaches. Although Mead is best known for his contributions to social psychology and symbolic interactionism, we focus here upon his seminal (but little discussed) theorization of temporality in *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932).³ Two insights in this work are critical for our efforts: the concept of time as constituted through *emergent events*, which require a continual refocusing of past and future, and the concept of human consciousness as constituted through *sociality*, the capacity to be both *temporally* and *relationally* in a variety of systems at once. Building upon the work of Henri Bergson (1989), Mead rejects the Newtonian conception of time as a succession of isolated instants, characterizing time instead as a multilevel flow of nested events, radically grounded in (but not bounded by) present experience. “Reality exists in a present” (Mead 1932, p. 1), although the immediacy of present situations is extended by our ability to imaginatively construct a sense of past and future. But Mead also moves beyond the individualist and subjectivist presuppositions of Bergson’s theory, which conceptualizes time as an introspective *durée*, a merely psychological rather than intrinsically social phenomenon. By contrast, Mead insists that the human experience of temporality is based in the *social* character of emergence, that is, in the passage from the old to the new, and in the interrelated changes occurring throughout the various situational contexts within which human beings are embedded. As actors respond to changing environments, they must continually reconstruct

³ We are not concerned here with Mead’s engagement in this work with functionalist evolutionary theory nor with his debate with metaphysical theorists of temporality. Although Mead develops his theories through a comparison with more general physical and biological (i.e., nonhuman) processes and has been criticized for veering away from action theory toward metaphysics (Joas 1985), he also provides the philosophical core of a temporal and relational understanding of the intersubjective development of agentic capacities, which is of critical importance for a theory of action. For a related discussion, see also Mead’s (1938) work, *The Philosophy of the Act*.

their view of the past in an attempt to understand the causal conditioning of the emergent present, while using this understanding to control and shape their responses in the arising future. This process forms the core of what Mead (1932, p. 76) calls “the deliberative attitude,” the capacity to “get hold of the conditions of future conduct as these are found in the organized responses we have formed, and so construct our pasts in anticipation of that future.”

Mead points this insight in the direction of action theory by describing how what he calls sociality—that is, the situatedness of actors in multiple temporally evolving relational contexts—contributes to the development of reflective consciousness. Mead outlines three levels of consciousness, distinguished in terms of the increasing capacity of actors to actively constitute their environments through selective control over their own responses: (1) the level of “contact experience,” characterized by immediacy of response to sense and feeling, (2) that of “distance experience,” characterized by the capacity to use ideation and imagery in remembrance and anticipation, and finally, (3) the culmination of sociality in communicative interaction, in which social meanings and values develop out of the capacity to take on the perspectives of (concrete and generalized) others. What drives the development of consciousness from one level to the next is the “awakening of delayed and conflicting responses” (Mead 1932, p. 71) to problematic situations in one’s various environments, increasing the field of choice while extending the temporal perspective of action. At every step, actors are conceived of not as atomized individuals, but rather as active respondents within nested and overlapping systems (which we prefer to call *temporal-relational contexts*); the construction of temporal perspectives is fundamentally an *intersubjective* process, constituted by the ability to hold simultaneously to one’s own and to another’s viewpoint. Actors develop their deliberative capacities as they confront emergent situations that impact upon each other and pose increasingly complex problems, which must be taken up as challenges by the responsive (and communicative) intelligence.

Unlike Mead, we are not primarily interested in the *evolution* of reflective consciousness but rather in the insight that Mead’s analysis affords into the internal structuring of agentic capacities and their different constitutive relationships to action. We agree with Hans Joas in his recent book, *The Creativity of Action* (1996; see also Joas, n.d.), that pragmatist thinkers provide the first steps toward developing an adequate conception of the constitutive creativity of action, conceived of as “the permanent reorganization and reconstitution of habits and institutions” (Joas, n.d., p. 24). Such a conception, Joas argues, fundamentally challenges the teleological means-ends model present in both rational choice and neo-Parsonian approaches, replacing it with an account of the situational and

corporeal embeddedness of action.⁴ Joas's major contribution is to wrest the theory of action from both its rationalist and norm-centered presuppositions, insisting that a conception of the situationally embedded creativity of action is essential not only for studies of microinteraction, but also for macrosociological analysis (and particularly for understanding the possibilities of what Dewey calls *creative democracy*). Yet he brackets the major question that we examine here, that of "large differences in the various acts and actors in regards to creativity" (Joas 1996, p. 197). We maintain that this is not merely an empirical but also an analytical question: by differentiating between the different dimensions of agency, we can help to account for variability and change in actors' capacities for imaginative and critical intervention in the diverse contexts within which they act.

The Chordal Triad of Agency

What, then, is human agency? We define it as *the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*.⁵ This definition encompasses what we shall analytically distinguish below as the different constitutive elements of human agency: iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation. In broad terms, these correspond

⁴ For Joas (1996, p. 160), action is not simply *contingent* upon the situation, but more essentially, "the situation is *constitutive* of action" (original emphasis), providing not merely "means" and "conditions" for preestablished ends but also the structured habitual patterns of response that become the basis for the reflective and creative engagement of actors with their changing environments.

⁵ While our principal focus in this article remains the different analytical dimensions of agency rather than action's structural contexts, we follow earlier work (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1996)—along with Sorokin (1947), Parsons and Shils (1951), and, especially, Alexander (1988b)—in our disaggregation of the latter. As we conceive of it, the *cultural context* encompasses those symbolic patterns, structures, and formations (e.g., cultural discourses, narratives, and idioms) that constrain and enable action by structuring actors' normative commitments and their understandings of their world and their possibilities within it. The *social-structural context* encompasses those network patterns of social ties (see Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994) that comprise interpersonal, interorganizational, or transnational settings of action. Finally, the *social-psychological context* encompasses those psychical structures that constrain and enable action by channeling actors' flows and investments of emotional energy, including long-lasting durable structures of attachment and emotional solidarity. These interpenetrating (but analytically autonomous) categories crosscut the key institutional sectors of modern social life: the administrative-bureaucratic state, the capitalist economy, and civil society (Emirbayer and Sheller 1996).

to the different temporal orientations of agency, allowing us to examine forms of action that are more oriented (respectively) toward the past, the future, and the present. Such a categorization gives analytical expression to Mead's conception of the positioning of human actors within temporal passage, involving the continual reconstruction of their orientations toward past and future in response to emergent events. In addition, it incorporates Mead's insight that it is the capacity for imaginative distancing, as well as for communicative evaluation, in relation to habitual patterns of social engagement that drives the development of the reflective intelligence, that is, the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations.

The iterational element.—The first of these dimensions, which we term the iterational element, has received perhaps the most systematic attention in philosophy and sociological theory, most recently from that tradition of thought that Ortner (1984) describes as *theories of practice* (see also Turner 1994). It refers to *the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.*

The projective element.—The second dimension of agency, the projective element, has been largely neglected in recent sociological theory, although it does receive attention in the writings of Alfred Schutz and his followers, and, indirectly, of rational choice theorists. Outside of sociology, concern with projectivity can be found in phenomenological and existential philosophy, psychoanalysis, narrative psychology, and dramaturgic anthropology. Projectivity encompasses *the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future.*

The practical-evaluative element.—Finally, the practical-evaluative element of agency has been left strikingly undertheorized by sociological thinkers, although intimations of it can be found in a long tradition of moral philosophy extending from Aristotelian ethics to more recent theories of critical deliberation, as well as certain feminist analyses. It entails *the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.*

We should stress from the outset that these are analytical distinctions; all three of these constitutive dimensions of human agency are to be found, in varying degrees, within any concrete empirical instance of action. In

this sense, it is possible to speak of a *chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones.⁶ On the other hand, we also claim that, in any given case, one or another of these three aspects might well predominate. It is possible to speak of action that is more (or less) engaged with the past, more (or less) directed toward the future, and more (or less) responsive to the present. In each of the three major sections below, we isolate these various analytical dimensions and examine the internal structure of each. Although it will never be possible to carry out our analytical dissections with surgical precision, we aim to show what agentic processes would entail were one or another of these tones in the chordal triad to be sounded most forcefully.⁷

Moreover, we also argue that each of the three analytical dimensions can be said to possess its own internal chordal structure. The three dimensions of agency that we describe do not correspond in any simple, exclusive way to past, present, and future as successive stages of action. Rather, empirical social action is constructed through ongoing temporal passage and thus through what Mead calls emergent events, rather than through a sequentiality of discrete acts or stages of one act. Each of our dimensions of agency has itself a simultaneous internal orientation toward past, future, and present, for all forms of agency are temporally embedded in the flow of time. We do claim, however, that for each analytical aspect of agency one temporal orientation is the dominant tone, shaping the way in which actors relate to the other two dimensions of time. Disaggregating the dimensions of agency (and exploring which orientations are dominant within a given situation) allows us to suggest that each primary orientation in the chordal triad encompasses as subtones the other two as well, while also showing how this “chordal composition” can change as actors respond to the diverse and shifting environments around them.⁸

Several further points of clarification are in order here. First, we must reaffirm that agency as we have sketched it above is a historically variable

⁶ This usage is analogous to Patterson’s (1991) discussion of the chordal triad of freedom.

⁷ We bracket for now the added complication that actors are always embedded within many different temporal-relational contexts at once and thus may exhibit a projective orientation within one context, e.g., even as they exhibit an iterational orientation within another. We return to this issue in the final section of the article.

⁸ Lest we fall into the analytical nightmare of “subsubtones” within “subtones,” we wish to stress that the notion of an internal chordal structure is a heuristic device that allows us to analyze variation and change in the composition of agentic orientations; clearly, actors do not dissect experience in such a manner while themselves in the flow of temporal passage. We should also note that what we call *chordal structures* are not necessarily harmonious; the subtones may be dissonant with one another, creating internal tensions that may spur the recomposition of temporal orientations.

phenomenon, embedded in changing theoretical and practical conceptions of time and action. Ours is not a universalistic perspective that assumes that all times, places, and persons are equally iterational, projective, or practical-evaluative. Rather, it is precisely the historical, cultural, and personal variability of agentic orientations that make this framework so compelling. The ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present *make a difference* to their actions; changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort.

Second, we follow Mead in arguing that changes in temporal orientation may also involve varying degrees of inventiveness and reflectivity in relation to action and its temporal-relational contexts, although not necessarily, as we shall show later, in simple or straightforward ways. (Such a conception signals our deliberate commitment to a humanistic, normative, and critical perspective upon social life.) While we claim that even habitual action is agentic, since it involves attention and effort, such activity is largely unreflective and taken for granted; as actors encounter problematic situations requiring the exercise of imagination and judgment, they gain a reflective distance from received patterns that may (in some contexts) may allow for greater imagination, choice, and conscious purpose. A disaggregated conception of agency thus allows us to locate more precisely the interplay between the reproductive and transformative dimensions of social action (Hays 1994) and to explain how reflectivity can change in either direction, through the increasing routinization or problematization of experience.

Third, we wish to stress that our conception of agency is intrinsically social and relational (Emirbayer 1997) since it centers around the engagement (and disengagement) by actors of the different contextual environments that constitute their own structured yet flexible social universes. For this reason, and also because of our deep resonance with both classical and contemporary pragmatism, one might characterize our approach as *relational pragmatics*. Viewed internally, agency entails different ways of experiencing the world, although even here, just as consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (James 1976; Husserl 1960), so too is agency always agency *toward* something, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events. Viewed externally, agency entails actual interactions with its contexts, in something like an ongoing conversation; in this sense, it is “filled with dialogic overtones,” as a sort of “link in the chain of speech communication” (Bakhtin 1986, pp. 92, 91). Following Mead and Joas, we highlight the importance of intersubjectivity, social interaction, and communication

as critical components of agentic processes: agency is always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action.

Finally, we ground this capacity for human agency in the structures and processes of the human self, conceived of as an internal conversation possessing analytic autonomy vis-à-vis transpersonal interactions. We conceptualize the self not as a metaphysical substance or entity, such as the “soul” or “will” (see White 1995), but rather as a dialogical structure, itself thoroughly relational. Our perspective, in other words, is relational all the way down.⁹ We cannot begin to explore here the ontology of the self or the full implications for agency of such categories as “desire” (although see Lacan 1977). Nor can we present here a systematic analysis of the components or structures of this self, or elaborate a new philosophical psychology, although we can suggest, following Norbert Wiley (1994, p. 210) in *The Semiotic Self*, that “the interpretive process [taking place within it] is, within limits, open and free,” and that this “in turn allows humans to create as well as to pursue goals.”¹⁰ We maintain that while transpersonal contexts do both constrain and enable the dialogical process, such contexts cannot themselves serve as the point of origin of agentic possibilities, which must reside one level down (so to speak), at the level of self-dynamics.

In the following discussion, then, we take up in turn three constituent elements of human agency: the iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative tones of the chordal triad. Within each of the sections to come, we first review briefly the relevant history of concepts, then analyze from within the dimension of agency at hand, then finally explore the implications of each aspect for concrete empirical research. In the final major section of the article, we step back to discuss the different ways in which these three dimensions of human agency interpenetrate with different structuring contexts of action.

⁹ Such a position does present us with a certain difficulty: namely, that corporate actors such as firms, states, or other organizational entities cannot easily be accommodated within the terms of such a framework unless they are themselves given theoretical status equivalent to that of natural persons or selves (for examples of this mode of reasoning, see Coleman [1990], Luhmann [1990], and White [1992]). While not averse to such a move in principle, we do not pursue all of its many implications in the pages to come, or grapple systematically with the special challenges in translation that it would necessarily entail.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Wiley’s perspective is itself self-consciously grounded in the pragmatist tradition (see also Wiley 1994, pp. 10, 29, 47); for a similar perspective, see Taylor (1991), Colapietro (1990), and Gergen (1994). More work needs to be done, of course, in theorizing the systematic blockages to such “open and free” intrapsychic communication or dialogue.

THE ITERATIONAL DIMENSION OF AGENCY

If we think of agency as a chordal triad composed of three analytically distinct elements (oriented variously toward the past, future, and present), then what we call the *iterational* dimension appears as that chordal variation in which the *past* is the most resonant tone. Although, as Mead (1932, p. 17) reminds us, all experience takes place in the present, this present is permeated by the conditioning quality of the past: "Its presence is exhibited in memory, and in the historical apparatus that extends memory." Past experiences condition present actions "when they have taken on the organized structure of tendencies" (Mead 1932, p. 18). In this section, we examine how the past, through habit and repetition, becomes a stabilizing influence that shapes the flow of effort and allows us to sustain identities, meanings, and interactions over time. The primary locus of agency for the iterational dimension, we argue, lies in the *schematization* of social experience. It is manifested in actors' abilities to recall, to select, and to appropriately apply the more or less tacit and taken-for-granted schemas of action that they have developed through past interactions. Schemas are corporeal and affective as well as cognitive patterns; they consist in the interpenetration of mental categories, embodied practices, and social organization. Moreover, they constitute temporal as well as relational patterns, recursively implemented in social life (Giddens 1984). The agentic dimension lies in *how actors selectively recognize, locate, and implement* such schemas in their ongoing and situated transactions. While this may take place at a low level of conscious reflection, it still requires attention and engagement on the part of actors in order to narrow the possibilities for action within particular temporal-relational contexts.

The concept of iteration is crucial for our conception of agency since we maintain that both the projective and practical-evaluative dimensions are deeply grounded in habitual, unreflected, and mostly unproblematic patterns of action by means of which we orient our efforts in the greater part of our daily lives. We have settled upon the unfamiliar term *iteration* to describe such activity precisely because the dimension of agency to which it refers is the most difficult to conceive of in properly agentic terms. The subset of words with which it is colloquially associated—routines, dispositions, preconceptions, competences, schemas, patterns, typifications, and traditions—seem more to imply structure than what we commonly think of as agency. This problem is also reflected in most attempts to theorize the habitual dimension of action since they focus upon recurring patterns of action themselves and thus upon structures, rather than upon the precise ways in which social actors relationally engage with those preexisting patterns or schemas.

Iteration: The History of a Concept

In much of social and psychological theory, habit has unfortunately been seen as little more than a matter of stimulus and response, an orientation that shifts attention away from human agency and toward the structural contexts that shape action. Indeed, as Charles Camic (1986, p. 1046) points out, a prevailing tendency in much of social science since the early 20th century has been to regard habit as “behavior that consists in a fixed, mechanical reaction to particular stimuli and [that] is, as such, devoid of meaning from the actor’s point of view.” The outcome has effectively been to remove habit from the domain of social action.¹¹ In what follows, by contrast, our key concern is to locate the agentic dimension in even the most routinized, prestructured forms of social action. Even relatively unreflective action has its own moment of effort; the typification and routinization of experience are active processes entailing selective reactivation of received structures within expected situations, dynamic transactions between actor and situation. We follow a current of thought (also documented by Camic) that never did succumb to the aforementioned tendency to conceive of habit as a “fixed, mechanical reaction to stimuli” (Camic 1986, p. 1046). According to this perspective, habit entails much more than biophysiological (or institutional) processes; it includes as well the element of agency—no less than do the more reflective and deliberative modes of action.

Classical and medieval philosophy.—Some of the earliest systematic thinking on the iterational aspect of human agency can be found in Aristotle (1985, p. 44), who uses the term *hexis* to refer to any settled disposition or state leading to action. Aristotle distinguishes the *hexis*—sometimes also translated as *habit*—from mechanical behavior as such, since it also reflects a person’s desires and decisions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1985) further depicts habits as the basis for “virtues” or “excellences” of character, which entail a settled disposition toward appropriate action in accordance with wisdom. Habits could not form the basis for virtue if they were merely automatic activity. St. Thomas Aquinas, too, defines iterational activity (in his terminology, the *habitus*) as a manifesta-

¹¹ See, e.g., Camic’s discussions of W. I. Thomas, Florian Znaniecki, Robert Park, and Talcott Parsons, among others, in Camic (1986, pp. 1072–75). Camic adds that the historical reasons for this tendency are twofold: on the one hand, the emergence during the late 19th century of Darwinian evolutionary theory and of experimental physiology and, on the other hand, the rise during that same period of a “militantly scientific” new field of psychology. Between them, these developments led to an identification of habitual action with the most elementary behavioral processes of the human organism, akin to those of the lower species (Camic 1986, pp. 1048–49).

tion of human agency.¹² In “The Treatise on Habits,” Aquinas (1948, pp. 822, 824) follows Aristotle in associating the habitus with moral virtue: “Virtue is a habitus which is always for good. . . . [It] is a habitus by which a person acts well.”

Nineteenth- and 20th-century social thought.—Dewey (1922) contributes to this perspective on habit in *Human Nature and Conduct*, where he describes habits as “active means, means that project themselves, energetic and dominating ways of acting. . . . Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. It means will” (Dewey 1922, pp. 26, 40–41). Habit emerges as something inherently plastic and educable, rather than a matter of mere stimulus and response. This critique of behavioral reductionism allows Dewey to elaborate the social and psychological foundations for a democratic politics, the goal of which should be to replace the unreflective habits with “intelligent” ones “which experience has shown to make us sensitive, generous, imaginative, [and] impartial” (Dewey 1922, p. 194).

During the mid 20th century, phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz further develop such views, reconceptualizing habit as a form of “prereflective intentionality” (Kestenbaum 1977). For Merleau-Ponty, intentionality is located prior to language in the sedimentation of meaning in the body; the body is conceived of as an “intentional arc” directed toward the world, the vehicle by means of which communication with the world is carried out (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp. 67; see also Wacquant 1992a). Schutz, on the other hand, emphasizes the social (rather than the embodied) dimension of the prereflexive life world, finding in Weberian ideal-types a model for the schemas and typifications that guide social actors during their routinized daily lives. These typifications provide for the continuity of social knowledge over time; while such knowledge is taken for granted, it nevertheless has a “highly socialized structure” (Schutz 1962, p. 75). This focus upon the routinized prereflective character of the social world also provides the basis for Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (1984), as well as for the social constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966).

Theories of practice.—In the present day, so-called theorists of practice (Ortner 1984) such as Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990; Bourdieu and Wac-

¹² “For Aquinas, . . . a *habitus* puts one’s activity more under one’s control than it might otherwise be. In this sense, to have a *habitus* is to be disposed to some activity or other—not because one tends to that activity on every possible occasion, but because one finds it natural, readily coped with, an obvious activity to engage in, and so on” (Davies 1992, pp. 225–26; emphasis in the original).

quant 1992) and Giddens (1979, 1984) build upon the insights of both pragmatism and phenomenology, as well as upon earlier traditions of thought. Bourdieu uses the Aristotelian/Thomistic idea of habitus to illuminate the formative influences of the past upon the cognitive, corporeal, and intentional structures of empirical action. Through the incorporation of past experiences in the body, he maintains that social actors develop a set of preconscious expectations about the future that are typically inarticulate, naturalized, and taken for granted but nevertheless strategically mobilized in accordance with the contingencies of particular empirical situations. Bourdieu recognizes the compatibility of such notions with the insights of both Dewey and the phenomenologists: "The theory of practical sense presents many similarities with theories, such as Dewey's, that grant a central role to the notion of habit, understood as an active and creative relation to the world" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 122).

In similar fashion, Giddens conceptualizes the agentic dimension of routine behavior in terms of what he calls the *stratification model of action* (Giddens 1979, p. 56). By distinguishing between three levels of consciousness—the unconscious, practical consciousness, and discursive consciousness—he in effect constructs a continuum between the unreflective and reflective dimensions of action. But despite this nod toward discursivity, Giddens gives routinized practical consciousness a privileged place in the explanation of social reproduction, calling routinization the master key of his theory of structuration. Such consciousness emerges out of a background of "tacitly employed mutual knowledge" (Giddens 1979, p. 58), by means of which social interactions are reflexively monitored. In underscoring the agentic moment in the reproduction of structures, he also develops the important idea of *recursivity*: structures (which Giddens defines as "rules and resources") are really only "virtual" structures (paradigmatic patterns) that must be recursively activated within social practices. The agentic dimension of routinized action lies precisely in the recursive implementation of structures by human actors.¹³

The Internal Structure of Iteration

We can see that according to many major theorists, habitual and routinized activities are not devoid of agency. Here we elaborate upon these theorists' insights by examining in more detail how agency works to repro-

¹³ Giddens (1991) is particularly interested in the concept of routinization because of his ontological presuppositions: he emphasizes the need for "basic trust" and "ontological security" that drives humans to routinize their practices and to give order and stability to their relationships, especially in the face of the growing complexity and diversity of modern society (for a similar perspective, see White [1992]).

duce past patterns of action. For the sake of greater specificity, we subdivide the iterational moment into a number of interrelated components (keeping in mind that these blend into one another in practice); each involves the engagement of a specific kind of schematizing process. Recalling the imagery of the internal chordal structure, we show how this primary orientation toward the past involves different processes of selective recall from past experience, which we distinguish here as *selective attention*, *recognition of types*, and *categorical location*. In addition, we show how these elements shade over into projective and practical-evaluative dimensions of agency. The future and the present now emerge as secondary tones in the chordal composition: the future through *expectation*, the memory-sustained anticipation that past patterns of experience will repeat themselves in successive interactions, allowing relationships to be sustained and reproduced over time, and the present through *maneuver*, the improvisational orientation toward habitual practices, largely tacit and unreflective, which takes place in ongoing dialogue with situational contingencies.

Selective attention.—At any given point in the flow of transactions, social actors are able to focus attention upon only a small area of reality. As Schutz (1964, p. 283) tells us, “There is a small kernel of knowledge that is clear, distinct, and consistent in itself. This kernel is surrounded by zones of various gradations of vagueness, obscurity, and ambiguity.” The quality of attention directed at any element or “zone” of knowledge is conditioned by what Schutz calls “systems of relevances,” developed over the course of biographical histories and past collective experience, which alert actors to elements of emerging situations that require attention and response. The same idea is expressed in the psychological notion of *gestalt*, which shows how the activity of directing attention is also linked to unconscious processes. Many elements of practical day-to-day activity may require only marginal clarity of consciousness; yet even the semi-obscure zone of habitual taken-for-granted activity requires a selective focusing of attention in order to single out the elements of response required to sustain a particular form of interaction.

Recognition of types.—Having directed attention, actors must identify typical patterns of experience and predict their recurrence in the future; to do this, they routinely construct simplifying models by means of which they characterize recurrent aspects of persons, relationships, contexts, or events. As Schutz (1967) puts it, this process of “typification” takes place through a “synthesis of recognition” by which actors recognize the “sameness,” “likeness,” or “analogy” of an emerging experience with those of the past, either within the actor’s direct memory or within a social memory as objectified in various media of communication (see also Alexander 1988, pp. 301–33). While emergent situations never completely match

these simplifying idealizations, actors tend to retrospectively assimilate new experiences to the old by means of an “enveloping” procedure by which differences or faulty “fits” are smoothed over through use of what Garfinkel (1984) calls the *et cetera clause*. Through this active process of recognition and assimilation, actors contribute to a sense of continuity and order within temporally evolving experiences.

Categorical location.—Social actors not only identify similarities between past and present types of experiences; they also locate these typifications in relation to other persons, contexts, or events within matrices composed of socially recognized categories of identity and value. These matrices may be built upon sets of binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Douglas 1985; Bourdieu 1977; Alexander 1988*b*), which delineate physical, social, and normative categories; as Bourdieu argues, such homologous systems of oppositions constitute transposable schemas by means of which fields of social relationships can be objectively mapped. On the other hand, these classificatory schemas may also be nonbinary and composed of more complex multivalent networks of relationships, containing nuanced lines of inclusion and exclusion, acceptability and nonacceptability, within crosscutting contexts of action. Although for the most part these matrices are unreflective and taken for granted, actors must still exercise effort in order to locate correctly where given experiences fit within them and thus keep social relationships working along established lines.

Maneuver among repertoires.—As we have seen, the employment of routines is not mechanically or situationally determined; rather, it requires a process of selection from practical repertoires of habitual activity. While repertoires are limited by individual and collective histories and may be more or less extensive and flexible, they do require a certain degree of maneuverability in order to assure the appropriateness of the response to the situation at hand. (Here the iterational dimension most closely resembles what we shall later describe as practical evaluation.) In unproblematic situations, this maneuvering is semiconscious or taken for granted, the result of an incorporation of schemas of action into one’s embodied practical activity. On the other hand, the application of such repertoires remains intentional insofar as it allows one to get things done through habitual interactions or negotiations (allowing Bourdieu to speak of the paradox of “intentionless intentions”). As Bourdieu notes, there may be much ingenuity and resourcefulness to the selection of responses from practical repertoires, even when this contributes to the reproduction of a given structure of social relationships.

Expectation maintenance.—One of the results of the various forms of schematization described above is that they provide actors with more or less reliable knowledge of social relationships, which allows them to pre-

dict what will happen in the future. These patterns of expectations give stability and continuity to action, the sense that “I can do it again,” as well as “trust” that others will also act in predictable ways (Schutz 1967; Garfinkel 1963, 1984). (Here we encounter the subtone in the chordal structure of iteration that most approximates the projective dimension of agency.) The maintenance of expectations regarding how oneself and others will act is not an automatic process: one’s expectations about the future can break down (requiring what Garfinkel calls *repair*) due to disruptions, misunderstandings, and changes in systems of relevance. The maintenance work that goes into sustaining expectations has practical as well as ontological importance, allowing not only for a sense of consistent identity amidst change (Pizzorno 1986; Melucci 1994), but also for social coordination within contingent and interdependent environments.

Iteration in Empirical Research

The iterational orientation of agency has already proved a rich source of research questions in a variety of social science disciplines. Here we explore how such research opens up a number of intriguing lines of inquiry into the reciprocal relationship—the ongoing dialogue or conversation—between the agency in its iterational modality and a wide range of temporal-relational contexts of action.

Cultural competences.—Research building upon Bourdieu’s notion of habitus proves highly useful in showing how different formative experiences, such as those influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, or class backgrounds, deeply shape the web of cognitive, affective, and bodily schemas through which actors come to know how to act in particular social worlds. Ann Swidler (1986) evokes Bourdieu in speaking of the “cultural toolbox” of practical competences that predispose actors to feel a fit within some actions and not others. Although Loïc Wacquant (1992*b*) criticizes the implicit instrumentalism of Swidler’s account, his work on boxing in Chicago ghetto neighborhoods sounds similar themes by exploring how embodied competences and classificatory schemas first learned within the street environment underlie boxers’ subsequent engagement of the “pugilistic field.” Likewise, Michèle Lamont’s (1992) research into money, morals, and manners in France and the United States examines how classificatory schemas developed within particular class, race, and national settings influence the boundary work of social actors in articulating tastes and aspirations, as well as in distinguishing themselves from other social groups. In such ways, these writers claim, the agentic reactivation of schemas inculcated through past experience tends to correspond to (and thus to reproduce) societal patterns: “Social structures and cognitive structures

are recursively and structurally linked, and the correspondence that obtains between them provides one of the most solid props of social domination" (Wacquant 1992a, p. 14).

Reproduction through creativity.—While the above authors tend to focus upon the "closeness of fit" between the habitus and subsequent agentic activity, others operating in a similar tradition emphasize the conflictual and contradictory relationships between human agency and social reproduction. For example, Paul Willis (1977), in his study of the cultural creativity of rebellious working-class lads, argues that their interactively generated criticism and rejection of middle-class trajectories was shaped by their working-class experience and leads, ironically, to the reproduction of their subordinate class position. From a social-psychological perspective, William Corsaro demonstrates how children reproduce adult culture through the creative and interactive elaboration of peer routines: "Socialization is not something that happens to children; it is a process in which children, in interaction with others, produce their own peer culture and eventually come to reproduce, to extend, and to join the adult world" (Corsaro 1992, p. 175). Likewise, Garfinkel (1984) shows in a famous case study how "Agnes," an "intersexed person," deploys tremendous effort and ingenuity in order to negotiate the taken-for-granted dimension of social interactions and thereby to *pass* as a woman according to dominant social norms. While these accounts represent heightened degrees of conscious purpose (Garfinkel), creative embellishment (Corsaro), and/or critical penetration (Willis), and thus brush up against the second and third dimensions of agency, the iterational dimension remains primary, since choices continue to reflect a deeper stratum of culturally and social-psychologically rooted predispositions, thereby contributing to the reproduction of social structures.

Life course development.—Recent research on life course development also inquires into the formative influence of past experiences on agentic processes (Berteaux 1981; Elder 1985, 1994; O'Rand and Krecker 1990). In the tradition of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), such research explores the connection between social structures and social-psychological development, as manifested in the life trajectories resulting from particular intersections of biography and history. The implication for agency is that neither social structures nor psychological traits in themselves determine habits of action; rather, actors develop relatively stable patterns of interaction in active response to historical situations. For example, Glenn Elder's (1974) study of cohort effects during the Great Depression demonstrates how family interactions amid periods of economic hardship work to shape emotional and cultural resources and thus precondition subsequent life careers. Other researchers (Kohli 1986; Meyer 1986) focus upon the institutionalized nature of life course trajectories, which socialize individuals

in relation to prestructured stages and pathways; however, they argue that this does not eliminate the role of agency in the construction of life directions: "The individual life course has to be conceptualized not as a behavioral outcome of macrosocial organizations (or of its interaction with psychological properties of the individual) but as the result of the subject's constructive activity in dealing with the available life course programs" (Kohli 1986, p. 272).

Typification within organizations.—Finally, the importance of habit and routine in shaping interactions is stressed in organizational analysis, particularly by the so-called new institutionalists (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Zucker 1977, 1983; March and Olsen 1976, 1984). Reacting against overly instrumental and purposive views of organizational life, many of these researchers draw heavily upon ethnomethodological, phenomenological, and cognitive approaches, emphasizing the routinized, taken-for-granted (or "scripted") quality of knowledge and action that makes organizations relatively stable and resistant to change. Institutional decisions do not develop through rational cost-benefit analysis, but rather are embedded in established routines and become "rationalized" (and thereby legitimated) only through retrospective accounting processes. This approach allows such researchers to argue that the persistence and/or resistance to change of practices within organizations may be due less to social sanctions or to formal structure than to the degree of institutionalization of informal patterns of shared beliefs and socialized expectations (Zucker 1977; Meyer, Scott, and Deal 1981). The strong formative influence of the past can also be seen in the perseverance of organizational procedures even in the face of inefficiency, due to the imprint of founding practices that commit organizations to routines (Nystrom and Starbuck 1984; Powell 1986).

THE PROJECTIVE DIMENSION OF AGENCY

One key limitation of many contemporary theories of agency is that they tend to restrict the discussion of human agency to its iterational dimension. While such theorists as Bourdieu and Giddens do, in fact, recuperate the creative, improvisational, and foresightful dimensions of the implementation of practical schemas of action—what we call here maneuver and expectation—they focus upon a low level of reflectivity and do not show us how such schemas can be challenged, reconsidered, and reformulated.¹⁴ By contrast, we maintain that human actors do not merely repeat

¹⁴ This is not to say, on the other hand, that these authors see change as impossible; Giddens's idea of "discursive consciousness" and Bourdieu's calls for a "reflexive sociology" suggest that each believes a certain increase in freedom and flexibility of action is possible, as one becomes more conscious of one's situation. However, their frame-

past routines; they are also the inventors of new possibilities for thought and action (see also Joas 1993). To understand this creative reconstructive dimension of agency, we must shift our analytic attention away from actors' orientation toward the past and focus upon how agentic processes give shape and direction to *future* possibilities. We argue that an imaginative engagement of the future is also a crucial component of the effort of human actors. As they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from the schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions. This capacity for what Mead calls "distance experience" enables them to reconstruct and innovate upon those traditions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes. The subset of words used to describe this ability has ranged from the strongly purposive terminology of goals, plans, and objectives to the more ephemeral language of dreams, wishes, desires, anxieties, hopes, fears, and aspirations. In this article, we term it the *projective* dimension of human agency.

In our view, projectivity is neither radically voluntarist nor narrowly instrumentalist; the formation of projects is always an interactive, culturally embedded process by which social actors negotiate their paths toward the future, receiving their driving impetus from the conflicts and challenges of social life. The locus of agency here lies in the *hypothesization* of experience, as actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative possible responses to the problematic situations they confront in their lives. Immersed in a temporal flow, they move "beyond themselves" into the future and construct changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present. Such images can be conceived of with varying degrees of clarity and detail and extend with greater or lesser reach into the future; they entail proposed interventions at diverse and intersecting levels of social life. Projectivity is thus located in a critical mediating juncture between the iterational and practical-evaluative aspects of agency. It involves a first step toward reflectivity, as the response of a desirous imagination to problems that cannot satisfactorily be resolved by the taken-for-granted habits of thought and action that characterize the background structure of the social world.¹⁵

works do not help us to analyze this possibility, nor do they give us the tools to recognize it in the course of doing empirical research.

¹⁵ Here we need to take great care to avoid misinterpreting what we call the future-oriented aspect of imagination. The desirous imagination is certainly directed toward the past as well as the future; the reconstructive dimension of memory has been well documented by research in this area (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Schwartz 1991; Halbwachs 1992; Olick and Levy 1997; Olick 1997). Mead himself (1932, p. 12) makes this point by insisting that "the past (or the meaningful structure of the past) is as hypothetical as the future." He also stresses, however, that the reason actors engage

Projectivity: The History of a Concept

We wish to stress from the outset that projectivity does not always generate morally superior or desirable engagements with problematic situations. Its potential inventiveness can yield responses as benign and mundane as the projects to grow a garden, to start a business, or to patch up a family relationship, or as sweeping and destructive as the project to establish a 1,000-year Reich. We also wish to stress that not all time periods, cultures, theoretical traditions, or even individuals are equally projective. As Niklas Luhmann (1990) points out, “ancient” conceptions of time (according to which an “enduring present” confronts a temporal flow in which the future is largely predetermined by the past), can be clearly distinguished from “modern” conceptions, in which experience is conceived of as moving toward an indeterminate future, which is purposefully constructed through means-ends rationality. Moreover, many non-Western cultures have alternative constructions of the relationship between past, present, and future, which constrain and enable particular forms of social creativity and reproduction. Our premise is simply that the specific culturally embedded ways in which people imagine, talk about, negotiate, and make commitments to their futures influence their degree of freedom and maneuverability in relation to existing structures (i.e., it *matters* to what degree they understand time as something fixed and determinate, or conversely, as something open and negotiable). These points will become clearer as we examine the historical development of the notion of projectivity in philosophical thought.

Classical and Enlightenment conceptions.—From the Hebraic and ancient Greek traditions, we gain important early conceptions of the projective capacity of human beings. In *Exodus and Revolution* (1985), Michael Walzer offers a compelling interpretation of early biblical narratives, showing how visions by the Jewish people of the future and their own relationship to it—ideas of the covenant, redemption, and promised land—came later to influence Christian narratives of redemption, as well as the discourse of revolutionary politics in the modern world. Within the

in such imaginative reconstruction of past experience is that they confront emergent situations involving new future horizons; that is, the reconstruction of the past is carried out with (more or less explicit) reference to future desires, concerns, and possibilities. We can make the even stronger claim that as action within a given context becomes more self-reflective, the future dimension gains in salience; this is implied, as Joas (1985, p. 192) points out, by Mead’s insistence that all self-reflective activity, regardless of the richness with which it engages the past, is “essentially referred to the future. . . . It directs itself to the organism’s present attitudes that have been formed by the past, becomes aware of their implicit reference to the future, and thereby becomes capable of experimentally testing alternative future possibilities in the present and then deliberately to construct the plan of its own action.”

more static destiny-bound framework of the ancient Greeks, however, the future did not have the centrality it has today as an object of human imagination and action (Kearney 1988). Plato was deeply suspicious of the imagination as a source of illusion, irrationality, and immorality, in opposition to the pure, ideal, and eternal world of rational form. From Aristotle's realist epistemology, on the other hand, came the beginnings of a more benign view of the imagination as a psychological link between sensation and reason, which, while not exactly "productive" in the way Kant and the later Romantics would see it, did provide the basis for rational deliberation about the future by allowing social actors to transcend the bounds of sensible experience. Aristotle also gave us the key conception of the telos of action as a basis for means-ends rationality, a view that provides philosophic grounding for prevailing Western instrumentalist narratives about the future.

Tensions between these two contributions of the Aristotelian legacy can later be found in early modern divisions between an affirmation of the moral conscience and the transcendental imagination (which is idealized as the "privileged expression of human freedom" [Kearney 1988, p. 175]), and the abstractly rational—and imaginatively impoverished—instrumentality of the utilitarian tradition. These conflicting concerns eventually gained systematic expression in the dualist philosophy of Kant (which accorded primacy, however, finally to the "practical" or transcendental moment), as well as in the Utilitarian and Romantic currents of the late 18th and 19th centuries. They also gained expression in the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, with their focus upon the telos of history and the relation between objective interests and subjective liberation (see Marx 1978). As we have seen, in present-day sociology, these currents most strongly manifest themselves, on the one hand, in rational choice perspectives, with their stress upon purposive-rational action and, on the other hand, in normative approaches that stress cultural ideals and moral action, the pursuit and realization of ultimate values.

Phenomenological and existentialist perspectives.—Beginning in the late 19th century, we encounter yet another line of reasoning—that of phenomenology and existentialism—that contributes to the development of theories regarding the projective dimension of agency. Building upon Edmund Husserl's (1960) theory of the temporal structure of experience, as well as the passionate dialectics of Søren Kierkegaard, philosophers in this tradition depict actors as "thrown" into historically evolving situations; out of the anguish, uncertainty, and longing that arise from the condition of "becoming," actors necessarily "project" themselves into their own possibilities of being. Reflection about the future is characterized by emotional engagement, "for when existence is interpenetrated with reflection it generates passion" (Kierkegaard 1944, p. 313). Martin Heidegger

(1962) terms this dimension *care* (*Sorge*), the preconscious affective engagement of the world that constitutes the “forestructure” of action; actors invest effort in the formulation of projects because in some way or other they *care* about (not just “have an interest in”) what will happen to them in the future.¹⁶ As Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) later stresses, this emotional engagement of the future always implies a thrust to surpass our basic condition of incompleteness: “The fundamental project of the for-itself is to achieve a coincidence with what it lacks” (Bernstein 1971, p. 139).

The bridge from the existential and phenomenological traditions to the sociological preoccupation with shared meaning is made by Schutz (1962, 1967), who stresses “the project” as a fundamental unit of action. Schutz (1967, p. 61) brings Husserl’s basically epistemological observations into the realm of action theory, pointing out that “*the meaning of any action is its corresponding projected act.*” Projects represent the completed act-to-be as imagined in the future perfect tense; “*The unity of the action is a function of the span or breadth of the project*” (Schutz 1967, p. 62; emphasis in the original). Here Schutz takes up the question bracketed by rational choice theory: he is interested not in behavioral outcomes, but rather in how forward-looking (but not always utility-maximizing) actors actually construct choices out of fluid and shifting fields of possibilities. For Schutz, purposeful action is rarely guided by the abstract objective analysis of means and ends, or by the clear choice between alternatives, that rational choice theorists propose (ironically, in common with Parsons [Schutz 1978; Joas 1996]). Not only is action limited and shaped by typifications from past experiences, but, more important, both means and ends are always temporally evolving, multiply inflected, and marked by high degrees of indeterminacy. Plans and purposes undergo a continual process of projective “phantasying,” in which “rays of attention” are focused upon a plurality of possible future states until choices detach themselves, “like overripe fruit,” from the subjective horizons of future actions (Schutz 1967, pp. 67–68).¹⁷

Pragmatist perspectives.—While the existentialist and phenomenological traditions highlight the centrality of projects for human life, they prove

¹⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, p. 87) draws heavily upon Heidegger—as well as Aristotle and Marx—in his own theory of “the imaginative constitution of society”: “To do something, to do a book, to make a child, a revolution, or just doing as such, is projecting oneself into a future situation which is opened up on all sides to the unknown.”

¹⁷ In contrast to most rational choice theorists, Schutz (1967, p. 69) maintains that choices are highly unstable and only gain relative clarity after the act has been completed, through ex post facto reflection: “The error is to suppose that the conscious state, which only exists after the deed is done, lies back at some ‘point of duration’ before the actual choice.”

less helpful in showing what projects are good for—that is, how our projective capacity is essential to problem solving within a community. Here, once again, we can turn to the pragmatists, who in addition to their concern with routine, are deeply attuned to the imaginative flexibility of actors' deliberations about the future. Dewey (1981, p. 61), for example, characterizes the experimental relationship with the future as an essential dimension of human action: "Experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with the future is its salient trait." Human intelligence is based upon the capacity to "read future results in present on-goings" (Dewey 1981, p. 69); this projective capacity permits the kind of responsive choice and inventive manipulation of the physical and social worlds that is so essential to democratic participation. Likewise, Mead (1934) stresses the essentially intersubjective dimension of projectivity, arguing that our basic self-concept is developed from the capacity to project ourselves into the experiences of others. The imaginative capacity of the "I" to move between multiple situationally variable "me's" is what constitutes freedom and maneuverability in relation to established roles, as well as making possible social coordination, joint problem solving, and collective projects of social reform. In the pragmatist view, projects are not constituted merely by "thrownness" into an uncertain world that condemns us to freedom, but also by the practical exercise of that freedom along with others in pursuit of a common good.

The Internal Structure of Projectivity

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the concept of projectivity has a rich legacy in philosophy and in sociological theory. Our own conception builds critically upon the insights of the above-mentioned theorists but seeks to give a more concrete elaboration of how projectivity actually works in social processes. As in the previous section, we outline several important processes involved in the projection of future action, keeping in mind again that these overlap with and feed into one another, interacting in an open-ended, recursive, and synergistic fashion. We differentiate between three dominant tones within the internal chordal structure of projectivity: *narrative construction*, *symbolic recomposition*, and *hypothetical resolution*. In addition, we again point to secondary tones that orient actors toward the other two dimensions of time: relationships to the past through a retrospective-prospective process of *identification*, in which possible trajectories are located against a backdrop of prior typifications from experience, and relationships to the present through *experimentation*, in which alternative courses of action are tentatively enacted in response to currently emerging situations.

Anticipatory identification.—Alternatives are seldom clearly and neatly presented, but neither is the future an open book. Understanding the limited and yet flexible structure of future possibilities involves the work of identifying patterns of possible developments in an often vague and indeterminate future horizon. As Schutz (1967) tells us, this anticipatory work is done by means of a retrospective engagement with one's prior "stock of knowledge" as stored in typifications, repertoires, and social narratives. This retrospective-prospective process shows the essential role of memory in the mapping of future trajectories of action. (In this way, it draws the past into the internal structure of projectivity.) We draw upon past experiences in order to clarify motives, goals, and intentions, to locate possible future constraints, and to identify morally and practically appropriate courses of action. Such anticipatory identifications are never accomplished once and for all, but rather are subject to continual reevaluation in light of the shifting and multidimensional character of human motivations and social relationships.

Narrative construction.—Such identification of typical trajectories is closely tied to the construction of narratives that locate future possibilities in relation to more or less coherent causal and temporal sequences. While narratives are not identical with projects (since narratives represent a particular cultural structure that may exist independently of intentionality), they do provide cultural resources by which actors can develop a sense of movement forward in time (i.e., the proverbial beginning, middle, and end). Jerome Bruner (1986) notes that the plots of such stories contain at least three basic elements: *plight*, *character*, and *consciousness*; these elements help actors to visualize proposed resolutions to lived conflicts (see also Taylor 1989). All social groups possess repertoires of stories that serve as temporal framing resources and that help to define membership in a community (Carr 1986; Somers 1992); the degree of specificity and complexity with which futures are imagined is closely related to the salience of existing narratives and the "careers" (White 1992) that they present as both morally and practically acceptable. While narratives provide "maps of action" (Ricoeur 1991) and thus help to institutionalize stages in the life course (Meyer 1986), they also, because of their flexible and metaphorical structure, can be used to experimentally posit new resolutions to emerging problems.

Symbolic recomposition.—The projective imagination works in a way analogous to the capacity of metaphor to create semantic innovation; it takes elements of meaning apart in order to bring them back together again in new unexpected combinations. Paul Ricoeur (1991, pp. 173–74) describes the imagination as the "free play of possibilities in a state of non-involvement with respect to the world of perception or of action." Actors playfully insert themselves into a variety of possible trajectories

and spin out alternative means-ends sequences, thereby expanding their flexible response to a given field of action. In this play of scenarios, (relatively) freed of practical constraints, symbolic codes, schemas, and narratives can be creatively reconfigured due to their multivocal, homologous, and transposable character (Alexander 1988, pp. 301–33). This process has an intersubjective transactional dimension; for example, in game theory, actors make decisions on the basis of imaginative scenarios regarding the simultaneous imaginative projections by other actors (Axelrod 1984). In a potentially less agonistic fashion, joint projections of action scenarios provide communicative bases for the formulation of new strategies for collective action (Melucci 1989), as well as for the development of new social policies, normative ideals, or ways of organizing institutions (McLoughlin 1978; Castoriadis 1987).

Hypothetical resolution.—After surveying possible scenarios of action, actors face the task of proposing hypothetical resolutions that will adequately respond to the moral, practical, and emotional concerns arising from lived conflicts. The fact that all of our conflicts are overdetermined and that our sense of relevance changes over the course of a lifetime, usually means that such resolutions will be *synthetic* in nature; they will often attempt to resolve several conflicts simultaneously and to incorporate different fields of intended action. A career project, for example, may jointly address a person's desire for money, status, accomplishment, and creative expression, as well as the hope to make a difference in the wider world. Likewise, by participating in social movements, one may attempt to resolve social problems while simultaneously gaining the opportunity for peer recognition, solidarity, rebelliousness, and organizational achievement. While all of these resolutions are not necessarily present at the outset as clearly articulated goals of action (and may be understood, if at all, only through ex post facto reflection), most actors, when pressed, will give more or less differentiated and multivalent descriptions of what they "want" or "intend" in their plans to pursue a particular course of action.

Experimental enactment.—This final dimension of projectivity rests on the borderline between imagination and action (and hence between the future and the present); once scenarios have been examined and solutions proposed, these hypothetical resolutions may be put to the test in tentative or exploratory social interactions. Psychologists such as Erik Erikson (1968) speak of this as "role experimentation," particularly salient during adolescence, by means of which individuals try out possible identities without committing themselves to the full responsibilities involved. Experimental enactments often have ritual overtones, which have been studied in versions of symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959) as well as dra-

maturgic anthropology. Victor Turner (1974), for example, describes the “social dramas” that are enacted during “liminal periods” in which societies ritualistically reverse social roles. Although Turner stresses how such dramas reinforce the social order, we would argue that these liminal experimental periods may also have a transformative and renovational effect upon the larger culture, as new possibilities for human interactions are imagined, tested, and (perhaps) defined on a collective scale.

Projectivity in Empirical Research

In considering how past patterns of interaction are imaginatively recomposed to generate new future possibilities, we open up a richly suggestive field for sociological research. This is in contrast with much of empirical sociology, where, despite its extensive philosophical legacy, the notion of projects has largely been ignored, due in part to its perceived subjective nature and the apparent incompatibility of “imaginative” phenomena with behavioral observation, survey techniques, and macrostructural analysis. We argue that projectivity needs to be rescued from the subjectivist ghetto and put to use in empirical research as an essential element in understanding processes of social reproduction and change. Many of the elements outlined above have, in fact, been addressed by a wide body of literature in various social science disciplines, albeit in an undertheorized and residual way. Here we discuss several of these approaches (and their limitations), in order to point toward future research on the interplay between the projective dimension of agency and the different temporal-relational contexts of action.

Time perspectives.—While most life course approaches in sociology have tended to focus upon the influence of past experiences on subsequent life paths, a well-developed subfield in social psychology has explored questions more directly linked to projectivity. Since the 1940s, research has been carried out on “time perspective” and its influence on such matters as academic success and civilian morale (Lewin 1948); more recently, researchers in this area have investigated changes in time perspective during different developmental periods, such as childhood, adolescence, middle adulthood, and old age. Of particular relevance to projectivity are studies of the construction of future expectations, examining such factors as variability in the density and extension of imagined future events, linked to cognitive development and/or particular social contexts such as family or class background (Cottle and Klineberg 1974; Devolder and Lens 1982; Wessman and Gorman 1977; Greene 1986, 1990). While much of this research is limited by overly behavioral and correlational assumptions, recent theorists of narrativity have added an interpretive dimension

to life course studies (Gergen and Gergen 1983, 1984, 1988; Bruner 1986; Sarbin 1986), exploring how personal conceptions about past and future are transformed at key moments of transition and/or crisis (Riegel 1975, 1977; Cohler 1982).

Prophetic movements.—A second line of work that directly engages projectivity is the extensive literature on prophetic, utopian, and revolutionary movements. While such literature can be criticized for its overemphasis on cultural (as opposed to social-structural or social-psychological) factors, we argue (along with Desroche [1979] and Ricoeur [1991]) that the projective imagination as expressed in collective ideals and aspirations plays a constitutive, not just an epiphenomenal, role in a wide variety of historical phenomena, ranging from millenarian movements, religious cults, alternative communities, and revolutionary organizations, to more generalized forms of cultural revival. For example, Norman Cohn (1977, pp. 16–17) argues that millenarian projections appearing in Europe during the 11th–16th centuries resulted in very different kinds of movements than the more limited localized peasant or artisan revolts of the period: “The usual desire of the poor to improve the material conditions of their lives became transfused with phantasies of a world reborn into innocence through a final, apocalyptic massacre.” Likewise, William McLoughlin (1978, p. 2) claims that major “great awakenings” during periods of uncertainty and change in American history led to cathartic revivals that “eventuated in basic restructurings of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals.” Finally, both Marxist and non-Marxist historians of revolutions (e.g., Thompson 1966, 1993; Walzer 1965, 1980) explore the projective dimensions of revolutionary movements, which Walzer defines as “conscious attempts to establish a new moral and material world and to impose, or evoke, radically new patterns of day-to-day conduct.” Revolution itself, he concludes, “is a project” (Walzer 1980, pp. 202–3).

Framing processes.—The projective imagination is also a factor in less apocalyptic forms of social movements and efforts at institutional reform. Most work in this well-researched area fails to adequately theorize the projective dimension, due in part to the paradigmatic split during the 1970s and 1980s between “strategy” and “identity” (Cohen 1985). This split, which goes back to the Kantian division between interests and ideals, has had the effect of severing two intrinsically linked dimensions of projectivity: strategies are stripped of meaning and reflexivity, while identities are temporally flattened out and shorn of their orienting power (Mische 1994).¹⁸ Recent attempts to bring the two paradigms together (see Mor-

¹⁸ Mische (1997, pp. 7–8) has further developed this critique in an empirical study of projectivity and social movements, arguing that the concept of projectivity allows

ris and Mueller 1992) have resulted in concepts approximating projectivity, such as that of framing in collective action (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; Gamson 1992; Tarrow 1992; for an alternative formulation, see Steinberg [1996]). Despite its structuralist overtones, the notion of frames (or more accurately, framing processes) “implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Snow and Benford 1992, p. 136). Framing is both *diagnostic* and *prognostic*: it suggests “a general line of action for ameliorating the problem and the assignment of responsibility for carrying out that action” (Snow and Benford 1992, p. 137). In proposing new social ends as well as different means for arriving at them, actors draw upon—and sometimes extend, rearrange, and transform—the master frames extant in the broader political culture.

Institutional innovation.—A fourth research area in which projectivity is important (but as yet underdeveloped) is that of institutional innovation and change. As we have seen, the new institutionalists reacted against rational-choice views of organizational decision making by, in effect, eclipsing the projective dimension, arguing that institutional purposes are embedded in routines that come to light only in post hoc accounting practices. But recently, some organizational researchers (DiMaggio 1988, 1991; Galaskiewicz 1991; Fligstein 1991; Brint and Karabel 1991) have tried to recuperate the purposeful and conflict-driven aspect of organizations and to pay more attention to processes of institution building and reform. Paul DiMaggio (1991), for example, invokes the language of projectivity (albeit without theorizing it) in his study of the struggles of museum professionals over the model of art museum to be imposed on a developing organizational field. DiMaggio (1991, p. 277) shows how opportunities for “professional projects” “reinforced the awareness that they were part of a collective enterprise, and thus the likelihood that they would look to one another as models and as sources of innovation.” These projects were constructed by drawing contentiously upon the “Western cultural account” of justice and progress (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987), showing the importance of narrative reconstruction in the development of collective projects of action.

us to supersede the split between rational choice and norm-based (or identity-based) perspectives on collective action: “Projects are simultaneously moral, practical, and political in scope, weaving together ideals and interests, protest and proposals, utopian alternatives and pragmatic assessments of opportunity structures.” Similarly, projectivity challenges the divide between rational choice and cultural determinism: “Projects are the means by which actors imaginatively formulate purposive actions, but these are always composed from the cultural narratives and repertoires at hand. . . . In contrast to the abstract voluntarism of rational-choice theory, moreover, the construction of projects is situationally contingent, subject to learning processes and revision, and always surrounded by a high degree of uncertainty.”

THE PRACTICAL-EVALUATIVE DIMENSION OF AGENCY

The final variation we examine in the chordal triad of agency is that which responds to the demands and contingencies of the present. Even relatively unreflective routine dispositions must be adjusted to the exigencies of changing situations; and newly imagined projects must be brought down to earth within real-world circumstances. Moreover, judgments and choices must often be made in the face of considerable ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict; means and ends sometimes contradict each other, and unintended consequences require changes in strategy and direction. "A rule doesn't [just] apply itself; it has to be applied, and this may involve difficult, finely tuned judgments. . . . There is, as it were, a crucial 'phronetic gap' between the formula and its enactment" (Taylor 1993, p. 57). The problematization of experience in response to emergent situations thus calls for increasingly reflective and interpretive work on the part of social actors. This exercise of situationally based judgment has been variously termed practical wisdom, prudence, art, tact, discretion, application, improvisation, and intelligence; here we designate it as the *practical-evaluative* dimension of agency.

The primary locus of agency in its practical-evaluative dimension lies in the *contextualization* of social experience. Again, we echo the pragmatists in stressing the communicative transactional dimension of such processes; through deliberation with others (or sometimes, self-reflexively, with themselves) about the pragmatic and normative exigencies of lived situations, actors gain in the capacity to make considered decisions that may challenge received patterns of action. This communicative process is what distinguishes the "strong" situational moment of deliberative decision making from the "weak" situatedness of what we call, in the iterative dimension, tacit maneuver. By increasing their capacity for practical evaluation, actors strengthen their ability to exercise agency in a *mediating* fashion, enabling them (at least potentially) to pursue their projects in ways that may challenge and transform the situational contexts of action themselves (although, given the contingency and uncertainty of interactions, the consequences of their actions cannot be controlled and will often "feed back" in ways that necessitate new agentic interventions).

Practical Evaluation: The History of a Concept

Despite its long history, the concept of practical evaluation has received less sustained and systematic treatment during modern times than it did in the ancient or medieval periods. In contemporary action theory and moral philosophy, it has been overshadowed by an emphasis upon clear and explicit rules of conduct, concepts that permit relatively little scope for the exercise of situationally based judgment. In social theory, modern

concerns with explicit decision procedures and a widespread “flight from ambiguity” (Levine 1985) and judgment have become evident in a host of analytical perspectives—not only rational choice theory, but also less explicit yet equally instrumentalist conceptions of social action, dating back at least to Max Weber’s discussions of *Zweck-* and *Wertrationalität* (Weber 1978). Even Durkheim (1961, pp. 31, 26) sees morality, by definition, as a “system of commandments,” “an infinity of special rules [that are] fixed and specific.” “To the extent,” he writes, “that the rule leaves us free [and] does not prescribe in detail what we ought to do, the action being left to our own judgment, to that extent there is no moral valuation” (Durkheim 1961, pp. 23–24).

Aristotelian perspectives on practical wisdom.—We must return once again to Aristotle’s writings on ethics for one of the earliest (and most fully developed) theories of prudence or practical wisdom. In marked contrast to later rule-based theories, Aristotle holds that “three features of ‘the matter of the practical’ . . . show why practical choices cannot be adequately and completely captured in a system of universal rules” (Nussbaum 1986, pp. 303–4): the mutability of the particular, its indeterminacy (complexity and contextual variety), and its inherent nonrepeatability.¹⁹ Also, the values, rules, and principles that are constitutive of a good human life are themselves plural and incommensurable; hence, a concern for situated judgments supplants any simple belief in the unproblematic application of universal norms or imperatives (Nussbaum 1986, pp. 303–4, 294–95). In Aristotle’s view, practical wisdom can refer variously to means or to ends; it can be either strategic and calculative—in which case, he says, we can speak of persons as being clever, crafty, or cunning—or it can be concerned with broader questions of the good life itself (Aristotle 1985, p. 153). Aristotle sees practical wisdom as intrinsically communicative in nature; that is, it entails a deep involvement and participation in an ongoing community of discourse. Far from being purely individual or monological, it remains open to dialogue and persuasion and is profoundly implicated in common values, interests, and purposes.

Theories of judgment and critical deliberation.—A significant break with this legacy comes about with Kantian ethics, which regards prudence not as a virtue, as did so many earlier moral theories, but rather as a vehicle for cold and selfish calculation, expediency, and pragmatism. And yet, especially in his later work, even Kant indirectly provides a theory of practical evaluation.²⁰ Moreover, he adds that practical judgments (spe-

¹⁹ “Perhaps the most obvious and astonishing absence from Aristotle’s thought for any modern reader is that there is relatively little mention of rules anywhere in the *Ethics*” (MacIntyre 1981, p. 141).

²⁰ For Kant’s early critical views of prudence, see Kant (1956), pp. 16, 37–38; (1964), p. 83. For his later work on practical judgment, see Kant (1971), pp. 389–90. In the

cifically, judgments of taste) fall within the potentiality of all persons since they “depend . . . on our presupposing the existence of a common sense [*sensus communis*]” (Kant 1951, p. 83). Kant links such “common sense” to what he calls the capacity for an “enlarged mentality,” in which judgment is carried out by abstracting from one’s own limited experience in order to put oneself in the position of everyone else and thus to deliberate over the collective good. Such an idea recalls Aristotle’s notion of a community of discourse, as well as the more distinctively modern theme of autonomy, since judgment no longer depends upon the subjectivity and caprice of concrete individuals.

More recent examples of theories that fully embrace the critical and dialogic aspects of practical evaluation can be found in the writings of John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas. Dewey subsumes Kant’s insights on reflective judgment into his own pragmatist—and eminently relational—theory of judgment. In “The Logic of Judgments of Practice” (1985), he points out that all such judgments begin with a problematic experience, a fork in the road, which they attempt experimentally to resolve. Judgments gain intersubjective validity from assuming the standpoint of a *sensus communis*, “a whole of common interests and purposes” (Dewey 1978, p. 286). Arendt (1984, p. 36) also expands upon Kant by maintaining that reflective judgment is not limited to aesthetics but represents “the most political of man’s mental abilities.” She builds upon Kant’s notion of the enlarged mentality, which she terms “representative thinking,” describing it as the ability to see things from the perspective of others, “an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement” (Arendt 1977a, pp. 220; see also Arendt 1977b; Behabib 1992b). And finally, Habermas (1990, 1993) engages Kant’s doctrine of judgment while insisting that he is correcting Kant’s ethical rigorism; to a Kantian “discourse of justification” he adds a more Aristotelian “discourse of application.” In developing his theory of communicative action, Habermas retains a Kantian emphasis upon deliberation and intersubjective validity, even as he objects to the emptiness of Kantian ethics itself.²¹

Critique of Judgment, Kant (1951, p. 18) distinguishes between “determinate” and “reflective” judgments; the former merely subsume the particular under a rule or universal already given for it, while the latter are “compelled to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal.” For Kant, logical and moral judgments belong to the former category, while judgments of taste belong to the latter and necessarily involve practical evaluation.

²¹ A more ambiguous example (from within the Kantian tradition) of implicit reasoning in respect to practical evaluation is Max Weber’s (1946) classic discussion of “responsible action” (see also Roth and Schluchter [1979], chap. 2), which requires an “open-eyed” apprehension of concrete situations and of the possible (unintended) consequences of action within them. Weber’s analysis is an ambiguous one because, unlike

Feminist theories.—Meanwhile, many feminist thinkers critically draw upon both Aristotelian and Kantian outlooks on practical evaluation in analyzing the particular capacities, experiences, and histories of women, while also generalizing from these experiences to develop broader (less “essentializing”) theories of moral and practical reasoning. One important contribution is Carol Gilligan’s (1982, p. 22) *In a Different Voice*, which stresses gender differences in the use of situated reasoning and a “contextual mode of judgment” and thereby seeks to overcome the limitations of Kant’s abstract universalistic conceptions of moral judgment and action (e.g., Kohlberg 1981). From a very different perspective, Donna Haraway (1988), too, criticizes established understandings of “objectivity,” and calls instead for “situated knowledges” grounded in the particularities of partial “limited” locations. Finally, Seyla Benhabib stresses processes of dialogue and public deliberation in her own communicative conception of practical judgment: there is “no incompatibility,” she writes, “between the exercise of moral intuition guided by an egalitarian and universalist model of moral conversation [Kant] and the exercise of contextual judgment [Aristotle]” (Benhabib 1992a, p. 54; see also Benhabib 1987, 1992c).

The Internal Structure of Practical Evaluation

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, practical evaluation as a concept is associated with many different forms of activity: with cognitive, moral, and aesthetic judgment as well as with general modes of practical consciousness and action; with expansive ideals of universality, together with more restrictive notions of gendered identities and social positions; with cleverness and calculation, and yet also with enlarged thinking and public deliberation. Here we examine the internal structure of practical evaluation, showing how certain of its dimensions are implicated in all of the manifestations mentioned above. We suggest that three dominant tones within its internal chordal structure can be distinguished as *problem-ization*, *decision*, and *execution*, all of which require the contextualization of projects or of habitual practices within the concrete circumstances of the moment. We also describe two secondary tones: the actor’s relationship to the past is based upon the *characterization* of a given situation against the background of past patterns of experience; and the relationship to the future is characterized by *deliberation* over possible trajectories

those of Dewey, Arendt, and Habermas, it points toward a decisionistic ethics (“Here I stand; I can do no other”) and greatly downplays Kant’s original vision of an “enlarged” or “representative” (Arendt) thinking. Weber fails to theorize the intersubjective processes whereby ultimate ends may themselves be chosen by reflective actors in a wise and prudential fashion.

of action, in which actors consider alternative hypothetical scenarios by critically evaluating the consequences of implementing these within real-world situations.

Problematization.—The first analytical component of practical evaluation consists in the recognition that the concrete particular situation at hand is somehow ambiguous, unsettled, or unresolved. In the case of projects, this recognition entails the apprehension of present reality as in some degree resistant to their immediate and effortless realization, posing challenges in application or contextualization. In the case of iterational or habitual activity, there is also the problem that no new situation is ever precisely the same as ones that came before; all routine activity faces new contingencies to which certain adjustments have to be made. Hence the critical challenge of “analogical transposition” raised explicitly by William Sewell (1992) and addressed as well by Bourdieu and Giddens. Dewey refers to this problem as the objective “incompleteness” of situations: “This incompleteness is not psychical. Something is ‘there,’ but what is there does not constitute the entire objective situation. . . . The logical implication is that of a subject-matter as yet *unterminated*, unfinished, or not wholly given” (Dewey 1985, p. 15). Something must be done—some practical judgment arrived at—that will render the given situation unproblematic, settled, and resolved.

Characterization.—The problematic circumstances at hand must in turn be related to principles, schemas, or typifications from past experience by which they are *characterized* in some fashion. (This component most deeply implicates the past in the moment of practical evaluation.) Does the situation in question call for the activation of a particular iterational or habitual activity? Does it call for the performance of a specific duty, or present itself as a context in which the pursuit of a particular project of action is appropriate or even possible? Speaking in specific reference to moral situations, Benhabib (1992*b*) terms this the problem of “epistemic identification” (while Aristotle calls it “perception” or “understanding,” and Kant discusses it under the rubric of “reflective judgment”). It requires “responding to nuance and fine shading, adapting [one’s] judgment to the matter at hand in a way that principles [or schemas of action] set up in advance have a hard time doing” (Nussbaum 1986, p. 301). Judgments of this nature are emotional (or “passional”) as well as cognitive: “Perception is a complex response of the entire personality” (Nussbaum 1986, p. 309), in which emotions can be seen (with Aristotle) as themselves “intelligent,” educable, and inseparable from intellectual life.

Deliberation.—Plausible choices must be weighed in the light of practical perceptions and understandings against the backdrop of broader fields of possibilities and aspirations. (Here the element of projectivity enters into processes of practical evaluation.) Deliberation involves more than

an unreflective adjustment of habitual patterns of action to the concrete demands of the present; it also entails (at least potentially) a conscious searching consideration of how best to respond to situational contingencies in light of broader goals and projects. Such consideration can take place individualistically or discursively, monologically or within public spaces, recalling the Kantian ideal of an “enlarged mentality.” While often employing strategic reasoning or means-ends rationality, it can also require attention to “what *conduces* to the end” (Aristotle 1985, p. 63; emphasis added); it therefore entails further specification of habits and projects as well as determination of the specific means for actualizing them. Deliberation applies to conflict among alternative possible ends, no less than it does to the contextualization of singular ends, involving a search for the proper course of action to follow under ambiguous circumstances (Taylor 1985). Finally, deliberation also entails emotional engagement with the particularities of situations; it stands “on the borderline between the intellectual and the passional, partaking of both natures: it can be described as either desiderative deliberation or deliberative desire” (Nussbaum 1986, pp. 307–8).

Decision.—Deliberation aims toward decision (or choice), the resolution to act here and now in a particular way. In certain cases, such resolution entails a highly discrete or circumscribed choice: an actor “finally arrives at a decision.” In other cases, it blends indiscriminately into the flow of practical activity, and is only clearly perceived after the fact. In all of these cases, it points in the direction of action within the circumstances of the present and yields a resolution to translate engagement with such circumstances (however passional or implicit) into concrete, empirical intervention. It should be noted that not all choices reflect unambiguous strategies; for this reason, Dewey (1940) speaks of flexible “ends-in-view” rather than of clear and fixed objectives. Certain decisions are provisional, tenuous, and opportunistic, as we shall see below; they may also engage (in a synthetic or polysemous manner) with more than one problematic situation simultaneously. Nor do all decisions lend themselves to easy formulation and explication. Choices can be a matter of tacit adjustment or adaptation to changing contingencies—including feedbacks from experience—as well as the product of articulable explicit reasoning.

Execution.—If deliberation entails consideration or planning, and decision marks a movement toward concrete action, then executive capacity is that capacity “to do the things that tend towards the mark that we have set before ourselves” (Aristotle 1985, p. 169). It is a capacity to act rightly and effectively within particular concrete life circumstances. Ideally, one not only grasps what one ought to do but also how best to set about it in the case at hand. To respond “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right aim, and in the right

way, is what is appropriate and best, and this [is what] is characteristic of excellence" (Aristotle 1985, p. 44). Sometimes even judicious execution, however, entails tragic loss, as when the fulfillment of a duty or realization of a particular vision of the good requires the sacrifice of an equally compelling duty or good (Hook 1974). Execution, in such cases, marks not a happy resolution but rather the fulfillment of a lesser evil. Moreover, even relatively unproblematic instances of execution often create new problems for action further down the road; feedback effects may be initiated over which actors themselves have little control and which they may not even intend. In any case, with execution or action, the arc of practical evaluation is complete: not only deliberation and judgment, but execution as well is required for the contextualization of our habits, ends, duties, and projects.

Practical Evaluation in Empirical Research

Finally, we outline research findings that pertain to empirical manifestations of practical evaluation, in order to convey a clearer sense of what is entailed by this analytical aspect of agency and to show how it can be investigated sociologically. These findings underscore possible ways in which practical evaluation might be elicited in particular contexts and in which it affects in turn the ability of actors to engage with, respond to, and potentially transform their structural environments.

Temporal improvisation.—One research area that provides insight into the temporal contextualization of both ritual and purposive action includes studies of sequencing processes in social interactions. For example, Bourdieu's investigations of the manipulation of the temporal structure of gift exchange reveal that the same gift-giving act can have different meanings at different times, altering the effectiveness of the intended act. Temporal strategies that enable actors to control intervals between expected ritual transactions—for example, by "holding back or putting off, maintaining suspense or expectation," or otherwise manipulating the "tempo" of action—allow them to gain significant material and/or symbolic advantages vis-à-vis their partners in exchange (Bourdieu 1977, p. 71). Additional examples of temporal improvisation include "turn-taking" patterns in everyday conversational interactions. Conversation analysts in the tradition of Schutz and Garfinkel (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) investigate the subtleties of timing and delay in the social organization of talk, showing at a micro level how agentic manipulations of time allow actors to engage in repair work, to avoid or (alternatively) initiate conflict, and in myriad other ways to advance their own interests.

Resistance, subversion, and contention.—Another opening for practical

judgment can be seen in the “procedures and ruses” (De Certeau 1984) by which actors can resist and subvert the logics and practices of the established order. Such tactics are “always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (De Certeau 1984, pp. xix–xx). They utilize an “art of placing blows,” of “getting around the rules of a constraining space” (De Certeau 1984, p. 18). James Scott (1985, 1990) explores the use of such “tactics of resistance” among oppressed groups and individuals; in his studies of Malay villagers, as well as in broader contexts of slavery, serfdom, caste subordination, colonialism, racism, and patriarchal domination, he uncovers strikingly similar patterns of disguised dissent from what he terms (echoing Goffman [1959]) “official” or “public transcripts.” In examining more overt instances of resistance and collective action, Charles Tilly (1986, 1994) also underscores the shrewdness, tact, and situational awareness of individuals and groups, even in the implementation of what he calls “repertoires of contention”; they “perform in dramas in which they already know their approximate parts, [but] during which they nevertheless improvise constantly” (Tilly 1994, p. 15).

Local or prudential action.—Yet another window of opportunity for practical evaluation arises in those structural situations in which no clear expectations for action apply in the first place, settings in which, as Eric Leifer (1988, p. 865) puts it, “roles are not ‘givens’ that constrain interaction, but something that actors must acquire through interaction.” These settings (or “pockets”) of role ambiguity necessitate what Leifer calls “local action,” in which actors in face-to-face competition avoid claiming “global” roles until their partners signal that such roles will be recognized. A powerful illustration is provided by John Padgett and Christopher Ansell’s (1993) study of the rise of the Medici in early modern Florence. Padgett and Ansell (1993, p. 1264, n.9) complicate Leifer’s model of local action by speaking of “an entire linked ecology of games, each game layered on top of another,” rather than of one single, unitary game. But both accounts concur on the importance of “flexible opportunism—maintaining discretionary options across unforeseeable futures in the face of hostile attempts by others to narrow those options” (Padgett and Ansell 1993, p. 1263).

Political decision making.—A highly contextualized analysis of political leadership and decision making can be seen in work of such authors as Alfred Stepan (1978) and Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) on the breakdown of (and transitions to) democracy. These writers describe open-ended and contingent sequences of action, underscoring the uncertainties and multiple possibilities confronting actors at each stage of complex reversible processes; whether they be “hard liners,” “soft liners,” oppositional publics, or military men, political leaders require “good . . . judgment to test the limits of a situation” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986,

p. 27). More counterfactually, Barrington Moore (1978) analyzes leadership choices in his discussion of “the suppression of historical alternatives” in Germany after World War I, choices that might have led to a more stable regime and thereby avoided the horrors of Nazism. (That is, was a different policy possible? Why was it not attempted? How about alternative tactics, strategy, and timing?) Leon Trotsky’s (1980) assessment of the pivotal role that Lenin played in the making of the Russian Revolution is another classic analysis of situationally contingent decision making; more recently, Timothy Garton Ash (1990) has analyzed the decisive yet almost seat-of-the-pants way in which leaders of the Velvet Revolution orchestrated and channeled events in Czechoslovakia during the crucial months of mid 1989.

Deliberation in publics.—One of the most important applications of judgment, and by extension of the capacity for human agency itself, is deliberation over the proper appropriate ends of action—over what conduces to these ends. Empirical studies of civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992) and of “publics in history” (Emirbayer and Sheller 1996; see also Emirbayer 1992*a*, 1992*b*) closely examine such agentic processes of “representative thinking” and collective deliberation. For example, Jane Mansbridge’s (1983) ethnography of a New England town meeting and of an urban crisis center concludes that citizen boards are most effective when the judgment and experience of members contributes to common problem solving. Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman examine the internal dynamics of deliberation within participatory workplaces in their classic sociological study, *Union Democracy* (1962). More recently, analysts such as Alain Touraine and his associates (1983), Lawrence Goodwyn (1991), and Roman Laba (1991) have investigated the processes of collective deliberation that prevailed at the grassroots level during the Solidarity movement in Poland. They demonstrate how Polish citizens arrived at judgments regarding the very nature of their movement, its ultimate ends, and even the ideals to which they aspired through democratic discourse, dialogue, and debate within public spaces.

CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this final section we turn to the question of how the three dimensions of agency—iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation—enter into different and changing relationships with the temporal-relational contexts of action. The challenge here is to analyze the variable nature of the *interplay* between structure and agency, rather than to understand these as either standing in insurmountable opposition, or, as in currently influential theorizations, being “mutually constitutive” in a direct and stable way.

We contend that as actors alter or shift between their agentic orientations, dialogically reconstructing the internal composition of their chordal triad, they may increase or decrease their capacity for invention, choice, and transformative impact in relation to the situational contexts within which they act. Such a conception opens up compelling questions for future research across many different empirical subfields.

Structure, Action, and Agency

A variety of recent attempts to rethink the relationship between structure and agency have argued that the Kantian dichotomy between ideal and material realms—together with parallel distinctions between free will and necessity, voluntarism and determinism—must be replaced by an outlook that regards these elements as reciprocally constituting moments of a unified social process. Seminal work in this area includes Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) attack on the division between subjectivism and objectivism, as well as Giddens's (1979, 1984) theory of structuration, which characterizes structure and agency as mutually constitutive (and hence inseparable) elements. This notion has been a salutary and fruitful one for sociological theory, making possible empirical research that underscores both the causal significance of structure as the constraining and enabling conditions of action, and of praxis as “an active constituting process, accomplished by, and consisting in, the doings of active subjects” (Giddens 1976, p. 121). But it has also brought in its train several theoretical disadvantages. Foremost among these is a tendency toward what Margaret Archer (1982, 1988) terms the “fallacy of central conflation”: the tendency to see structure as so closely intertwined with every aspect of practice that “the constituent components [of structure and agency] *cannot* be examined separately. . . . In the absence of any degree of autonomy it becomes impossible to *examine* their *interplay*” (Archer 1988, pp. 77, 80; emphasis in the original).²²

²² Strictly speaking, Archer means by “central conflation” an elision of the two key elements of “Cultural System” and “Sociocultural Interaction.” We generalize from her criticisms to make a broader point about the relationship between agency and its plurality of structural contexts. If, as Archer (1988, pp. 89–90) puts it, “the powers of Mephistopheles [structure] ultimately depend on Faustus [agency] continuing to invoke them,” the constraining and enabling powers of specific actual structures cannot be determined. And correspondingly, if actors “are assumed to enjoy a constant degree of transformative freedom,” then the circumstances under which one encounters “more voluntarism” or “more determinism” also cannot be specified (on this point, see also Alexander [1994]).

What becomes eclipsed in the notion of the inseparability of structure and agency is the degree of changeability or mutability of different actual structures, as well as *the variable (and changing) ways in which social actors relate to them*. In most central-conflationist views, the constitutive relationship between agency and structure is held analytically constant. We argue, by contrast, that while the temporal-relational contexts of action influence and shape agency and are (re)shaped by it in turn, the former is never so deeply intertwined with every aspect of the latter that these different analytical elements cannot be examined independently of one another. The agentic orientations of actors (along with their capacity for inventive or deliberative response) may vary in dialogue with the different situational contexts to which (and by means of which) they respond. While human agency represents the possibility for imaginative distancing from (and communicative evaluation of) received structures, agentic processes themselves assume diverse empirical forms in response to the specific contexts within which action unfolds. We might therefore speak of the *double constitution of agency and structure*: temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environments. It is the constitution of such orientations within particular structural contexts that gives form to effort and allows actors to assume greater or lesser degrees of transformative leverage in relation to the structuring contexts of action.

Here it is important to be perfectly clear about our analytical distinctions: the foregoing formulations are based upon a threefold differentiation between agency, action, and structure. While what we have called “agentic orientations” vary in their concrete manifestations, agency itself remains a dimension that is present in (but conceptually distinct from) all empirical instances of human action; hence there are no concrete agents, but only actors who engage agentially with their structuring environments. We concur with Alexander (1992, pp. 1–2) that the “identification of actor and agency” renders one “guilty of [the fallacy of] misplaced concreteness. Rather than replacing or reinterpreting the familiar dichotomy between actors and structures, [this] identification . . . actually reproduces it in another form. . . . Actors per se are much more than, and [simultaneously] much less than, ‘agents’ [alone].” All social action is a concrete synthesis, shaped and conditioned, on the one hand, by the temporal-relational contexts of action and, on the other, by the dynamic element of agency itself. The latter guarantees that empirical social action will never be *completely* determined or structured. On the other hand, there is no hypothetical moment in which agency actually gets “free” of structure; it is not, in other words, some pure Kantian transcendental will.

Empirical Propositions

Given these theoretical formulations, the empirical challenge becomes that of locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action. Here we take a step beyond important recent initiatives in this direction, such as that of Sewell (1992), which focuses primarily upon the structural side of such variation. While building upon the work of Giddens and Bourdieu, Sewell (1992, p. 16) criticizes the overly reproductive conceptions of these authors, arguing that “a theory of change cannot be built into a theory of structure until we adopt a far more multiple, contingent, and fractured conception of society—and of structure.” Agency, in his view, consists primarily in the capacity of resource-equipped actors to act creatively through the transposition of existing schemas into new contexts. He notes that “agency differs enormously in both kind and extent,” but attributes this difference primarily to the “nature of the particular structures that inform those social worlds” (Sewell 1992, pp. 20–21). While this framework allows Sewell to advance several highly suggestive propositions regarding different rates of change among such structures as language, states, and capitalist economies, he fails to offer any theorization of differences in agentic capacity that are not inseparably bound to structural qualities. Moreover, he does not examine the internal composition of agency itself, and, in particular, the temporal orientations of agency that we have discussed in this article.

Where might we look for evidence of such variation in agentic capacity? How might we locate what we have called the *double constitution* of agency and structure (i.e., how temporal-relational contexts constitute the patterns of response that shape agentic orientations, which go on to constitute different mediating relationships of actors toward those contexts)? Building upon Mead’s suggestion that it is the sociality of experience that drives the development of agentic capacities, we offer three lines of questioning through which these analytical formulations might point to new initiatives in empirical research.

1. *How do different temporal-relational contexts support (or conduce to) particular agentic orientations?* This initial question might be considered the first constitutive dimension of the study of agency, in which agentic orientations are held steady in order to examine the formative influences upon them of different kinds of situational contexts. The task here is to locate which sorts of social-structural, cultural, and social-psychological contexts are more conducive to developing the different modalities of agency that we have outlined in this article. What kinds of settings and situations, for example, tend to keep actors engaged in main-

taining the habitual schematic responses and relations that have become embodied and institutionalized in past experiences? What kinds of contexts provoke or facilitate them toward gaining imaginative distance from those responses and thereby reformulating past patterns through the projection of alternative future trajectories? And finally, what sorts of contexts constrain or enable their capacity for communicative deliberation, by means of which they judge which particular actions are most suitable for resolving the practical dilemmas of emergent situations? The goal here is to locate particular packages of commonly occurring structure-agency relationships, across a wide range of historical, institutional, and interpersonal contexts.²³

We can start in this direction by building upon Swidler's (1986) distinction between "settled" and "unsettled" times. During stable historical periods, she suggests, most people unproblematically employ established cultural competences; however, during periods of upheaval, other forms of agentic activity may come into play. While certain sets of actors might resist change and hold tightly to past routines (such as local or national traditions) in an attempt to ward off uncertainty, others may be more likely to engage in projective activity (as expressed in ideologies and utopias) as they seek to imagine alternative futures for a problematic present. As a countereffect, the strong future orientations provoked by historical change might inhibit actors' responsiveness to situational complexity and practical exigencies (as expressed by ideological rigidity or lack of negotiating capacity). In response, later moments in a historical change cycle might bring more practically evaluative negotiators and institution builders to the fore. We contend that insight into such processes can be gained by looking at the agentic orientations supported by periods of stability and/or change. This recalls what Mead terms the *temporal* dimension of sociality: actors engaged in emergent events find themselves positioned between the old and the new and are thus forced to develop new ways of integrating past and future perspectives. We can formulate this as an exploratory proposition, a probabilistic axis along which to direct empirical research: *Actors who face changing situations that demand (or facilitate) the reconstruction of temporal perspectives can expand their capacity for imaginative and/or deliberative response.*

We can also tackle this question in another way by focusing upon the *relational* (rather than the temporal) dimension of sociality (i.e., the em-

²³ We bracket for the purposes of this article the question of how differences in agentic orientation can be empirically measured, although this certainly poses a challenge for future research. We also resist calling agentic orientations "variables" in any linear or causal sense (Abbott 1988), in order to stress the recursivity and multiple determination of all social processes.

beddedness of actors in multiple cultural, social-structural, and social-psychological contexts). A compelling starting place is Rose Laub Coser's (1975, p. 239) elaboration of Merton's theory of the development of individual autonomy from the complexity of role sets: "The multiplicity of expectations faced by the modern individual, incompatible or contradictory as they may be, or rather precisely because they are, makes role articulation possible in a more self-conscious manner than if there were no such multiplicity." The implication here, supported by Coser's research among nursing personnel, is that actors who are located in more complex relational settings must correspondingly learn to take a wider variety of factors into account, to reflect upon alternative paths of action, and to communicate, to negotiate, and to compromise with people of diverse positions and perspectives—all qualities, she argues, that support more autonomous personal and occupational identities (and, by extension, more imaginative and reflective engagements with the contexts of action). Another intriguing research area relates variation in agentic capacity to institutional complexity; for example, in his previously mentioned work on museum reform, DiMaggio (1991) argues that the creation of a professional environment at the *interorganizational* level leads to more critical discourse, formal equality, and purposeful search for alternatives, in contrast to the routine, hierarchy, and scripted forms of rationality that predominate inside organizations. While some researchers have begun to look at how choice making and careers are embedded in complex network interactions (Abbott and Hrycak 1990; Abbott 1997a; Pescosolido 1992), little attention has yet been given to how differently structured networks and careers support variable agentic orientations. We can build upon these findings by formulating another exploratory proposition to serve as a second axis for empirical investigation: *Actors who are positioned at the intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention.*

These formulations may be extended to the study of actors in brokerage positions, long considered an exemplary instance of agentic activity. Such social, political, and economic entrepreneurs seize opportunities for purposive intervention by maneuvering back and forth between different social networks as well as cultural or social-psychological settings. While the critical role of brokers has been well documented by anthropologists, political scientists, economists, and social network analysts (Wolf 1956; Geertz 1960; Boissevain 1974; Marsden 1982; Fernandez and Gould 1994), less attention has been paid to the kinds of temporal constructions (and agentic orientations) that these brokerage positions may support (Mische 1997; Gibson and Mische 1995). Our analysis raises a series of questions in this vein: are actors in such bridging positions more prone to projectivity and practical evaluation than those in more bounded tight-knit con-

texts, given the greater availability of resources for hypothetical rearrangement and comparative evaluation of possible trajectories of action? Does the capacity to draw, when needed, upon different forms of routinized relationships, or conversely, purposively to manipulate, to extend, or to transpose these across changing contexts, underlie their ability to gain greater control and directivity over the various contexts within which they act?

2. *How do changes in agentic orientations allow actors to exercise different forms of mediation over their contexts of action?* This second question requires that we reverse our initial query in order to examine how changes in agentic orientations give actors varying capacities to influence the diverse contexts within which they act. While the foregoing propositions seem to provide a relatively straightforward and optimistic set of scenarios—actors positioned in more temporally and relationally complex settings may have more necessity and/or opportunity to develop the capacity for inventive and deliberative intervention—here we run into greater analytical difficulties. As any student of social processes knows, agentic capacities are only one side of the question; just because actors desire or attempt to intervene does not mean that their interventions will have the desired effects. Both Giddens and Sewell (among others) have taken care to highlight the unintended consequences of action, and a similar point has been made by Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985, 1991) in a striking series of studies on the interplay between the reproductive and transformative effects of action. While a study of such consequences is by definition exceedingly complex and beyond the scope of this essay, we can alert researchers to some of the paradoxical or counterintuitive situations that a study of agency's interplay with structure might reveal.

For example, an analysis of the multiplex nature of agentic orientations can help to unpack the following paradoxical observation: *Actors who feel creative and deliberative while in the flow of unproblematic trajectories can often be highly reproductive of received contexts.* To understand this phenomenon, we must recall that actors are always simultaneously located in a variety of temporal-relational contexts at once; this is reminiscent of Goffman's (1974) stress upon the multiple embeddings of situations in different frames or vantage points on action. We can extend Goffman's imagery by suggesting that it is possible to be (primarily) iterational in one frame, projective in another, and practical-evaluative in yet a third. Moreover, a switch in frames can reveal apparent contradictions in the reproductive or transformative consequences of action. Take, for example, the case of actors who successfully follow established occupational careers, in which they experience a considerable degree of creative and practical realization. From the perspective of their own professional lives, they are exercising a high degree of personal agency; most likely, they are

highly future oriented in formulating goals and objectives, and well equipped with flexible communicative skills, giving them the capacity to creatively solve emergent problems within the context of the workplace. On the other hand, these same actions can be reframed to show their privileged positioning in relation to other similarly established career trajectories within a particular social-structural matrix at a given historical conjuncture. It may be shown, in fact, that such actors are extremely unquestioning (and iterative) in relation to these larger temporal and relational patterns of action. By “swimming with the current” (Blair-Loy 1997), they unhesitatingly reproduce larger schemas, helping to lock in place social, political, and economic contexts, which, however “unjust” they may appear in an expanded perspective, after all serve the actors well within their own personal and professional lives.

An analysis of shifts in agentic orientations can also shed light upon the converse observation: *Actors who feel blocked in encountering problematic situations can actually be pioneers in exploring and reconstructing contexts of action.* Here again we build from the premise that actors may be capable of switching between agentic orientations and thereby exercising different mediating influences upon their contexts of action. In this case, we can take as an example those who feel that their attempts to follow established trajectories are blocked by the social, political, or economic relations of the day (e.g., the case of women entering male-dominated careers [Blair-Loy 1997], or of members of any excluded group seeking entrance into a previously barred arena). It may be that the reason such border crossers experience difficulties is that they have already projectively expanded and recomposed their proposed fields of action (e.g., the experience of those involved in heady discussions of social reform, such as the civil rights, feminist, or gay and lesbian rights movements), but that when trying to implement those reforms in practice, on either a personal/professional or institutional/legal scale, they encounter hard barriers of interpersonal and institutional conventions. Such actors may not yet have developed the practical-evaluative skills needed to deal with the ambiguities and dilemmas of new and unexpected situations; they may in this case fall back into heavily scripted (or iterative) patterns of interaction, in which conventional roles (e.g., mother, seductress, maiden aunt in the case of women in business careers [Kanter 1977]) are transposed into the new contexts (see also Tilly 1998). On the other hand, as such pioneers make inroads into previously segmented fields, they may also find new and creative ways of fusing, extending, and transforming these received schemas, as they experiment with practical strategies to confront the emergent challenges of historically changing circumstances.

3. *How do actors reconstruct their agentic orientations and thereby alter their own structuring relationships to the contexts of action?* Finally, we

focus upon the research questions opened up by the self-reflexive dimension of agentic orientations, that is, the capacity of actors to reflectively reconstruct their own temporal orientations toward action. In Mead's (1932, p. 72) terms, this is due to the ability of conscious beings to direct attention and intervention toward their own patterns of response: "Life becomes conscious at those points at which the organism's own responses enter into the objective field to which it reacts." Important work in social psychology has focused upon the development of such critical self-awareness, often building upon Meadian conceptions of communicative interaction (Cottrell 1969; Denzin 1988; Callero 1991; Schwalbe 1991). Of particular relevance here is previously mentioned work on life course development, with its focus upon trajectories and turning points (Elder 1985; George 1993), especially work examining the subjective and/or narrative reconstruction of the self through self-interpretive activity during critical life transitions (Cohler 1982). The temporal dimension of such self-construction was stressed three decades ago by Erik Erikson, who showed how conceptions of time develop and change at key transitional periods in the life cycle; for example, a critical task of adolescence is the construction of a sense of a future connected with a past, as manifested in a personal identity that "includes a subjective sense of continuous existence" (Erikson 1968, p. 61). Likewise, researchers on adulthood and aging have noted self-reflective shifts in temporal perspectives as individuals become less preoccupied with the future and more engaged in ruminations upon the past: "While reminiscence is used by much older persons primarily as a means of settling accounts prior to death . . . middle-aged persons are more likely to use reminiscence in an effort to solve problems in the present" (Cohler 1982, p. 225).

With so much attention to temporal perspectives within the subfield of social psychology, it is remarkable that so little of it has made its way into mainstream theoretical and empirical traditions in sociology. More work is necessary in order to link the study of temporal constructions with the varieties of agentic activity that we have tried to delineate in this article. We can formulate this as a final exploratory proposition: *By subjecting their own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgment, actors can loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints.* A classic example is Freudian psychoanalysis, in which interpretive recollection of past experiences has a liberating effect upon action; Ricoeur (1970) points out that this process is projective as well, suggesting research into how temporal orientations are intermingled (and undergo changes) in the course of therapeutic processes. Another example is the notion of "cognitive liberation" in the social movement literature (McAdam 1982), in which actors "discover" the possibility of collective action in order to

change an undesired state of affairs. In what ways do such liberating moments require or provoke a recomposition of the temporal construction of the self? Under what conditions do such reconstructions of agentic orientation give actors greater or lesser transformative leverage in relation to their environments? Here we have indicated only a few general components of this process, the full scope and dynamics of which pose ample challenges for future research.

We close with the suggestion that these propositions are not merely relevant for micro- or individual-level analysis but also have important implications for macrolevel research. Abbott (1997*b*), for example, has suggested that the concept of “turning points” has extensions outside of life course research, including studies of political realignments, business cycles, and scientific progress (not to mention social movements and revolutions).²⁴ We can pose the further query as to whether part of what happens during such periods is a reformulation of the temporal orientations that shape the self-understandings of collective as well as individual actors. Here we echo Aminzade’s (1992, p. 470) call for theories “that link the objective temporalities of long-term historical processes to the subjective temporal orientations of social actors.” Historical actions and choices are deeply conditioned by how collective actors conceive of the binding power of the past, the malleability of the future, or the capacities of actors to intervene in their immediate situations. Researchers have shown, for example, how cyclical (more iterational) and/or linear (more future-oriented) conceptions of time can place “different limits on the range of adaptive responses to new circumstances” (Aminzade 1992, p. 472; see also Lauer 1973; Goldstone 1987, 1988); such differences in temporal perspectives can have critical effects upon the cohesion or longevity of different forms of community organization and/or collective action (Hall 1978). Yet, despite a few suggestive studies, we still have little understanding of the dynamics by which historical changes in agentic orientations take place. We need further studies of the communicative processes of challenge, experimentation, and debate by which actors formulate new temporally constructed understandings of their own abilities to engage in individual and collective change, as well as how these microlevel processes intersect with longer-term social, political, and economic trajectories.

²⁴ Abbott, however, is less interested in the subjective composition of such turning points than in the structural characteristics that make them particularly susceptible to transformative action. Trajectories, he claims, can be conceived of as narratively constructed “networks through time,” linked by occasional transitions that bring about a reformulation of the logic governing the connection between past and future possibilities. Turning points are the “peculiarly essential junctures . . . where action might make particularly consequential bridges by making or breaking links between many networks” (Abbott 1997*b*, p. 99).

Such an approach would have the additional merit of placing the discussion of agency squarely within the context of its own essential historicity.

CONCLUSION

We have argued throughout this essay that human agency needs to be radically reconceptualized. Neither rational choice theory, norm-based approaches, nor any of the other sociological perspectives extant today provide a fully adequate understanding of its significance and constituent features. Nor do such perspectives satisfactorily answer the question as to how agency interpenetrates with and impacts upon the temporal-relational contexts of action.

We have contended that one key to understanding the variable orientations of agency toward its structural contexts lies in a more adequate theorization of the temporal nature of human experience. Actors are always living simultaneously in the past, future, and present, and adjusting the various temporalities of their empirical existence to one another (and to their empirical circumstances) in more or less imaginative or reflective ways. They continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations. Moreover, there are times and places when actors are more oriented toward the past, more directive toward the future, or more evaluative of the present; actors may switch between (and reflexively transform) their orientations toward action, thereby changing their degrees of flexible, inventive, and critical response toward structuring contexts. Such a perspective lays the basis for a richer and more dynamic understanding of the capacity that actors have to mediate the structuring contexts within which action unfolds. We have referred to this perspective as *relational pragmatics*.

Finally, this point of view also opens up the possibility to conceive of moral and practical issues regarding human freedom, creativity, and democracy in a more satisfactory and powerful way. In this essay, we have not laid out a normative theory that actually distinguishes between “better” or “worse” agentic processes, “more or less morally worthy” projects. The elaboration of such a theory would require even longer and more complex arguments than those presented here. Yet, we have delineated the analytical space within which reflective and morally responsible action might be said to unfold. Throughout, we have stressed the reconstructive, (self-) transformative potentialities of human agency, when faced with contradictory or otherwise problematic situations. What are commonly referred to as norms and values, we can now add, are themselves by-products of actors’ engagement with one another in ambiguous and challenging circumstances; they emerge when individuals experience a dis-

cordance between the claims of multiple normative commitments. Problematic situations of a moral and practical nature can thus become resolved (to the extent that they can become resolved at all [Hook 1974]) only when actors reconstruct the temporal-relational contexts within which they are embedded and, in the process, transform their own values and themselves. As Mead (1964, p. 149) expresses it, “The appearance of . . . different interests in the forum of reflection [leads to] the reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object.”

While the optimistic progressivism of the classical pragmatists may appear relatively simple and even naive from our position at the close of the 20th century, the orientation toward action that they present still resonates powerfully as we attempt to respond to a rapidly changing world composed of increasingly complex and overlapping matrices of social, political, and economic relations. If we cannot control the consequences of our interventions, we can at least commit ourselves to a responsive, experimental, and deliberative attitude as we confront emergent problems and possibilities across the variety of contexts within which we act. As the pragmatist thinkers never tired of reminding us, this is a preeminently dialogic and communicative process, which unfolds in perpetual interaction with the social universe. Both the pragmatist conception of the responsive intelligence and the Kantian ideal of the enlarged mentality can be of use to us in the continuing challenge to develop ever more comprehensive, cosmopolitan, and universalistic perspectives—perspectives nevertheless flexible enough to respond to situational complexity and ambiguity. The “mode of associated living” that Joas (1996), following Dewey, calls “creative democracy” embodies such moral intelligence on a transpersonal scale; it involves “conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey 1980, p. 93) in which imaginative reformulation and practical reasoning are undertaken in common through inquiry into moral and practical problems on the model of an experimental science. If our perspective on human agency does not in itself resolve such problems, it can at least help to give social science a more adequate theoretical grounding, so that it can become a creative and vital participant in this democratic debate.

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