

*Agency, Activity, and Laziness: Understanding the Persistence of Structure*

One of the questions that has concerned Sociology throughout its history is the relationship between structure and agency, especially in terms of the ability of subjects (alone and in groups) to form, change, and/or overturn norms. Leaving aside any origin stories of norms, which would entail a great deal of speculation about the social organization of primitive man and ultimately be of little use, a clear understanding of how new norms develop provides important clues about the extent to which agentic subjects can affect their world and the mechanisms that facilitate or prevent people from making effective interventions. Built into this line of questioning is a view of the subject that juxtaposes active agency with a view of the individual as automaton and dupe, doing whatever society says. Problematically, this agent/automaton dichotomy ignores one element of human nature that impacts greatly upon the whole discussion of how society is reproduced or changed – the laziness of humanity. Or, to put it more sociologically, the tendency of subjects to prefer and utilize that which is known to that which is unknown.

Melvin Pollner's introduction to his book *Mundane Reason* not only calls attention to this process but also shows how ethnomethodology can be a way to empirically examine the processes by which everyday reality is maintained. Through extending the methods of anthropology to our own culture, we can examine the skills, assumptions, and practices that comprise the commonplace (ix). Important for my discussion here is his claim, "Mundane reason's incapacity for radical reflection ... is not a deficiency or fault but an aspect of the very process through which mundane worlds are constructed" (xvi). By providing the subject with a coherent, consistent understanding of the world that can absorb the shocks of contradictory information, mundane reason provides subjects with a

way of apprehending the world that does not require them to constantly struggle to make sense of the information they are receiving. Instead, people can relax and reserve their energy for more pressing matters that really do shake their beliefs or require careful consideration. The result of this ability to relax is that most people do; this tendency can be seen as the subtext of the schemas proffered by Sewell. Transposability allows the subject to avoid having to deal with each situation *de novo*. Instead, lessons and skills learned in other arenas are imported to deal with a novel situation. While the agency of the subject may be required to apply said schemas meaningfully, the level of activity demanded is certainly less in such situations than in ones where there is no resource kit available.

The tendency of sociologists to equate agency and an active subject is also apparent in Herbert Blumer's outline of the methodology of symbolic interactionism. Looking specifically at his ideas about the nature of human action, an emphasis on the human as actor, thinker, interpreter, and doer is clear. Blumer avers, "Fundamentally, action on the part of a human being consists of taking account of various things he notes and forging a line of conduct on the basis of how he interpreters them" (15). What is unclear is the likelihood that the course of action or opinion decided upon by the subject will be little more than a decision to maintain course and keep thinking and doing the things they've been doing all along. The tendency for the subject to be lazy and choose a familiar course of action does not obviate the activeness of the subject, though it does go a long way in helping us to understand how norms retain a great deal of stability.

The lack of creativity that subjects exhibit as they go about making sense of their world and interacting with others is apparent in the work of Elijah Anderson. In the

chapter “The Black Male in Public” from his book *Streetwise*, Anderson focuses on salience of stereotyping for how black men are perceived and treated in the context of brief encounters among strangers in the streets on the Village. Central to his argument is how race serves as a “master status-determining characteristic” that overrides the individual identity of any given black man in the mind of the stranger who appraises them (165). The laziness or lack of creativity present in this process of stereotyping is alluded to in Anderson’s description of said process as “facile but practical” (168): individuals persist in negative thinking not only because it continues to get them the results they desire but also because it is the easiest way to go about things.

Ultimately, the ability and likelihood of social structures to persist, be changed, or be overturned is in part the result of this paradox of the agentic subject as active but lazy and uncreative in most instances. Kuhn’s work on paradigm shifts in the sciences may be useful here as he also points to the rarity of radical shifts in ways of thinking. Most new norms that develop are simply extensions of other norms that people already have a great deal of practice with in other areas of their lives. New organizations are patterned on old organizations; new roles revise those that came before them. While some people are devoted to change and others act in the interest of their privilege, there is still a substantial amount of status quo reproduction that might have laziness at its root. By investigating both the process by which a subject chooses between tradition and the commonplace or the more spectacular means by which their process of active interpretation leads to truly creative outcomes, ethnomethodology can strengthen itself by qualifying its understanding of the agentic subject as one that often allows itself to run on autopilot without ever turning into an automaton.