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Student Name: Kat Wehrheim

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Assignment title: Action in society is "individual" as well as "social". Discuss this statement with reference to the course material.

Assignment due date: 9 July 2019

I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.

Name:

Kat Wehrheim

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Q3: Action in society is “individual” as well as “social”. Discuss this statement with reference to the course material.

1. Introduction

Shruh Zhuu threw all his training and thoughts of his own safety to the winds. He took from his belt a hatchet made of sharpened animal bones bound tightly together with hardened babiche and stealthily placed it high in the thick boughs of a bushy young spruce tree, well concealed from the eyes of The People.¹

Shru Zhuu is an adolescent member of a nomadic Gwich'in band in Alaska. He has grown up knowing that the Chief's decisions are final, that improper handling of his weapon will result in harsh punishment, and that in times of famine, the appropriate course of action is to leave one's elders behind to die. However, when faced with the prospect of seeing his grandmother suffer this fate, he decides to flout the rules. The outcome is not only his grandmother's survival, but also culture change.

For the purposes of this essay, I am going to ignore the fact that the author does not describe her work as an autobiographical piece, but as a story handed down from generation to generation until it reached her mother, and then her:² either way (whether it reports events that physically happened, or whether it relates fictional events employed by the community to illustrate an aspect of their development), it represents the way that their interplay of individual and societal action is conceived by them.

I am going to examine one theory each of social and of individual action in society, as well as two examples of approaches combining the two, to come to the conclusion that action in society is individual as well as social. In the final section, I am also going to consider some implications this may have for future social change outside the Gwich'in culture.

2. Emile Durkheim

Socialisation matters. In Velma Wallis's example above, it matters so much that the *usual* state of affairs is for families to be complicit in leaving behind their loved ones, accepting their certain death: it is the deviance of Shru Zhuu's action that constitutes its newsworthiness. Whether or not we are going to agree with Durkheim, the conclusions he came to are understandable.

Durkheim's theory can be contextualised as an example of a growing movement that drew on the concepts and methods of natural science for social studies, first envisioned by Auguste Comte. It was conceived against the background of Durkheim's own experience of nineteenth-century France, where the advent of industrialisation was causing extensive social change.³ Durkheim's interpretation of the social change he was witnessing was a biological, functionalist, evolutionary one: his conception of society was that of a body, and the parts of this body were becoming specialised due to a division of labour. Their specialisation, in turn, implied an increase in morality as

¹ V.Wallis, *Two Old Women* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), pp.11-12.

² Ibid., p.XIII.

³ M.Knuttila, *Introducing Sociology: A Critical Approach*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.143-145.

a result of the responsibilities brought about by interdependence. For Durkheim, social change was consensual as well as inevitable: individuals found and fulfilled their function as part of the whole as a matter of course, and any exceptions to this rule were attributed to temporary “anomie” before a new order of things had had time to shake down.⁴

It is debateable, but also of little consequence for the development of Durkheim’s society, whether his inevitable consensus was conceived as law-determined to the point of social determinism or not: if it was, then an individual’s actions themselves were pre-determined by their environment; if it was not, then their success or otherwise once they had been performed was still pre-determined all the same. While this might have made a difference to individuals’ personal freedom in the short term, it is likely that they would soon have lost interest in flogging a stillborn horse that had never even had the chance to be turned into a dead one. Either way, at a societal level, change would have been effected by societal adaptation to external circumstance alone: for Durkheim, society conditioned us, and not vice versa – a conception that was later to be echoed and developed by the structuralist movement in the 20th century.

3. Max Weber

Individual action matters. The abandonment of the two elders by Wallis’s Gwich’in band is described as a sequence of individual actions: the Chief announcing his decision; the younger members looking down and not speaking up; the two old women disguising their shock.⁵

Max Weber, while preserving faith in Enlightenment Science, drew different conclusions from Durkheim’s: where Durkheim would have attributed the above actions to the inevitability implied by social conditioning, Weber would have interpreted them as choices made freely by individuals, based on their reasoned assessment of their current situation within society.⁶

Weber’s conception of individual action as intention based on reasoned choice remains credible despite his theory of his subjects’ Calvinist socialisation playing a role. If action is separated from intention, as outlined by Giddens,⁷ then Weber’s model is able to accommodate insufficient information as well as unintended consequences without collapsing back into determinism. His work laid the foundations for a variety of later action theories.

While Durkheim would have described Wallis’s Chief as following convention, and the rest of the Gwich’in band as joining him in submitting to the inevitable, Weber would have seen the Chief’s decision as an evidence-based choice, the younger band-members’ silence as a deliberate act of prioritising their own survival over that of their elders, and the two old women’s lack of response as a choice based on their wish at least to salvage their pride.

If the latter were the only valid explanation, however, then how could Shruh Zhuu have grown up knowing that the Chief’s decisions are final, that improper handling of his weapon will result in harsh punishment, and that in times of famine, the appropriate course of action is to leave one’s elders

⁴ S.Seidman, *Contested Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p.63.

⁵ V.Wallis, pp.5-7.

⁶ M.E.Warren, ‘Marx And Methodological Individualism’, in *Rational Choice Marxism*, ed. by T.Carver and P.Thomas (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.243-248.

⁷ A.Giddens, *New Rules Of Sociological Method* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.80-81.

behind to die?

And if it were an exclusive case of the former, then why is there now a hatchet in a bushy young spruce tree?

4. Peter Berger/Thomas Luckmann, and Ludwig Wittgenstein

Erik Olin Wright, in a discussion of Marxism and Methodological Individualism, offers a technical account of why we may not have to choose between the two explanations. Comparing and contrasting the theories of Atomism, Methodological Individualism, Radical Holism, and Anti-Reductionism, he asks two questions of each of the four models: firstly, whether properties of, and relations among, aggregate social entities are irreducibly explanatory, and secondly, whether relations among individuals are explanatory. For Anti-Reductionism, he answers both in the affirmative.⁸

Berger and Luckmann offer a detailed, sociological account of what appears to be happening:⁹ while allowing that (especially primary) socialisation leaves us feeling that certain truths about the world are unshakeable, and that individuals as well as institutions usually ensure the maintenance of these by contributing their participation, they also posit that a variety of options are available to individuals wishing to branch out, as well as a natural path for their innovative contributions to feed back into a living, growing, changing, whole. Berger and Luckmann not only explicitly endorse a combination of Durkheim's and Weber's theories;¹⁰ they take this idea further to propose that it constitutes a dialectic. Their conclusion is one of

(...) society as part of a human world, made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men, in an ongoing historical process. It is not the least fruit of a humanistic sociology that it reawakens our wonder at this astonishing phenomenon.¹¹

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, had little direct involvement in sociology, and he would have rejected the positivist leanings of Comte's heirs above.¹² It can be argued, however, that Wittgenstein's philosophical work was highly relevant to social studies, and that it points in a similar direction with regards to this essay question as Berger and Luckmann's ideas.

In a refreshing move after centuries of social theories, Wittgenstein reminds us that social interaction is, above all, practical. When he speaks of "forms of life", he is referring to the life that we actively produce as well as experience:¹³ for Wittgenstein, socialisation is not about having the world explained to us in order to gain knowledge of it, and neither is it about being absorbed into a system with the power to determine who we are going to be and what we are going to do. It is about, with guidance from those who already are socialised, becoming increasingly, and increasingly competently, involved in participating in our world without necessarily thinking about what we are doing, and without necessarily conceiving of it as knowledge, as the basics are second nature to us, to the point of our not even noticing that they are. An amusing example of this involves Wittgenstein

⁸ E.O.Wright, A.Levine, E.Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism* (London: Verso, 1992), p.124.

⁹ P.Berger and T.Luckmann, *The Social Construction Of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1966).

¹⁰ Ibid., p.207.

¹¹ Ibid., p.211.

¹² N. Pleasants, *Wittgenstein And The Idea Of A Critical Social Theory: A Critique Of Giddens, Habermas And Bhaskar* (Oxford: Routledge, 1999), p.1.

¹³ O.Hanfling, *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1989), p.162.

feeling compelled to explain (to a visiting non-philosopher) his friend's unconventional choice to proclaim that he knows a tree is a tree.¹⁴

Wittgenstein uses the analogy of a riverbed to illustrate the way he conceives our verbal and non-verbal interaction to be rule-governed rather than law-determined: while there are boundaries imposed by the banks, the life we participate in has space to flow on between them, and while the banks may be slow to change, we do have the capacity to erode them.¹⁵

This demonstrates that Wittgenstein's description is as capable as Berger and Luckmann's theory of accommodating what has happened so far in our Gwich'in band's history. Both are equally able to accommodate the events that follow, too:

Shruh Zhuu's grandmother and her friend duly retrieve the boy's hatchet from its spruce tree. Their individual and collective choices to replace a habit of dependence and complaint with an attempt to carve out a self-sufficient life at first result in hardship, but eventually in their reclaimed ability to thrive. Events outside the band's control initially lead to its further decline, but when remorse is followed by an attempt to find the two elders, reconciliation and cultural change are achieved: the practice of leaving elders behind to die in times of need is discontinued.

For Berger and Luckmann, Shruh Zhuu would have enjoyed a primary socialisation that involved learning, and accepting as truths, that the Chief's decisions are final, that improper handling of his weapon will result in harsh punishment, and that in times of famine, the appropriate course of action is to leave one's elders behind to die. He would then have made a choice to defy his socialisation, which in turn supported the two elders in their choice to defy theirs. The combination of their actions and of the group's, driven by their individual and collective remorse, to attempt to find the elders, would then have fed back into the dialectic that existed between old customs and new action, effecting the culture change that took place.

For Wittgenstein, Shruh Zhuu would have grown up increasingly, and increasingly competently, participating in a form of life that involved the Chief's decisions being final, that involved harsh punishment of improper handling of his weapon, and that involved leaving one's elders behind to die in times of famine. Most or all of these things would have gone without saying, to the extent that at the same time as constantly living them, Shruh Zhuu would have been unlikely to be able to articulate that they were part of the riverbed of his belief system. When faced with the prospect of allowing his grandmother to die, however, compassion was able to move him to take the initiative in eroding the riverbed and reshaping the river, as the elders' actions and the individual and collective actions of the remaining band played their part too.

In other words, application of both models demonstrates that action in society is individual as well as social.

5. Conclusion and outlook

The Gwich'in example of individual as well as social action in society being relevant to culture change relates to a small-scale society, where mechanisms of culture maintenance and culture change may

¹⁴ O.Hanfling, p.155.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.162.

be different from those in a society of millions of individuals who usually use computers to communicate.¹⁶

However, the fact that particular *tokens* of a process may differ between two societies, in no way implies that the process *itself* is only relevant to one of them. If we accept that Berger and Luckmann's dialectic exists, and that Wittgenstein's riverbed exists, then the likely scenario is that both exist in the society that we are part of, just as they do in Gwich'in society.

In their discussion of social epistemology, Goldman and Blanchard mention a number of factors influencing learning and behaviour in modern societies.¹⁷ Their account assumes the highly specialised, formalised institutions we would expect to find in an industrialised, large-scale society¹⁸ – but here, too, in each case, an interplay between individual and societal action is described: for example, freedom of the press is mentioned as a contributing factor to individuals' rejection of racist tendencies, and individual virtues as well as epistemically virtuous institutions (such as egalitarian educational systems) are listed as contributing factors to the correction of unconscious bias.

Our challenge, then, is twofold. Firstly, we are faced with the same difficulty that the Gwich'in band were: whether we refer to it as "primary socialisation" with Berger and Luckmann, or whether we employ Wittgenstein's analogy of a riverbed, the fact remains that our habitual participation in a form of life is likely to mean that we are going to take things for granted that on reflection, we would prefer not to. In this regard, our task is the same as that of the Gwich'in: if we are committed to contributing positively to the society we are part of, then this is going to involve finding the curiosity, openness and humility to go out of our way to look for ways in which we, individually and collectively, currently are not.

Secondly, whether we refer to it as a dialectic with Berger and Luckmann, or whether we stay with Wittgenstein's riverbed and use the analogy of erosion: whenever we do perceive a need for social change, the process by which this is going to be able to be achieved is going to involve individual as well as societal action. It is, however, unlikely to be an exact carbon copy of a previous process successfully employed elsewhere. We are different from the Gwich'in, and we are different from the society we were moment ago. Berger and Luckmann's dialectic has spiralled on; Wittgenstein's riverbed, albeit more slowly, has also shifted. Individually and collectively, we are going to have to be creative.

¹⁶ G.Silberbauer, G., 'Ethics In Small-Scale Societies', in *A Companion To Ethics*, ed. by P.Singer, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), pp.14-28.

¹⁷ A.Goldman and T.Blanchard, "Social Epistemology", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by E.N.Zalta (Summer 2018 edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epistemology-social/>> [Accessed: 19 June 2019].

¹⁸ G.Silberbauer, p.17.

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