Structure and political agency, thought style and strategy schedules in government: a neo-Durkheimian explanation

Perri 6
Professor in Public Management
School of Business and Management
Queen Mary, University of London

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Email: P.6@qmul.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article presents a neo-Durkheimian institutional approach to the theoretical puzzle about agency and social structure. It shows how social structure cultivates thought styles to shape and specify contrasting styles of agency in the context of executive government. To exhibit the framework’s account of agency, the article introduces the concept of a strategy schedule, meaning the differently structured set of generic fallback options cultivated for recognition in contrasting elementary forms of organisation, including among policymakers. Contrasts in the forms of strategy schedule give content to agency as deliberation and choice. To illustrate the argument, the article contrasts styles of political agency in political decision-making in the Wilson and Heath governments of the 1960s and early 1970s.
This article describes a neo-Durkheimian institutional approach to longstanding puzzles about agency and structure, shows how social structure cultivates thought styles which shape styles of agency in government, and provides empirical illustrations of these explanations. The neo-Durkheimian approach enables us to distinguish structural circumstances which cultivate, for example, resilient, instrumental, personalised and assertive style of political agency, from those that sustain coping, reactive, opportunistic ones. Other styles elicit authorised action and role-appropriate agency, while yet others which emphasise principled, collective styles. The framework explains likelihood of hybridity among these forms. This article introduces the concept of a ‘strategy schedule’, or the structure of fallback options available to people under one set of elementary institutions of social organisation, by which they can conduct encounters with people working under other institutions. The argument answers the common charge that Durkheimian approaches turn people into ‘cultural dopes’.

**Limitations of prevailing frameworks**

Problems about structure and agency have become even more important in recent years, as sociological theorists such as Archer (1995, 1996, 2000, 2003) have returned them to the centre of theoretical debate. Interpretivists deny that there is a puzzle about structure and agency because they reject the causal explanatory programme underlying it (Martin and Dennis, 2010). Mainstream social science continues to look for explanatory solutions rather than dissolution. In sociology, Archer’s (1995) and Mouzelis’ (1995) neo-traditionalist overturning of Giddens’ (1981) and Bourdieu’s (1990) earlier attempts to dissolve the problem by combining structure and agency into a single concept of structuration has been widely influential (Parker, 2000; Elder-Vass, 2010). The topic has become a major preoccupation in political science (Hay, 2002, 2009; Hay and Wincott, 1998), especially for those who see in ideational explanations a way to preserve human agency, and in international relations (Wendt, 1987; Wight, 1999; Friedman and Starr 1997); in these disciplines, the focus has been on ontological presumptions.
Agency

Theoretical frameworks explaining why people reason as they do, by reference to constraints, imperatives, institutions or wider climates of thought, opinion or ideas have long been accused of articulating human agency insufficiently. For Garfinkel (1967, 67-8) showing how institutional constraints shape thought was turning people into ‘cultural dopes’ or passive recipients of prescription. Supposedly, everyone agrees that voluntarism (implying that choices have low prior probabilities conditional upon external constraints and high ones only conditional upon desires and beliefs taken as given), determinism (arguing that point prediction of particular choices could in principle achieve prior probabilities of one, conditional upon external constraints) and unpredictable randomness (implying that choices have low probabilities, even given desires and beliefs) are unsatisfying and implausible. Yet deep disagreement persists about whether particular frameworks veer close to any of these positions.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) identify four spectra of agency – namely (a) a contrast with habitual, quasi-automatic or prescribed action; (b) reasoning, deliberating, evaluating, choosing and acting upon beliefs, preferences and options, anticipating possible consequences and intrinsic merits; (c) the substantive possibility of choosing otherwise; and (d) efficacy or the actor’s possession of causal powers sufficient to bring about intended outcomes of actions.

Two additional features have been proposed – namely, resistance to constraint or prescription (DiMaggio, 1988) and creativity in response to shocks (Wilsford, 2010). Yet it is unconvincing to claim them as evidence of agency. For resistance and creativity too are made possible by micro-structural relations: there is more to social structure than either predominant negative power or macro-structure.

Archer (2003) emphasises the second feature, or deliberation. She regards it as exhibited in ‘interior conversations’, which she regards as measuring agency conceived as a subjective but irreducible property of individuals. Archer claims that these conversations need not be socially shaped, at least for the most reflexive people. Yet extensive research in the sociology and
anthropology of knowledge on the institutional stylisation of classification (e.g., Douglas, 1986; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Bowker and Star, 1999) indicates that even interior conversations must be socially influenced (cf. Dépelteau, 2008; Mutch, 2004).

Other scholars in the same tradition argue that agency should be measured by effective causal powers (the fourth feature) made available, not least by social structures, to individuals or organisations (Elder-Vass, 2010). On these accounts, efficacious agency might be intact even if preferences, reasoning patterns and emotions are socially moulded. Unfortunately, efficacious action by those who act under strong constraint, upon habit, may reflect resource endowments and efficacy resulting from causes so distal from the agent that, to the actor, the outcome appears indistinguishable from luck: causal powers making for efficacy are not only internal to actors.

Capturing the third feature, the possibility of choosing otherwise, is challenging. We cannot preserve what we care about in agency by showing that desires and beliefs driving actions had low conditional probability, given the actor’s contextual constraints: that is a failure in explanation. Causal inexplicability does not preserve agency. Social science can identify options that actors subjectively recognise as available and relevant for deliberation, contrast options that researchers consider objectively available, and explain why actors did or did not recognise them all. But it cannot sacrifice explanatory power in the hope of preserving a conception of agency as freedom which obscures the distinction between subjective and objective availability of options.

Any framework positing biasing, socialisation, internalisation or influencing of subjectivity by social forces that can be classified as structural, might be said to diminish agency in the dimension of the possibility of choosing otherwise, but not in the dimensions of reasoning, deliberation, choosing and acting on choices.

If the possibility of choosing otherwise consists in something more than length of and bias in the subset of the total feasible set actually deliberated upon, it needs explanation. Otherwise it becomes simply an unexplained residue – ‘decision minus the combination of constraint and imperative’ (cf. Laclau’s 1990 ‘gap’, discussed in Glynos and Howarth, 2008). For example, some
scholars argue that, where they can only identify structural constraints providing background conditions but not point prediction, structure may be a necessary condition for explaining decisions but must be supplemented by agency (e.g., Stockemer, 2011). But this gives no content to agency itself.

Moreover, conceiving of agency as ‘decision minus constraint and imperative’ fails to recognise that weak constraint itself results from distinct social structures affording discretion, which themselves cultivate distinct ways of biasing and framing options and decisions. Strong discretion has its own peculiar institutional pressures.

Stronger scores on one or more of the four features constitutes, for Emirbayer and Mische, a greater degree of agency. But agency is not always appropriately understood in this linear additive fashion. For in working life, family, friendship, political behaviour and financial behaviour, we each face such different constraints on each of these dimensions, that scalar comparisons in degree of agency are difficult to aggregate on standard measures. A study which found people exhibiting strong agency on one dimension but weak agency on another tells us something, but not much about the content of their agency, or the specific types of deliberation, evaluation, judgement, reflection, and efficacy they are both restricted to and enabled to pursue. Yet precisely that rich semantic understanding is what would provide most explanatory power in accounts of both the structural influences upon them and the patterns of consequences of their actions. Wight correctly argued (1999, 129) that we need accounts of agency which provide substantive content to its forms.

Archer (2003) offers a typology of reflexivity, addressing degrees to which deliberation is supposedly released from social prescription, but it does not connect directly with decision-making or commitment to decisions made. Moreover, Archer’s types are supposedly buffered from discrete basic forms of social structure, because her (1996, cf. 2003, 344-9) ‘situational logics’ providing context for agency recognise no deep social shaping of thought (Mutch, 2004), but only of “situations”, to which agents bring their own “concerns” only lightly restricted by those situations (Archer, 2003, 132-142). More convincing would be a typological approach to
understanding syndromes of agency that spans several dimensions, specifies bias in decision-making and commitment to decisions, and which treats structure as sustaining agency, not merely as constraining it, but sustaining agency differently in each form.

**Social structure**

Sociological examinations of social structure – when conceived as objective constraining and imperative force in social organisation, not merely as regularity or pattern (contra Martin 2009, 7-9) – have recently focused on ties in networks sometimes more heavily than upon institutional constraints, rules or norms. Bourdieu’s emphasis on forms of capital and the organisation of fields remains influential (Lopez and Scott, 2000). Others regard formal organisations as part of social structure (Elder-Vass, 2010). Some treat local material constraints as part of structure, although not necessarily of social structure. Disagreement persists about whether networks, rules and norms, fields and organisations form a nested hierarchy, whether networks are symptoms of the work of rules. In international relations scholarship, structure is variously equated with the degree of macro-hierarchy or anarchy in the world system (Wendt, 1987; Wight, 1999). In each discipline, ‘culture’ – variously defined, but sometimes treated as prevailing climates of ideas, beliefs and norms – is sometimes added to social structure as a constraining, influencing, biasing and socialising force. There is little agreement about whether material, institutional, relational, normative, organisational and cultural structure should simply be treated as summing to form social structure, or about the causal relations each element may exert upon agency, or by what mechanisms.

None of these frameworks provides a testable, granular account of the content of forms or styles of both agency and structure and the causal relations between them. A neo-Durkheimian institutional approach can achieve greater traction on these concepts, and operationalise them for studying social organisation in government.
Structure and agency in neo-Durkheimian institutional theory

Developed first in anthropology but now used widely in political science and organisation studies and known by various names, the neo-Durkheimian framework (Douglas, 1982a [1978; Gross and Rayner, 1986; Thompson et al, 1990) argues that the mix of four institutional elementary institutional forms of social organisation constitutes social structure (6, 2014a; forthcoming a).

The framework rests on a distinctive conception of institutions. Institutions, whether elementary or empirical, are defined as practices specifying more or less entrenched commitments (6, 2011, forthcoming c). Practices need not be explicitly articulated as rules, unless and until justification is called for. Norms, rules and prescriptions (‘normative structure’) are consequences of making institutions explicit, not constitutive of them. Empirical institutions (drive on the left in Britain; shake hands on meeting; sexual fidelity is expected in marriage and civil partnership) are distinguished from elementary forms of institutions, meaning universal (that is, continuously operative at any level of technical sophistication and any scale of human activity), causally fundamental, non-reducible, generic configurations of institutions which, in differently weighted hybrids, specify underlying organisation for the myriad empirically observable forms of social relations and commitments (cf. Fields, 1995, lx; 6, 2014c).

‘Social structure’ in neo-Durkheimian parlance is the weighted mix, settlement or conflict among the limited plurality of elementary forms of informal social organisation, measured on two institutional dimensions (discussed below). These also form micro-structure: unlike many approaches (DiMaggio, 1988; Coleman, 1990), the framework does not confine structure to macro-level constraints or facts exogenous to formal organisations in which people make decisions (cf. Heugens and Lander, 2009). Social structure, in the neo-Durkheimian framework, represents only a subset of constraints upon actors’ decisions. As well as social structure, empirical ‘context’ also includes material constraints, skill constraints, time constraints, information constraints, and so on. Some of these things may be consequences of prior action shaped by social structure. Different relationships are expected between agency and social structure from those between
agency and empirical context. Social structure explains styles of agency. Because social structure is understood typologically, as the weighted mix of elementary forms, so agency will be understood typologically.

The neo-Durkheimian typology of elementary forms of social organisation (Douglas 1982a [1978]) is sufficiently well-known to need no detailed presentation. It is generated by cross-tabulating Durkheim’s (1951 [1897]; 1961 [1925]) two basic dimensions of institutional variation – namely, social regulation or the degree to which institutions organise around constraint, imperative, prescription, roles and given fact or conversely, discretion and latitude (although some internally generated practices, which may be made explicit as rules, are necessary to sustain strong integration in the absence of strong external regulation); and social integration or the degree to which institutions organise around bonds, membership in bounded groups or conversely, around detachment. Allowing these dimensions to exhibit strong and weak forms deductively yields four elementary forms of informal institutions standardly called hierarchical (strong regulation and integration), individualistic (weak regulation and integration), enclaved (weak regulation, strong integration) and finally, institutions characterised by isolate ordering (strong regulation, weak integration) (Douglas, 1982a [1978]; Gross and Rayner, 1986; Thompson et al, 1990; 6, 2011, in press). Identifying the significance of isolate ordering is a distinctive feature of the framework (6, 2011, 2014a,b, in press), by contrast with the now conventional ‘markets, hierarchies and networks’ trichotomy, or with Fiske’s (1991) inductively identified elementary forms.

Pure forms are rarely observed empirically because positive feedback dynamics within them will, beyond a certain phase, undermine their viability (6, 2003; Thompson, 1996). Each form yields, as a consequence or symptom, a distinct typification of network relations (‘relational structure’). Positive feedback (self-reinforcement or self-radicalisation) within, and negative feedback (countervailing reaction) among elementary forms together produce disequilibrium dynamics, thus changing the mix of elementary forms (Thompson, 1996).
The framework’s theory of expected variation in elementary forms allows that some forms of social structure will specifically sustain *weak* constraint, in some respects, on some actor abilities and on some aspects of belief- and preference-reflection. Weak constraint is not a situation of weak institutionalisation. Rather, it describes a particular type of institutional setting, as causally significant as any other, which produces, not ‘more’ agency, but a different substantive kind of agency.

The framework’s causal engine is that elementary forms of social organisation cultivate distinct thought styles (Douglas, 1986; Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1902-3]; 6 and Richards, forthcoming). A thought style describes the *manner* by which beliefs are held and used (dogmatically or provisionally), political emotions felt (ferociously, accommodatingly, and so on), classifications legitimately used (rigidly, or allowing for blurring), risks and losses regarded as acceptable or unacceptable to be borne, anomalies handled and so on (6, 2011, forthcoming b). A thought style is contrasted with an ideology (the present argument provides a sharper contrast than Douglas’ 1986 account). Ideologies are sets of normative propositions summarising normative political ‘claim’ ideals about order, justice, liberty, etc. People holding the same ideology may follow contrasting thought styles and *vice versa* (6, 2014a).

Styles vary because relations among concepts, categories, terms, etc., are as strongly or weakly intellectually integrated and regulated as the institutions which organise people are informally socially integrated and regulated (cf. ‘the classification of things reproduces th[e] classification of [people]’: Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1902-3], 11). Mechanisms for cultivating thought styles include replication and transposition of central features of social organisation onto relations among particular subsets of (for example, political) ideas, and quotidian informal ritual fixing of categories (6, 2011, forthcoming c), including those used to frame policies (6, 2004; 2011, 73-81).

Styles of thought give content to styles of agency. We all think institutionally in some way (Douglas, 1986), but when we understand the full range of informal institutions, far from turning people into ‘cultural dopes’, this recognition positively enables agency and gives it content. The
approach explains why people should be thought of ‘in the active voice’ (Douglas, 1982b [1979]; Douglas and Ney, 1998), not in spite but because of the causal work of social organisation.

Styles shape Emirbayer’s and Mische’s second feature of agency – namely, deliberation, reflection and evaluation of options. Thought styles filter the effects of substantive beliefs upon practical reasoning, desires and action. Thereby, styles provide contrasting substantive content for agency, answering Wight’s (1999, 129) requirement. The framework’s significance for studying government is that thought styles powerfully contribute – independently of ideology or problem topic or field – to explaining political decisions and their patterns. In researching government decision-making, eight related measures can be used to operationalise the concept of thought style as style of political judgement. Measures are expected to show consistent scores in any given mix of institutional forms. These measures are risk stance in the domains of losses and gains (predicted to show greater variation than prospect theory allows); stance toward time (anticipation horizon, reference to collective memory and historical analogy in decision-making), treatment of anomalies in classification; relations among reasons, goals and preferences; importance attached to efforts to relax different types of constraints upon action; the structure of ‘strategy schedules’ or the structure of fallback options (where there are any) for dealing with people who operate under different institutions and therefore refuse to engage in relations of the form which reflects the first preference cultivated under one’s own institutions; and tightness or looseness of linkage among issues considered in decision-making (6, 2011, 87-99; forthcoming b).

Thus the framework predicts that the following styles of agency will be cultivated in contrasting forms of social organisation. ‘In individualistic contexts, agency is instrumental, strategic, medium-term; in enclaved ones, principled, under foreshortened planning horizons; in hierarchical ones, rule- and authorisation-based; in isolate ones, coping, improvisatory, opportunistic’ (6, 2011, 282; in press).
It follows that actorhood, meaning a person’s or a collectivity’s capacity to act at all, is not the same as agency, which is a capability cultivated in individuals and in collectivities and is exhibited in varying styles of deliberation and bias.

Unlike structuration theories, the framework does not obliterate the distinction between structure and agency, or treat them as aspects of the same underlying phenomenon. Contra Archer (1995), a causal relation (unlike a constitutive one) between structure and agency is not a ‘conflation’ because structure and agency remain distinct phenomena; rather, it is ‘downward causation’ (Sawyer, 2005, 69-73). Relations between structure and agency in the neo-Durkheimian framework are neither constitutive as in structurationist theories, nor those of supervenience (Healy, 1998; cf. Le Boutillier, 2001) nor yet of emergence (Elder-Vass, 2010). Rather, their relations rest on mechanisms of causal cultivation and elicitation of thought styles. Nor does the neo-Durkheimian approach imply that agency and social structure can vary entirely independently, as is implied by accounts treating agency as ‘decision minus constraint’. Yet agency is not linked with other empirical aspects of context as it is with social structure: topic, ideology and material constraint may provide occasion, limitation and focus of attention but not cultivation in the full range of cognitive stylistic bias. The framework is not deterministic because point prediction is ruled out by non-linear dynamics (Thompson 2008). Nor is it voluntaristic, because thought style is cultivated by institutions.

**Strategy schedule as one measure**

Space does not permit an examination of cases against all eight measures listed above, let alone comparative analysis of agency in each style. This article introduces a novel measure for understanding institutional shaping of thought style, called the ‘strategy schedule’. Differentiated among elementary forms, strategy schedules show how different institutions cultivate distinct forms of rationality, choice and therefore give content to agency (cf. Wildavsky, 1994).
Concentrating on this measure serves several purposes. Firstly, it enables a demonstration that the elementary forms do not necessarily cultivate ‘one club’ styles. When, for example, one typical individualistic way of trying to relating to others is blocked, refused or otherwise unavailable (i.e., constraints arising from interactions with people working under other elementary forms of social structure), there may well be other options which are equally individualistic. If this were not the case, then social organisation would constantly be dissolving after each frustration. Moreover, second- and third-best options will not be selected arbitrarily from a loosely collected repertoire: the theory predicts distinct and clear structures for strategy schedules. Second, it shows how thought style replicates social structure in transposed ways. Third, it shows how flexibility and range of options recognised as available vary among styles cultivated in contrasting social structures. Some elementary forms allow a richer repertoire of fallback options than others, reflecting the richer variety of internally generated positions and relations. For example, individualistic institutions allow both positive relations of alliance and negative relations ones of rivalry among both independents (e.g., patrons) and dependents (e.g., clients), generating more cells of social structure than other forms (6, forthcoming a). Fourth, it enables us to see show that even individualistic action, supposed by some rational choice accounts to be the default style, is the product of informal institutions of social weakly integrated and regulated structure, but that this style is not universal: contrasting styles of agency are cultivated where other elementary forms dominate.

For reasons of space, the article concentrates exclusively on individualistic and isolate ordering. In the study of government, hierarchical organisation is reasonably well understood (but see 6, 2015 for corrections to common misconceptions). Enclaving, by contrast, is less common at ministerial level, although it is observed during revolutionary periods (Hood, 1998; 6, 2011) and there are occasional periods of sectarian mobilisation within radical democratic governments: the monetarist grouping within cabinet during the first years of Mrs Thatcher’s administration may be an example (Campbell, 2003). The dynamics of individualistic organisation in high political office
are surprisingly still in need of further attention. Moreover, only recently has the significance been appreciated of isolate ordering in democratic governments (6, 2014a,b, in press).

The structure of strategy schedules shows falling back under constraint from pursuit of the greatest available gain, but the objectively available gains, costs and fallback options, and also their perception are shaped by the individualistic and isolate institutions. People act for reasons in pursuit of institutionally cultivated goals, under heavy institutional constraint, showing contrasting styles of rationality in each form.

In individualistic ordering, agents first seek to secure individual control of resources without compromise (1). When that fails, people are cultivated to seek negotiated accommodations (2). Negotiation between a client or would-be client and an individualistic patron reflects asymmetries in power, not offset or softened by any countervailing institutions such as status or community. Because it affords weak social regulation and integration, either or both the independent and dependent agent will prefer to seek tacit generalised exchange (2a), rather than to bargain for a specific quid pro quo (2b). Individualistic ordering cultivates amplified recognition in both independents and dependents that they may better preserve their room for manoeuvre by means of a negotiated but unspecified understanding which is precisely not a bargain (an explicit commitment for a specific quid pro quo). If a more flexible ‘understanding’ (2a) is unavailable, individually ordered agents may have to settle for a bargain (2b). Where the others, operating under other institutions, are cultivated to refuse accommodation under negotiated consent, the next option for an independent is grandstanding (3) to sustain individual appeal to potential supporters. This might take the form of highly individualised, personal confrontation (3a).

Another kind of grandstanding is the taking of risky, highly individualised initiatives which, even if they may fail in their principal or substantive aims, might still succeed or be presented as succeeding in others. Thus, the agent develops ‘reserve preferences’ for one and the same initiative (3b): the simplest of these is to seek ‘credit for effort’. Reserve preferences are not necessarily the product of guile. Individualistic agents’ substantive or principal aims need not be sham or
insincerely followed: reserve preferences need not be ignoble or even wholly secret. Rather, the reserve preference guides the agent to select actions from which individualised benefit can be salvaged, even in the event of substantive failure or rebuff, and the probabilities of setback are anticipated with reasonable shrewdness.

‘Stunts’ or ‘gimmicks’ are also forms of grandstanding (3c). These differ from initiatives with reserve preferences precisely in that the substantive and avowed aims are not especially important, so that the driving preferences are only those such as ‘credit for effort’ or presentational benefit, which would in other cases only reserve ones. Opponents will often suspect that individualistically ordered independents who engage in personalised grandstanding are engaging in stunts, even if in fact the agent only has reserve preferences.

Thus strategy schedules under individualistic ordering are rich in three generic fallback options each with subsidiary cases, replicating in transposed form the range of both positive and negative relations of social structure which the positions of independent and dependent can engage in, under weak social regulation and integration (6, forthcoming a).

Under the strong social regulation and weak integration of isolate ordering, this rich structure of fallback options is unavailable. Just as differences in resources controlled at any one time mark distinctions between independents and dependents in individualistic ordering, so in isolate ordering, a key difference is in an actor’s structural control (for the time being) of resources for passing on strong constraints to others by imposition, so that the actor can evade the worst losses yielded by those constraints. A structural despot (A) is one who can, for the time being, pass on constraints by imposition (Ai). A structural serf (B) is one who cannot (6, 2011, 2014ab, in press, forthcoming a). The position of the structural despot is fragile, because weak social integration leaves collective action as difficult as for the structural serf and strong regulation effectively rules out negotiated relations. Therefore, the baffled structural despot’s only fallback from failed attempt to pass on constraints by imposition, is to accept the constraints (B), just as the structural serf must, who could not even attempt to use imposition to pass on constraints. In effect, the structural
serf position is one of resorting to coping and short term tactical operations (Bi), habitual action (Bii) or guile for evasion (Biii) or, when these fail, acceptance of loss (Biv). Whereas those in structurally despotic positions improvise only in fresh efforts in imposition, structural serfs improvise in evasion or guile or simply in coping under adversity, while accepting constraint and loss.

When dealing with others who do not operate under isolate ordering, the first strategic choice of isolates is to engage in short term exploitation, whether by imposition (structural despots) to pass on constraint to others or more weakly by free-riding (structural serfs). When this is blocked, structural serfs (by definition, the despotic position is unavailable when the differently ordered others successfully resist imposition) may seek, using guile, to ‘pass off’ (Biii-a). Faced with inflexible hierarchy, they can hide as hierarchical superiors (if in high office) or subalterns (if not); dealing with intransigently individualistic others, they can pass as followers or clients of independent patrons. When this too fails, those in isolate ordering again resort only to coping, or adaptation to accepted loss (Biv).

To examine these hypotheses, data are drawn from a small part of a much larger study using large quantities of declassified ministerial papers from the National Archives, to create cases of decisions which are coded using measures of thought style, to examine neo-Durkheimian explanations of political judgement styles in fields of social, micro-economic and foreign policy in the Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Wilson and Heath governments between the October 1959 and February 1974 general elections in Britain. Only two illustrative cases can be discussed of shifts within strategy schedules, showing how social structure cultivates thought styles to shape agency. To illustrate an individualistic strategy schedule, the article briefly examines decisions by Harold Wilson’s 1964-1970 government, which (contra Bale, 1999) was characterised by highly individualistic competition among leading patrons of claqués of clients (6, 2014a, forthcoming b, c). Agency shaped by isolate ordering is examined in decision-making in the 1970-4 Heath administration, especially between 1972 and 1974, when Heath’s own dominating position and the
weak cohesion among ministers amounted to a structurally despotic isolate ordering (6, 2014b, in press, forthcoming b). Of course, in both cases, there were strands of each of the other elementary forms also operating. The civil service and the constitution continued to supply hierarchical institutions; there was modest enclaving on their backbenches; but individualistic and isolate ordering respectively were the most significant elements in the mix (6, in press, forthcoming a). To show that the argument applies in foreign and domestic policy, the illustrations contrast agency and structure in both Wilson’s ‘peace initiatives’ over the Vietnam war with the Heath government’s political judgement about the war, with decision-making about the nexus of incomes policy and industrial relations in both administrations.

Agency in individualistic strategy

Wilson’s government faced extremely difficult dilemmas in its relations with the US. Even if the government had wanted to, distancing itself from US President Johnson’s escalation of war in Vietnam risked the US administration’s goodwill that was vital in securing financial assistance for each of the annual sterling crises which bedevilled the government between 1964 and 1968. Its negotiating position vis-à-vis the US was not strong, although the Johnson administration believed that it needed Britain to maintain both a strong pound and continued defence commitments east of Suez and would have liked a token military commitment in Vietnam. On the government’s backbenches was a group bitterly opposed to the war and to the Labour government’s support for it. That group became steadily more enclaved over time, especially after the 1966 general election when for a time whipping discipline was weaker and their numbers great enough to permit rebellion without bringing down the government. The British foreign secretary remained co-chair of the largely dormant Geneva conference process but this gave the government no substantive leverage to influence US, Soviet, Chinese or Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) commitment to the war. Wilson’s decision to devote much time and energy between 1965 and 1968 to a war over which he had no power may seem surprising. Some critics put it down to personal vanity, but
the manner of his agency can be better explained by reference to the social structure which cultivated a particular thought style in his fissiparous administration. For Wilson was never secure from his ‘crown princes’. He had to manoeuvre frequently to break up their claques, maintain his own clients, but above all competitively to assert his own profile, while deflecting the threat from the backbench enclave. In relation to the US over the Vietnam war, his individual assertion could not take the form of dominance (type 1).

In talks with the US about support for sterling during 1965 and 1966, despite their disagreements and rivalries, Wilson, Chancellor Callaghan and Economic Affairs Secretary Brown variously pursued the strategy of positively avoiding being tied to a specific bargain with the US, fearing the conditionality that Washington would seek to require. The result was what most historians call an ‘understanding’ (type 2a in the strategy schedule). Although historians do not define the term, it can be characterised as a tacit appreciation, but without offer and acceptance or specific *quid pro quo*, of limits to action reflecting the limits of the other party’s acquiescence in initiatives which might threaten perceived interests. Absence both of written agreement and of offer and acceptance allow tacit amendment in ‘terms’ over time, as each side gently probes to discover the limits of the other’s acquiescence. The process can involve loquacious but obliquely conducted talks between parties, unlike tacit bargaining by inference from silent behaviour (cf. Downs and Rocke, 1987; Langlois and Langlois, 1996).

On the one hand, Wilson specifically instructed his Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, to refuse a bargain specifically linking support for the pound to Vietnam (PREM 13/693. 23.3.65;² Colman, 2004, 67-8). And during that summer’s sterling crisis, Wilson and Callaghan both rejected suggestions from Washington for conditionality on support for the war, let alone in the form of a military contribution (FO 371/179587. 9.9.65) or indeed a commitment in perpetuity to maintain defence assets ‘east of Suez’. On the other, Wilson rebuffed ministers who were frustrated by what

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² References in this format are to files in the National Archives at Kew, giving file reference and date of relevant document.
they saw as his subservience to Washington by reminding them of British dependence (Wilson, 1977, 131), while officials acknowledged that there were limits to how far Britain could go in 1965 in offending the US over political support for the war and in any defence cuts in Asia (FO 371/179587. 21.9.65) (Ellis, 2004, 126). For his part, Johnson finally ordered that support for the pound and Vietnam be discussed separately (Dumbrell, 1996, 222; Schwartz, 2003, 79). Wilson’s and his ministers’ choice to refuse a bargain with the US, to exploit the position of being a weaker party needed by the other (O’Hara, 2003) reflected the social structure within the government. They framed the external choice in the same manner they framed their own relations, as rivals whose weakness meant they needed each other but with whom they could not afford the risk of an explicit bargain.

Moreover, with especial intensity during 1965 but continuously until early 1968, Wilson continued to undertake highly personalised and some cases very public diplomatic initiatives to call for peace or at least de-escalation, preparatory to bilateral US-DRV talks. Even if Wilson himself had no expectation that the 1965 Commonwealth prime ministers’ mission would achieve its avowed purpose, he insisted on his own high profile position to ensure that he would gain any credit for effort (type 3c). If it was a stunt, then it also served as a useful distraction at that year’s Commonwealth prime ministers’ conference from Rhodesia (Crossman, 1976, II, 27.6.65, 255). Yet he seems sincerely to have thought before the February 1967 London talks with Soviet prime minister Kosygin that there was a chance of breakthrough. He was careful to ensure that when the story of the talks eventually leaked, he could present his efforts as creditworthy, to his backbenchers and to a public which still expected its government to play a global role: reserve preferences mattered (type 3b).

Industrial relations provide examples of highly individualistic political judgement by Wilson and his ministers, showing contrasting aspects of thought style to the negotiation and brokerage commonly associated with individualism. This too was driven by Wilson’s own competitive imperatives within the government. In 1966, attempts broke down to reach a settlement about pay
and hours with the National Union of Seamen, in which an embittered enclave was centrally
important and was able to capitalise on grievances going back many years and exacerbated by
defeat in the 1960 unofficial strike. Wilson overruled Brown, who was prepared to avoid raising
incomes policy in the talks and even to represent an offer as being within the pay norm when it
may well have been above it (PREM 13/1227. 25.5.66). Instead, he insisted both on holding firm
for the employers’ final offer, and on associating himself personally with government efforts, of a
rather confrontative kind, to persuade the union in talks at Number 10. When this produced no
result, Wilson personally broadcast to the nation describing the NUS action as ‘a strike against the
state, against the community’ and declaring the incomes policy norm as sacrosanct (Wilson, 1971,
230) even though he knew well that the proposed court of inquiry would surely offer more. To
increase pressure on the union, Wilson and Jenkins, the Home Secretary, decided to accept civil
service advice to declare a state of emergency early, before any real hardship had been suffered
(PREM 13/1227. 11.5.66). After the NUS rejected the Pearson Court of Inquiry
recommendations, Wilson prepared his most dramatic personalised confrontation (type 3a). After
holding back for a final personal meeting with the NUS executive, he insinuated in the Commons
that communist influence in the NUS was intimidating moderates. When the press failed to find
their own way to the story he wanted, a week later on 28th June, Wilson named several strike leaders
as communists. His left-wing backbenchers were aghast at what they saw as McCarthyite tactics;
some in the press saw only personal aggrandisement and perhaps a stunt. Shortly afterward, the
strike collapsed when moderates regained control of the executive, but there is room for debate
about just how great a contribution Wilson’s dramatic, individualised and individualising
confrontation made in bringing about that result (Thorpe, 2001).

These fallback tactics and reliance upon reserve preferences such as credit for effort were not
always successful. Wilson’s highly personalised negotiation strategy in 1969 with the trade union
leadership through TUC over the ‘In place of strife’ proposals also exhibited occasional moves toward
grandstanding confrontation, but as these appeared to backfire, he and Employment secretary
Castle were forced back to negotiation, and in the denouement, to accept a specific bargain (2b) for the figleaf of the TUC’s ‘solemn and binding commitment’. The scale of the substantive failure denied Wilson much credit for the public for trying to control unofficial strikes. On the other hand, the figleaf was sufficient to preserve Wilson’s premiership, which may well have been under serious threat if he had been unable to wring even that face-saving formula from the trades unions.

Wilson exhibited almost the full range of the strategy schedule predicted by the theory to operate under individualistic ordering. When faced with enclaves or with superior foreign powers with whom the he could neither assert his claim nor secure negotiation save at a price considered unacceptable, Wilson was prepared to use negotiation to avoid a bargain, grandstanding confrontation, and initiatives with reserve preferences and stunts. Explanations appealing to personality, ideology, the domain of losses, or supposedly given interests, do not provide convincing accounts of the variety of tactics used, the plasticity of interests given priority, the instrumentality with which ideology was invoked or the fact that the government moved in and out of domains of losses and gains but continued to deploy tactics from this repertoire. By contrast, understanding the individualistic social structure shows how the resilient, instrumental, personalised and assertive style of agency, making use of a wide repertoire of action forms, arises from the weak constraints and loose relations within the government, which are then painted on to the face of the problems and policy choices ministers faced.

**Agency in ‘strategy’ under isolate ordering**

Heath and his ministers felt deeply the imperative to pass macro-economic constraints of controlling inflation on to workers through micro-economic policy in the form of imposed incomes policy and through discipline in industrial relations. The vastly ambitious 1971 Industrial Relations Act was rushed onto the statute book, as Heath, Carr (first Employment, then Home secretary) and others assumed that, despite their opposition, the trades unions would reluctantly acquiesce in enacted legislation for which the government had an electoral mandate. The
impository thought style left ministers unable to anticipate the scale and effectiveness of the union’s tactic of non-registration and boycott of the National Industrial Relations Court or the protracted period over which the TUC managed, albeit with difficulty, to sustain it. When in 1972, the new Employment Secretary Maurice Macmillan tried to use both cooling off and strike ballot orders in a rail strike, these measures backfired badly and could never be used again. Later that year private container company employers tried to use the court to sanction unofficial picketing by dockers. Apart from the legal anomalies in the bill exposed by the appeal courts, the eventual imprisonment of several pickets for contempt of court led to mass protests, unofficial action and the threat by the TUC of the first national general strike in fifty years. The government could do little. By 1973, the Act was of limited practical relevance but remained a political obstacle to wider substantive agreement between government and unions (Moran, 1977). There was no fallback position, only acceptance of the setback. To underline the point, in just three and half years, Heath declared more States of Emergency than any other government since the 1920 legislative framework; all were for industrial disputes; in none of these cases did the government prevail.

The strategy of passing on constraints by imposition in incomes policy remained a government commitment. The ‘n minus one’ pay norm was insisted upon, with ministers determined in late 1971 to hold out against the National Union of Mineworkers. In February 1972, NUM picketing had reduced stocks for power generation to such a low point that the government was forced to make humiliating concessions. When a DTI ‘lessons learned’ report advised ministers that the problem was the policy ‘only break, not bend’ (PREM 15/1680. 19.5.72), Heath underlined the phrase in his copy. Yet in 1973-4 in the second dispute with the miners, when the government was by then operating Stage Three of its detailed statutory incomes policy, the government followed the same approach and only the general election prevented the government from a similar capitulation to that of two years previously. The repetition was not habitual, unthinking action, but a risk knowingly run in fully deliberative agency. But the thought style of imposition without fallback other than accepting constraint and loss resulted from the government’s own internal
social ordering which it led ministers to paint the terms of that ordering onto their problems, available options and weightings of risks. Despite much agonising (CAB 184/90; PREM 15/2123; PREM 15/1678), the Industrial Relations Act was never amended for fear of loss of face. Similarly, flexibility in incomes policy was procrastinated beyond the election for fear of loss of the one instrument of fragile control regarded as available. Improvisation took the form of persistence in attempts to pass on constraints by imposition, and of coping when this failed.

The bilateral talks in Paris over the Vietnam war limited the scope for third country diplomacy, even if Heath and Foreign Secretary Lord Home wanted to engage in it. On this issue, no structurally despotic position was available, but the isolate thought style left the Conservative government with no more flexible style of agency than acceptance of the war as an inevitability, and repetition of the demand for a reconvened Geneva conference even though it had ceased to be relevant or even in British interests. Even Heath’s statements of support for US President Nixon’s bombing campaigns expressed more acceptance of their unavoidability than any enthusiasm (PREM 15/1118. 30.12.72; FCO 15/1719; cf. Hansard 25.4.72: vol 835 cc1273-4; 13.6.72; vol 838 cc1251-3). Home persisted in pestering the Soviets, whom the FCO now understood had little leverage in Hanoi, with demands for reconvening the Geneva machinery, despite FCO advice that the constant rebuffs only underlined British impotence and that the Geneva role was no longer an asset for Britain: Home’s only argument was that the machinery was still formally in existence and it supposedly put the Soviets in the wrong to be seen to refuse (FCO 15/1600. 14.5.72; FCO 15/1719. 18.5.72). The stance toward the military operations and the diplomatic rigidity reflected neither habit nor lack of deliberation but a thought style which emphasised what was seen to be imposed as constraint and was therefore to be followed. Improvisation was limited to what could be done with what ministers saw as given fact. In these respects, thought style replicated the social organisation of the government itself, internally dominated by its structurally despotic leader but pushed into a structural serf position when the brittle despotic position either failed or was unavailable.
Discussion

The neo-Durkheimian institutional framework not only preserves agency in the dimension of reasoning, deliberating, evaluating, choosing and acting upon choice, but enhances our appreciation of it by distinguishing four styles, each with substantive content, two of which have been illustrated empirically. Using this approach, political agency becomes intelligible, and contrasts carrying richer explanatory freight can be drawn.

Far from structure and agency being opposites or standing in zero sum relation to each other, when defined precisely, they operate in causal lockstep. Despite often being described as a ‘cultural’ approach, the framework uses no ‘cultural’ phenomena such as ‘values’ or ‘worldviews’, either as explanations or as *explananda*. Indeed, that Tories on the party’s left such as Carr would write and rush through the Industrial Relations Act, and that Labour governments would appear to use McCarthyite tactics, and that both would back the US in Vietnam, reminds us of the limitations of ideological beliefs as explanations for particular decisions in government. For only by looking past ideology to the specificities of thought style can we adequately explain such decisions.

The illustrations show that individualistic agency is no mere default case, but requires particular institutions to be sustained. Weak regulation is not strong agency but a peculiar kind of agency. Understanding strategy schedules shows that individualism is not only or even principally about bargaining. Even in isolate ordering – often represented as passive, dull, or attenuated agency – the framework shows that there is a distinctive and articulate style of agency on this dimension. It is no mere null hypothesis (contra Fiske, 1991). Each style of agency is driven by a thought style; each is cultivated by social structure; and the styles are expected to be found in differently weighted hybrids, changing over time in response to positive and negative feedback dynamics. Instead of being a remainder or ‘gap’ after constraint is accounted for, agency is understood as stylised capability for deliberation. The styles enable us to contrast subjective and objective availability of options. Showing how decision-makers’ informal institutions of social organisation provide distal explanations for thought style and agency, provides more a satisfying causal account of structure.
and agency than do proximate intentional explanations. By defining social structure as informal institutional organisation among actors in respect of social regulation and integration, the concept is both clearly distinguished from network or relational structure (a symptom) and normative structure (which may well encompass some of wider constraints) and from empirical context which is specific to the decision field or topic.

The concept of a strategy schedule as a measure of thought style captures some of the structure of the subjectively available options which stylise the content of deliberative agency. Although space does not permit illustrations from more hierarchical and enclaved cases, the examples from the Wilson and Heath governments show that available fallback options (and, under individualistic ordering, reserve preferences for the same options) exhibit distinctive structures, and that these decision structures reflect the social structure which organises decision-makers themselves.

Differences in structures of fallback options provide part of the answer to those who fear that an approach of this kind will again turn people into ‘cultural dopes’. People make choices from menus with researchable intelligible structure, and their flexibility in using those menus varies among elementary forms. (Another part of the answer is that the dynamics of change in elementary forms lead to anomalies, surprises and countervailing reactions, which disrupt those forms, so that people are not organised indefinitely in any configuration of those forms: 6, 2003; 2014b.)

The approach therefore answers Wight’s (1999) call for substantive content for agency. It offers a specific and testable recasting of Archer’s (1996) ‘situational logics’, while explaining the structural cultivation of thought style for which Mutch (2004) calls. It affords distinctive content to styles of agency in one and perhaps two of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) dimensions of agency. It has no need of problematic notions of \textit{habitus} and avoids conflating structure and agency. Most significantly, the framework transforms a problem from often discussed in terms of ontology (Hay, 2002, 2009) into one of substantive theory which can be subjected to empirical testing using a full set of measures, which can be applied, for example, using comparative historical case research designs.
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