Actor-Centered Social Work: Re-visioning "Person-in-Environment" through a Critical Theory Lens

Mary Ellen Kondrat

The ecosystems perspective has become the most prevalent approach for understanding the relationship between person and social environment. It views the individual and larger social systems as separate but contiguous elements that transact with each other in relationships of mutual influence. This article revises the relationship between person and social environment through the lens of critical theory. Emphasizing distinctively human characteristics, arguments define human actors as coconstructors of, not just interactors within, their social environments. It is suggested that the individual is "in" the larger social system not so much the way a smaller box is contained within a larger box but rather the way dancers are in a ballet or a football team is in a game. The dancers and the players co-constitute the dance and the game. Although human behavior is shaped by society and its structures, those very structures are recursively constructed, maintained, and reproduced by the social actions of human agents over time. Implications for social work practice, research, and education are discussed.

Key words: constructionism, critical theory, macro–micro theory, person-in-environment, structuration theory

Historically, the profession of social work has been characterized by a sharp divide between macro and micro theories and practice, including sometimes heated debates over the proper focus for "real" social work (Abramovitz & Bardill, 1993; Gibelman, 1999; Haynes, 1998; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Over the years, efforts have been made to bridge this divide through the adoption of overarching perspectives and frameworks for practice that relate the various sizes of social phenomena to each other (Haynes; Kondrat, 1999). Of note in this regard is the groundbreaking work of social work scholars who have contributed to the development of various systems perspectives and ecological or ecosystem frameworks (Germain, 1973, 1978, 1981; Germain & Gitterman, 1980, 1995, 1996; Greif & Lynch, 1983; Meyer, 1983; Pincus & Minahan, 1973). In social work, these ecosystems frameworks have become the most prevalent approaches for explicating the person-in-environment perspective, long considered the organizing framework for professional practice (Wakefield, 1996a, 1996b). Despite these efforts to relate the individual to the larger social systems in meaningful ways, tension over the micro–macro dualism continues to plague the profession (Haynes, 1998; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

sociologist who spent much of his academic career at Kings College, Cambridge. More recently, he has served as Director of the London School of Economics. Giddens (1990) described his work as “radicalized modern” rather than “postmodern,” particularly in his emphasis on human agency and on the possibility for effective political engagement and social change on a global as well as local level. It is his empowering focus on human agency in the maintenance, stability, and transformation of society’s institutions that gives Giddens’s work particular relevance for social work theory and practice. Giddens’s major theoretical project has been the development of what he calls structuration theory. In this theory Giddens integrates two previously separate streams of thought in the social science literature—theses that have focused on macrosocial structures and those that have examined human interactions at a microlevel. This article outlines major elements in structuration theory and describes how, by connecting everyday life directly to larger social structures in a dynamic way, this theory has the potential to infuse a new, pragmatic, and more activist perspective on the micro–macro dualism in social work theory and practice.

Social Science and Macro–Micro Divide

The divide between micro and macro theory is not unique to social work as a discipline. Over the past century, since sociology became an academic subject, a great deal of sociological thought has gone into developing social–structural explanations for the behavior of human individuals and collectivities. Theorists who have adopted this approach to the study of social phenomena, by and large, have followed a perspective shared by classical social theorists like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Talcott Parsons, who (though differing considerably in the content of their theories of society) understood social structures and institutions as consisting of regularities and objective patterns external to individual action, intentions, and meanings, and not reducible to the sum of those meanings or actions (Durkheim, 1964; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Parsons, 1964, 1966). This group of theorists developed macrosocial theories in which the major explanatory variables were larger structural phenomena. The behavior of individual actors was understood to be strongly influenced or even determined by the various structures or institutions of society. The human being as active agent, exercising free will and contributing to his or her circumstance, was not a consideration in this perspective (Kondrat, 1999).

By contrast, another group of classical sociological thinkers like Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel, and Alfred Schutz (Cicourel, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967; Schutz, 1967) adopted a view on the task of social science consistent with the one defined by early social theorist Max Weber. Weber (1964) defined sociology as “a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action” (p. 88). Theorists who were influenced by Weber’s perspective on the task of social science have emphasized the construction of interpersonal social realities in the more immediate arena of routine human interactions and concentrated on microunderstandings for human behavior and action (Giddens, 1993; Kondrat, 1999), but they have tended to overlook both the institutional constraints under which human actors construct their immediate social worlds and the ways in which everyday human interactions contribute to larger structural conditions (Giddens, 1984, 1987; Kondrat, 1999).

According to Giddens (1984), each of these streams of social thought give differing accounts for two important phenomena: “human agency” and “social structure.” Agency here refers to the capacity for a person to make a difference in some state of affairs or situation. Structure refers to the organization of rules and resources that constitute social systems and institutions (Giddens, 1993). Giddens argues that the traditional macrosocial theorists have had a lot to say about structural properties of social life, but little to say about important aspects of human agency such as intentions, reflection, power, or meaning. By contrast, sociological microtheorists, by focusing rather exclusively on agency in interpersonal interactions, provide only a very limited account for the development and endurance of larger human institutions and structures, particularly structures related to power and resources (Giddens, 1987, 1993; Kondrat, 1999). Giddens (1987) argued that because historically these two phenomena have been developed in the social science literature as separate issues, an integrated account of how human agency is involved in the construction, endurance, and transformation of human social structures has not been well developed. Giddens’s structuration theory is an attempt to reconcile accounts of human agency and social structure in
a way that bridges the traditional micro-macro divide (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1993).

Giddens’s central assertion is that the relationship between human beings and their social structures and institutions is recursive (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1979, 1987; Kondrat, 1999). The term “recursive” carries a different meaning from terms such as “interaction,” “transaction,” or “reciprocal relationship”—terms frequently used in social work literature with a systems or ecosystems perspective to describe the relationship between individuals or small systems and the larger environment. These latter terms imply two separate but contiguous or related elements whose relationship is one of mutual influence (Germain & Gitterman, 1995). Recursiveness derives from the root word recur; as such, the word refers not to systems but to processes. In structuration theory, recursiveness refers to the way certain processes in society repeat and reproduce themselves in an ongoing cycle. Specifically, the theory refers to the processes through which society and its structures shape the activity of individuals, although those structures, in turn, are constituted by the very actions they shape and condition (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1984, 1987, 1993; Kondrat, 1999).

To offer a simple illustration of this kind of recursive process, Giddens pointed to the structure of a given language. How is it, he asked, that the structure and syntax of a particular language in a society are preserved across time? It is because individuals in that society continue to speak, write, and communicate in the language. And how is it that people continue to communicate in the language? It is because they grow up in a society where that language is spoken. The process is recursive—the use of a language perpetuates the structure and form of the language; structure and form, in turn, shape language use (Giddens, 1984). Of course, the matter is a lot more complex for other social institutions—the institution of racism, for example, or the class structure of a society. But Giddens contended that the outline of the argument is similar. Social structures and institutions are maintained because of the structured and patterned way people act and interact over time; people learn to act and interact the way they do because of their immersion in a society which is supported by certain structures and institutions (Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1987, 1993).

Understanding that human action and the reproduction or renewal of human institutions are essentially different moments of one-and-the-same process holds important implications for the traditional social work perspectives on the relationship between person and society—between micro and macro systems. “While not made by any single person, society is created and recreated afresh, if not ex nihilo [from nothing], by the participants in every social encounter. The production of society is a skilled performance sustained and made to happen by the participants in every social encounter” (Giddens, 1993, p. 20) [italics added]. This means that the relationship between microaction and macrostructure is much closer than is usually conceptualized. Concepts such as “human agency,” “freedom,” “power and empowerment,” and “social transformation” take on new and more expanded meaning (Figure 1). This expanded meaning adds a critical activist ingredient to social work’s concept of person in the social environment.

**Human Agency**

It can be argued that there are two central sociological “truths” that define structuration theory: the structures and institutions of society provide a context and formula for human social practices; social structures and systems are constructed, maintained, and altered through the social practices of individual members across time and geographic space (Giddens, 1984, 1987). The social work literature from a person-in-environment perspective has tended to emphasize the first of these premises over the second and so has given somewhat more attention to the constraining and enabling aspects of social context and less to the active role of human beings in constructing and maintaining those larger contexts.

In the classical ecosystems framework, for example, the relationship of smaller systems to larger systems in which they exist is conceptualized as a hierarchical arrangement (Germain, 1978). The metaphor of a set of Chinese boxes, with smaller boxes fitting neatly inside increasingly larger ones, as first suggested by Germain (1978), captures a sense of how large systems and their “subsystems” have been presented in this literature. The person as system exists within the family system that exists within the neighborhood that exists within a community, and so forth. This metaphor of subsystems within systems is enhanced by another concept, that of “transactional interface,” that is, the fluid location of contact.
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^In human beings there is a certain amount of freedom from either genetic determinism or environmental determinism” because human beings have “free will.” Germain (1978). General systems theory and ego psychology: An ecological perspective. Social Service Review, 52, 546–547.
between an organism (system) and its environment, which allows exchange and feedback (Germain, 1978; Gordon, 1969; Greif & Lynch, 1983).

From the perspective of structuration theory, the box within box metaphor and the concept of transactional interface, although helpful, may not go far enough in capturing the complicated relationship between the individual and the larger social systems in which he or she participates. Individuals belong “in” larger social systems, not so much the way a smaller box is nested within a larger one but rather the way an artist exists within his or her own creation or (to emphasize the coordination involved in any skilled social production) the way a ballet troop is in the dance performance or the players are in the football game. The artist, the player, and the dancer constitute the work of art, the game, and the dance. A person is part of a family system not simply as a bounded subunit transacting with other subsystems but rather as one who coconstitutes and cocreates the family in an ongoing way. The individual exists in society and its institutions as an independent (although transacting) subsystem but instead as one whose daily activity creates and re-creates society.

More recently, person-in-environment theorists have begun to pay increasing attention to the implications of social constructionist perspectives for a contextualized understanding of human behavior and development (Greene & Lee, 2002; Kondrat, 1999; Lee & Greene, 1999; Malek & Vignlante, 1997). Introduced into social work primarily from family therapy, qualitative research, and feminist literatures, social constructionism forms the basis for innovative approaches to social work practice with families and individuals, including “solution-oriented treatment,” “narrative therapy,” and “dialogic therapy” (Franklin, 1998; Gergen, 1999; Greene & Lee, 2002; Kondrat, 1999; Laird, 1993). There are many variations on social constructionism with differing emphases; however, by and large, those who adopt the constructionist perspective would agree on the following points: whatever is defined as “reality” in a person’s experience is not simply a fixed, environmental “given”; a person’s reality and the meaning he or she derives from experience are constructed by individual consciousness in interaction with the environment; and reality and meaning are mediated through language and culture (Gergen, 1999; Greene, Jensen, & Jones, 1996; Greene & Lee, 2002; Kondrat, 1999). Thus, social constructionism advances an understanding that the individual is an active agent in coconstructing his or her immediate “world of meaning” and therefore his or her reality (Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988).

Constructionist perspectives add an important dimension to the profession’s understanding of person-in-environment. In particular, more than earlier person-in-context theories, this framework provides a consistent conceptual underpinning for the assertion that human beings are active agents, capable of self-transformation. However, social constructionist theorizing within social work has generally remained at the microlevel, with the notion of the individual as active agent confined largely to his or her immediate social encounters (Kondrat, 1999). At the same time, larger macrostructures (for example, the structures that support racism, classism, or sexism) have been viewed primarily as a context for human activity, something that sets limits to and influences human behavior. Of course, it is crucial not to ignore the tremendous effect of social structures and institutions as individuals and families construct their lives and relationships (Laird, 1993), but this is only one-half of the equation. Social institutions and social structures, Giddens suggested, are also human constructions; they have no existence apart from the human actions that constitute and reconstitute their form and substance (Kondrat, 1999). Thus, in Giddens theory, we find the concept of human beings as active agents capable not only of self-transformation but also of larger social transformation as well.

Agency and Knowledge

In structuration theory the knowledgeable ability of the human actor plays an essential role. It is so central to the theory that without a concept of the “knowledgeable agent” there literally would be no structuration theory. “Every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member” because social actors reinforce the structures of society in their everyday social practices and because to do so “requires skillful and knowledgeable performance” in interaction with others (Giddens, 1987, p. 63) [italics added]. That is to say, human beings routinely and reflexively monitor their own
social performance, and so are capable of giving some account of that performance (Giddens, 1984).

Although the idea that human beings are knowledgeable coconstructors of their own larger social environments is not incompatible with traditional person-in-environment concepts, these latter frameworks make very little mention of this uniquely human feature and its implications for social behavior and societal consequences. Proponents of social constructionist perspectives do emphasize concepts of “meaning” and “understanding”—meaning and understanding are assumed to be created with others in social interactions (Franklin, 1998; Gergen, 1999; Greene & Lee, 2002). However, the concepts remain persistently psychological or sociopsychological; thus, the relationship between meaning and social structure has been underdeveloped in the constructionist literature (Kondrat, 1999).

According to structuration theory three basic kinds of social knowledge are available to the human actor. The first is termed mutual knowledge—that is, knowledge that people who have been raised in the same socializing community possess in common. This is the knowledge that helps people accurately anticipate the correct way to perform and to make sense of what others do (Giddens, 1987). Society and its institutions and structures are maintained by such patterned practices and rules, and members of a society need to know what to expect of themselves and others if the “dance” or “game” is to continue smoothly. (Of course, not everyone may be “in the know” in the same way or to the same degree, an issue to which we will turn in a moment.) Mutual knowledge has at least two subtypes: discursive knowledge and practical knowledge. Discursive knowledge is knowledge readily available for conversation. Practical knowledge, by contrast, is knowledge that is implicit in the social practices of skilled social actors (Giddens, 1984, 1987; Kondrat, 1992). Practical knowledge is articulated in acts rather than in words and is usually simply accepted and assumed, unless challenged (Giddens, 1984). Others have described this kind of knowledge as “embodied” (Fay, 1987), “tacit,” “taken for granted” (Berger & Luckman, 1967) or “extra-cognitive” (Kondrat, 1992, 1999).

For example, students and others who travel to countries with cultural and social systems different from their own frequently discover that they are missing “cues” about how to interact in a given social situation or that they misinterpret the behavior of others. In some societies, for instance, smiling directly at a stranger in public places is taken to have provocative connotations; in other societies, such behavior is intended to signal friendliness or benevolent intent. Not having been socialized into the host culture, the visitor may be lacking immediate access to the sort of mutual knowledge that cultural insiders take for granted about tacit interactive rules. In such cases, a good strategy might be to ask a member of the host culture about interactive practices. If pressed to reflect, the cultural insider may be able to give at least a partial account of the practical rules that guide behavior in specific instances. The knowledge that ultimately emerges on reflection is available for “discourse”—that is, moves from implicit practical knowledge to discursive knowledge as defined in structuration theory.

Up to this point, the concept of mutual knowledge is similar to ideas developed by others, particularly microsocial theorists concerned with face-to-face interactions. The idea that most of the rules human beings follow when they engage in social interactions are implicit has been developed by others, including classical social theorists like Erving Goffman (1980), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1967), and Alfred Schutz (1967). The suggestion that these implicit prescriptions are carried out unreflectively until actors are confronted by a novel or challenging event is also a concept discussed by others (Goffman, 1980). Where the ideas in structuration theory differ from those of sociological microtheorists is in bringing together microinteractions with their macroconsequences.

To illustrate this last point, it is useful to return to the earlier example of the “smile in public places.” Suppose a student traveling abroad, riding a public bus, smiles in what she believes to be a communication of friendliness. Fortunately, she happens to be accompanied by a friend who grew up in the host culture and who quickly explains the implicit rule that for an unmarried woman, a smile and eye contact with a stranger in this circumstance is an invitation to more familiarity than she might wish; so far, so good. However, based on structuration theory it is possible to take the argument further. Individuals can reflect not only on the tacit social rules but also on the structural outcomes of enacting those rules.
Thus, the two friends on the public bus may go on to explore with each other how the rules about prohibited behaviors in public places may keep women "in their place" and contribute to the gendered relations of inequality and power in that society. They may also consider similar rules in the visiting student's own society. In this conversation, the two friends have moved beyond simple articulation of implicit rules about how to interact to a reflective consideration of how the ongoing enactment of such rules is both derived from and at the same time perpetuates structural features of social life—for example, sexism, classism, or racism. "All human beings are knowledgeable agents. That is to say, social actors know a great deal about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to-day lives" (Giddens 1984, p. 281). This ability of the individual to reflexively uncover many of the structural implications of routine social practices is key to understanding the concept of knowledgeable agent.

Power and Empowerment

Of course, what a particular individual might know depends somewhat on the position of that actor within a given social structure (Giddens, 1984). Here I am using the term "social position" in its traditional sociological sense: "any difference among people in terms of which they make social distinctions among themselves in social intercourse" (Blau, 1994, p. 3). Actors may be located at varying positions along structuring dimensions of social life such as class, status, gender, and cultural or religious marginality. An individual's social location influences access to resources (including technological resources), power, opportunity, and information, all of which enter into the determination of what one knows, does not know, or is prevented from knowing (Giddens, 1984; Kondrat, 1999). Even in more open societies, in which information about sectors of society other than one's own may be available through travel, education, and the various media, access to knowledge may differ from group to group (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1984; Kondrat, 1999). For instance, what someone who belongs to a marginalized racial and cultural minority group knows about racism as a structural feature of social life in the United States may differ from what a member of a nonmarginalized group might know. What an economically privileged member of the banking establishment knows about how the class structure of society is maintained on a day-to-day basis differs from what a single parent living marginally from paycheck to paycheck knows about the process (Kondrat, 1999). What one knows and how one knows it depend a great deal on social location. Concepts of knowledge and structure go hand in hand with concepts of power.

In structuration theory, power is one of the most central variables. "The study of power cannot be regarded as a second-order consideration in the social sciences. . . . There is no more elemental concept than that of power. . . . Power is the means of getting things done and, as such, directly implied in human action" (Giddens, 1984, p. 283). But power, as defined here, is not an amorphous force that somehow attaches to particular people or institutions. Power is explained very concretely in terms of two component properties of systems: resources and rules (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1984).

"Resources . . . are structured properties of social systems, drawn upon and reproduced by knowledgeable agents in the course of interaction" (Giddens, 1984, p. 15) (italics added). "Resources are the media through which power is exercised"(Giddens, 1984, p. 16). There are essentially two different kinds of resources: (1) allocative resources, which include the material features of the environment and technical and other artifacts of human production; and (2) authoritative resources, which refer to the way human beings, their relations, and their opportunities are organized in society (Giddens, 1984). Property and monetary resources are examples of allocative resources. Holding a position of power in a business or a community, belonging to a family with status in a particular community, holding a degree from a prestigious academic institution, and having an effective support network would be examples of authoritative resources. The two kinds of resources are not independent of one another; indeed, they tend to be mutually reinforcing. For example, family wealth (an allocative resource) is frequently a factor in assuring an opportunity to obtain a degree from a highly regarded academic institution (authoritative resource).

Although resources are structured properties of systems, rules are the structuring properties of various social systems (Cohen, 1987). Rules define how resources should be allocated and relationships arranged. Rules can be procedural or moral.
Procedural rules define how something is to be done; moral rules define rights, duties, and obligations (Cohen, 1987). An understanding that one’s elderly parents have the right to respect from their children and grandchildren would be an example of a moral rule; the precise ways in which respect may be shown would be procedural. Rules vary with regard to their levels of explicitness, formality, and sanction. As noted earlier, some rules are formulated quite explicitly (discursively); other rules are more tacit, accepted unreflectively. Some rules are more formal than others. Laws and bureaucratic regulations are examples of formal, codified rules, whereas the rule about how much eye contact is appropriate in a crowded elevator is informal. There are also gradations in severity of sanction for violating rules (Giddens, 1984).

By defining power directly in terms of two constitutive elements, rules and resources, structuration theory makes the concept of power more concrete and more practical. In general use, the word power is an abstraction; power cannot be pointed to directly, and therefore it is grasped largely in its effect. By contrast, in structuration theory power can be identified and catalogued by reference to resources at an individual’s disposal and in the rules that support or oppose a particular action or outcome (Cohen, 1987; Giddens, 1987). The university student with a disability uses his or her knowledge of the explicit and sanctioned rule formalized in the Americans with Disabilities Act to advocate for responsive services from the university. The gun control lobbyist uses strategies of power in the effort to change the formal rules (that is, laws) about gun ownership. Such strategies would include enlarging the network of people in positions of influence who support gun control legislation, increasing economic resources through donors who contribute to the cause, using the rules and procedures of the legislative body to promote committee action on their bill, and so forth. At the same time, antigun control lobbyists are also at work maneuvering and enlarging their resource base and skilfully using the rules.

The concept of power was not emphasized in the early ecological or systems theory literature (Germain & Gitterman, 1995). More recently, Germain and Gitterman discussed issues of power and powerlessness in relation to the concept of client “self-direction,” linking the concept to the individual’s ability to assume some level of control over his or her decisions and actions. Despite solid efforts to include power in traditional person-in-environment and social constructionist frameworks, the understanding of power remains primarily at the microlevel, and more attention is paid to the constraining aspects of power than to its facilitative aspects (Germain & Gitterman, 1995; Greene & Lee, 2002). Giddens’s (1984) pragmatic definition of power in terms of resources and rules could add substantially to social work’s understanding of human agency in the social environment.

**Human Freedom**

Every theory that attempts to address the relationship between human action and social structure must eventually deal with the issue of structural determinism versus human freedom—that is to say, the extent to which human awareness and behavior is determined by external social conditions. According to Giddens (1984, 1987), the structures and institutions of society provide the medium and formula for reproducing human social practices, but those structures and institutions do not determine human behavior. “Social practices do not reproduce themselves, social agents do, and from the standpoint of structuration theory, social agents are always seen to retain the capacity to do otherwise than they do” (Cohen, 1987, p. 300). From this perspective, the key ingredient in human freedom is the capacity of human actors to reflexively monitor both their social behavior and the intended and unintended consequences of such behavior. It is this reflexive capacity that differentiates between behavior that is socially derived and behavior that is socially determined. Indeed, human beings not only have the ability to monitor their social action but do monitor their performances continuously, even if not always consciously. In structuration theory, this monitoring process is considered a necessary ingredient for skilled social behavior (Giddens, 1984, 1987).

Thus, the individual as actor is free in principle to resist, modify, or challenge received prescriptions of what to do and how to do it. However, just as structuration theory does not promote structural determinism, neither does it advance the notion that human beings have unqualified freedom (Cohen, 1987). The reflexive ability to monitor the conditions and consequences
of action may be necessary for human freedom, but it is not sufficient. There are also constraints to freedom that derive from limitations of knowledge and differences in power. First, every human being’s knowledge is a product of his or her perspective and, therefore, limited to some greater or lesser extent. Perspective is a product of geographical, social, historical, and structural location. “Every individual actor is only one among others in society: very many others . . . . We have to recognize that what an actor knows as a competent—but historically and spatially located—member of society, ‘shades off’ in contexts that stretch beyond those of his or her day-to-day activity” (Giddens, 1979, p. 73).

Second, inequalities of power, as expressed through the medium of resources and rules, may serve to thwart the achievement of the legitimate aims of a particular individual or social group (Cohen, 1987). The social worker advocating for the construction of a small group home for the severely mentally disabled in a particular neighborhood may be thoroughly knowledgeable (an authoritative resource) about the local politics (implicit and explicit rules, as well as allocative and authoritative resources), but in the face of stiff opposition from the neighborhood association, she may still be unable to muster sufficient support (resources and rules) to convince the city council to alter the zoning laws (formal rules) that exclude group living arrangements in the contested neighborhood. Is this social worker free to pursue her interests? Yes, but not in an unlimited way, because the neighborhood association leaders are also free to pursue an opposing objective and may be able to mobilize more resources. Does she have power (that is, resources and rules to support her position)? Yes, but so do the people who make up the neighborhood association.

The ecosystems metaphor is adopted from the biological sciences where concepts like adaptation, goodness-of-fit between individual and environment, and preservation of “homeostasis” or a “steady state” are major explanatory processes (Germain & Gitterman, 1995, 1996; Greif & Lynch, 1983; Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997). Those who advocate the biological metaphor stress mutual adjustments between the individual and the environment to explain human behavior and development (Germain, 1978; Germain & Gitterman, 1995, 1996; Greif & Lynch, 1983). Although it is acknowledged that human beings are different from other biological organisms or entities, those capacities, such as free will or reflective thought that are often regarded as specifically human, are not central concepts in explaining human behavior or change. Even if you take into consideration the ecosystem concepts of “equifinality” (that is, the belief that the same end state can be reached by different routes) and “multifinality” (that is, the idea that no end state is fully predetermined), the usual account of human freedom from the ecological or systems perspectives does not generally explain precisely how human reflection, free will, and consciousness create new options and possibilities (Germain, 1978; Germain & Gitterman, 1995; Greif & Lynch). If traditional ecosystem theorists provide only a cursory account of human freedom, social constructionists often err in the opposite direction. The constructionist argument that meanings and realities are created fresh in every social encounter emphasizes the human freedom to transform and renew the self and relationships. However, as social constructionist Joan Laird (1993) suggested, such theories often tend to underemphasize the very powerful structural constraints placed upon human actors as they construct meaning in their everyday encounters. With its emphasis on “action—structure recursiveness” and “human reflexivity,” structuration theory enriches our understanding of human beings in the social environment by adding a more detailed account of the limits and possibilities of human freedom.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Historically, the concept of person-in-situation has been an influential metaphor in social work practice and theorizing (Gibelman, 1999; Haynes, 1998). This metaphor took on greater definition with the introduction of concepts from general systems theory in the 1960s and 1970s (Compton & Galaway, 1989). Deriving largely out of the physical sciences (for example, mechanics and cybernetics), systems theory gave social work a set of constructs that helped organize thinking about the effect of the social and material context on human behavior (Germain, 1978; Germain & Gitterman, 1995; Greif & Lynch, 1983). The adoption of constructs from the biological sciences during the 1970s and early 1980s, specifically constructs derived from the discipline of ecology, constituted an attempt to further refine understandings of person-in-situation. Those who
advocated the ecological approach suggested that a metaphor for the relationship between human beings and their environments based on the behavior of living organisms came closer to representing the human condition than one derived from the physical sciences (Compton & Galaway, 1989; Germain, 1973). The introduction of social constructionism (and its more radical, conceptual “cousin”—cognitive constructivism) into social work theorizing turned the profession toward more distinctly human metaphors for explaining human behavior and development (Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988). Just as historically the incorporation of the ecological metaphor to person-in-situation theory made such perspectives more relevant to biological entities and social constructionism contributed concepts that were specific to human beings in relationship, structuration theory tells a more integrative story about the intimate connection between individuals and the larger social environment. This theory goes farther than the most recognized person-in-situation frameworks in the way it understands the uniqueness of human actors as coconstructors of, not just interactors within, their larger social environments. Here we can discuss only a few of the many implications of Giddens’ theory for social work theorizing, practice, research, and education.

**Structuration Theory and Social Work Practice**

The social science and social work literature has long been plagued by a conceptual disconnection between theories of individual action and interaction, on the one hand, and theories of society and social change, on the other (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Kondrat, 1999). This separation is also evident in social work practice (Abramovitz & Bardill, 1993; Haynes, 1998; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Frequently, practitioners have been chided in the literature for what has been described as their lack of attention to macro aspects of practice (Specht & Courtney). However, the possibility that current social work conceptualizations of the macro-micro relationship may themselves be in need of reconsideration has not been seriously entertained. Current person-in-environment thinking treats macro and micro realities as more-or-less separate arenas of human activity that “interface.” Constructionist theorizing also conceives of macrostructures as somehow “other” than—although influencing—the immediate arenas in which individuals construct identities, relationships, and meanings in their everyday interactions (Laird, 1993). Giddens’s contention that social structure is both medium and outcome of the patterned activity of individuals over time brings micro and macro realities conceptually together (Giddens, 1979, 1984). Although acknowledging that individuals can indeed affect their environments, the emphasis in the literature typically has focused on the influence of the environment on individual behavior and opportunity. What structuration theory suggests is that the emphasis should be on the recursive processes and interactions that mutually maintain and reproduce both individual action and the structures of the social environment. In this framework, one would ask not only “what effect does the social environment have on individual behavior and life chances” but also “what do routine and recurring interactions contribute to the production of the structures that make up the social environment?”

How would such consideration look in practice? An example may be instructive. The director of a community mental health center was confronted with the aggregate data that African American clients of the agency’s emergency unit had proportionally higher rates of hospitalization and higher rates of nonvoluntary commitments than did white clients. These unequal outcomes by race suggested a form of structured racism within this agency. The director was initially puzzled because the agency had a reputation for being concerned about cultural competence, and all of the workers had received extensive training within the past two years. In addition, ethnic minority personnel constituted about 20 percent of the treatment staff, proportional to the client population. Fortunately, the director also understood that structural racism, defined in terms of the systematic, negative consequences of institutional action for specific groups based on race, is more than a matter of personal beliefs, opinions, feelings, and intentions that devalue members of those specific groups (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). She invited a team of independent consultants into the agency to observe the everyday interactions that constituted the delivery of services in the emergency unit—their question: How were these unequal outcomes being structured in the day-to-day routine world of crisis management? By examining the behavioral “building blocks” that constructed the unequal outcomes,
the consultants were able to help the social workers look at the subtle interplay between power and resistance.

Many of these professionals were members of a group that had historically dominated, marginalized, and treated with disrespect members of other racial groups—sometimes in the name of helping. This history, coupled with individual experiences of racism, formed part of what the clients of color knew—explicitly or tacitly—about interactions with members of the majority culture. In addition, practitioners in that setting had seldom given much thought about the real power they possessed to take actions that may have grave consequence for a client’s freedom and sense of dignity. It was simply assumed as given in that setting.

In Giddens’s (1984) theory, individuals are not merely acted on by structural imposition—people act back, they resist, they challenge an authority they believe is threatening to their personhood. With the assistance of the consultants, workers began to examine how what they had perceived as threatening behavior on the part of clients might be better interpreted as resistance to further marginalization, disempowerment, and disrespect. They began to examine how their clinical choices and interactions might change if they were to begin viewing some of the emergency room “presenting” behavior as a potential strength—opposition or challenge to further disempowerment—instead of viewing it as threatening acting-out behavior (Kondrat, 1999).

With the sensitive help of the consultants, social workers began to understand how some of their decisions to recommend hospitalization or to involve security personnel in particular cases may have been based on a misconstruing of the relations of power and marginalization in that setting. What the consultants discovered would certainly come as no surprise to students of racism in this country. However, it did result in a major shift in awareness for the workers on the crisis unit. By focusing on recurring interactions between practitioners and clients, the consultants discovered not only how decisions about individual clients came about but also how group-based inequality of outcomes was constructed in the ordinary and taken-for-granted world of routine practice (that is, the arena of Giddens’s practical knowledge). As Giddens (1987) explained: “Individuals can in some degree . . . give accounts of the circumstances of their actions. But this by no means exhausts what they know. . . . Many most subtle and dazzlingly intricate forms of knowledge are embedded in, and constitutive of, the actions we carry out” (p. 63).

Research on Practice

According to structuration theory, individual actors construct, maintain, or alter social structures, whereas those same structures shape individual action. A good deal of social work research has focused on the effect of the social environment on outcomes for individuals, including research examining what happens when aspects of that environment are altered in the form of social interventions. However, by and large, the profession and its researchers have seldom asked the critical corresponding question: How and by what mechanisms are larger structural outcomes constructed and maintained by the interactions of individuals and groups over time?

Within the discipline of education (which, like social work, is also a profession), researchers have been investigating for years why unequal educational outcomes and unequal life chances are constructed for different social groups of children who ostensibly attend the same schools, have the same teachers, and have similar potential. Intensive case studies using critical ethnography and various participant observer approaches were used to get inside the “black box” of schooling to see how these unequal outcomes (by class, race, or gender) become structured through the ordinary, daily interactions between student and student and between teacher and student (Apple, 1995). One of the classic works in this genre is Paul Willis’s (1977) Learning to Labour. Set in a high school outside of London, Willis’s study uncovered the ways by which the lived, day-to-day experience of schooling perpetuated distinctions between children of working class parents and those of less economically vulnerable parents, in effect blocking upward mobility for children of the working class, despite the most progressive intentions of the teachers.

Social work inquiry could address similar questions. For example, there is some documentation that despite efforts to make community mental health agencies more culturally competent in dealing with ethnic minority populations, certain groups continue to fare less well overall on a number outcomes related to successful community
tenure (Hall & Kirk, 1995; Kondrat, Greene, & Winbush, 2002; O'Sullivan, Peterson, Cox, & Kirkby, 1989). It would be instructive for researchers to consider the mental health center as an arena in which outcomes are negotiated not only for individuals but also for groups of service recipients. As in the example provided earlier in the article, such research would examine what routine interactions in this arena—between and among staff, between staff and consumers, and between consumer and consumer—may have to tell us about the ways in which unequal group outcomes are constructed. Understanding more about what happens when services providers, clients, and agency milieu interact could give practitioners insights about what may need to change to improve outcomes for ethnic minority client groups.

Mental health is not the only arena in which outcomes differ according to race, gender, or other category (Alexander, 2000; McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). Research using critical ethnography or similar approaches could prove useful in answering questions about how racism, “genderism,” and classism become structured into many of our service institutions, despite the good will and professionalism of many workers.

Social Work Education

Historically, social work education has promoted the importance of viewing individuals and families in the context of the larger social environments that they inhabit. Among services professions, social work has been a pioneer in advancing this holistic perspective. Yet, despite the profession’s insistence that the relationships between the person and the environment are reciprocal, in educating social work practitioners more attention is paid to the constraining or enhancing influence of the environment and less to the way individuals coconstruct the social environment. Indeed, the literature often describes social structures as fixed and given or even reified as a more “powerful other,” dominating and restricting the legitimate aspirations of individuals and groups (Kondrat, 1999). The new Council on Social Work Education Educational Policy Statement contains this kind of language in reference to the human behavior content of the curriculum. Although maintaining the need to focus on interactions between and among systems, the statement urges educators to attend to “ways in which social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being” (CSWE, 2002). The implication, by omission, is that the influence between larger social systems and individual actors is largely unidirectional.

The metaphor of the individual interacting with a larger powerful and external system may have some heuristic value in describing just how difficult real social change can be, but it also is potentially misleading in that use of this metaphor can make us forget that the concepts “social system” and “social structure” are human constructions. These terms are used to summarize complex, entrenched, and powerful networks of relationships, behaviors, beliefs, interactions, rules, and resources (Kondrat, 1999). But they are not “realities” independent of the human interactions that coconstruct and re-create these structures over time. Within structuration theory, individuals are viewed as continuously active agents in the construction of society and its structures—conforming, resisting, challenging, persisting, surviving, and transforming (Kondrat, 1999). To be an agent is to make some difference in social outcomes, large or small, and, “since to make a difference is to transform some aspect of a process or event, agency in structuration theory is equated with transformative capacity” (Cohen, 1987, p. 284). Structuration theory has relevance for social work practice and education precisely because of its critical, activist concept of person—the person as constructing society through the social interactions in which he or she engages, and through the choices made in social situations (Kondrat, 1999).

References


**Mary Ellen Kondrat,** PhD, is associate dean and director of the MSW program, College of Social Work, Ohio State University, 1947 College Road, Columbus, OH 43210; e-mail: kondrat.1@osu.edu.

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