Handout 3: Cheat Sheet on Structuration Theory

1. What is structure according to Giddens?

According to Giddens, structure is a sum of "rules and resources, organized as properties of social systems" that exists only as structural properties (1984, p. 25). Structure for Giddens is both medium and outcome as it is created through process. Thus, social life is perceived as process and not product. Structuration looks at norms as value-based benchmarks emerging out of the coming together of formal rules and informal and implicit codes. It is not just the stated rules that count but how bureaucracy interprets these things.

2. How does Giddens define agency?

"Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power: cr. the Oxford English Dictionary definition of an agent, as 'one who exerts power or produces an effect'). Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. Action is a continuous process, a flow..." (Giddens, 1984, p.9)

3. How is power conceived in Giddensian terms?

Like Foucault (1979), Giddens' views of power is relational and based on a dialectic of control in which "all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their supervisors" (Giddens, 1984, p.16). Rather than seeing power as a type of act (making people do things against their will) or a stock of capital, Giddens views it as "the capacity to achieve outcomes" (Giddens, 1984, p. 257); "a capability manifested in action"(Jones and Karsten, 2008). For Giddens, power is the transformative capacity that all human agents possess based on their control over allocative resources (objects, goods and other material phenomena) and authoritative resources (command over other persons).

4. What key concepts in structuration theory may be useful to this project?
Note: What would you like to add to this?

1. Duality of structure

Giddens conceives of the duality of structure as being: "...the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution." (Giddens, 1979).

Applying this to the study of social life in the digital paradigm would mean enquiring into how digital technologies co-constitute social and citizen practices, while permeating the very context in which voice and participation arise. However, Giddens himself did not extend his framework in this direction. The only comment that he has made about applying structuration to analysing the co-constitutive relationship between technologies (in general) and society is that whatever effect that technology has on social practice depends on how social agents engage with it in their actions (Jones and Karsten, 2008). In Giddens' own words, "as (agents) do things in relation to machines

and so forth, these are the stuff out of which structural properties are constructed" (Giddens and Pierson, 1998, p. 83 cited in Jones and Karsten, 2008). What this means is that in the Giddensian view, structure cannot be "inscribed or embedded in technology" (Jones and Karsten, 2008).

Despite its almost total neglect of technology, the structuration approach has fascinated information systems researchers for over a decade. As Jones and Karsten (2008) point out, this is because "structuration's 'focus on structure and on the processes by which structures are used and modified over time' is seen as resonating with long-standing concerns in information systems research about 'the structuring properties of technology.'"

The 'duality of technology' perspective would thus avoid an "exclusive focus on technology as a physical object" and instead recognize that technology is "interpretively flexible". In other words, technology is "created and changed by human action (but) also used by humans to accomplish some action" and thus "technology is implicated in an ongoing process of structuration" (Orlikowski, 1992).

2. Knowledgeability

Knowledgeability is a key component of agency: "The ability of the agent to engage with the structure through action is due to what Giddens calls the 'knowledgeability' of the agent/actor, the 'tacit and discursively available knowledge' that actors have (or believe in) about the circumstances of their action and draw upon in action. Simply said, according to Giddens, every human agent is knowledgeable in the practical consciousness and has a 'vast variety of tacit modes of knowing' how to go on in the contexts of social life"(Giddens, 1979, 1982; Bhowmick, 2016).

Knowledgeability is a useful notion to understand the ways citizens make meaning of citizenship. It can also be conceptualized as citizens having degrees of knowledge. It allows us to interpret the ways in which techno-mediated systems are deployed, and how they interact with governance systems and democratic processes. We can use this notion to ask the question, 'how does technology disrupt the way in which citizens understand their social contract'?

When a new system comes into force, we are witness to a liminal moment; a time and space when given modes of 'knowing' are called into question. In techno-mediated governance systems, marginal citizens unfamiliar with emergent rules of the game are likely to be confronted with a redundancy of their past ways of knowing citizenship. The discursive power of techno-environments creates new rules for negotiating voice and citizenship. So, we will need to engage with the question of citizens (at the peripheries of the information society) often not knowing what they don't know.

As technology mediated practices call for greater degrees of a new knowledgeability, agents may becomes alienated from citizen practices that were previously known to them. New meanings of governance hence create an imperative to understand the relative power of the knowledge bearing subject.

3. Choice to do otherwise

Since Giddens defines agency as a capability to have acted differently in every situation (either to resist or reproduce structure/ status quo), he has been critiqued for a bias towards voluntarism

(Babber, 1991; Jones & Karsten, 2008). In making assumptions about agents' choice, power and capability, Giddens does not account for asymmetries of agency or the levels of embedded privilege that may affect exercise of 'the choice to do otherwise'.

The informatized and algorithmic environment comprising the structures of citizen voice in a digital environment shapes citizen agency, determining the legitimate means of participation, and perhaps foreclosing others. Does the choice then to do otherwise really obtain? Alternately, techno-platforms may decentralize participation, and expand capabilities that remove asymmetries between classes of citizens.

4.Signification

Signification refers to the ways in which structure and agency interact with each other to create shared meaning. Structure as signification involves semantic rules. In a signification structure, for example, standard codes can be produced and reproduced (Hussain & Cornelius, 2006).

The new grammars of participation and the codes they produce and reproduce have been critiqued for a depoliticised clictivism of agents. Other ways of looking at shared meanings could concern the role of big data and what this could imply for voice.

5. Legitimation

Legitimation refers to the way in which norms are maintained within structures. This happens through both reproducing existing norms and creating new norms.

Norm making within governance systems in contemporary conjuncture has been studied through lenses such as network governance, surveillance state etc. As Lawrence Lessig (1999;2000) famously said – when "code is law", a new social order emerges;

> This regulator is code--the software and hardware that make cyberspace as it is. This code, or architecture, sets the terms on which life in cyberspace is experienced. It determines how easy it is to protect privacy, or how easy it is to censor speech. It determines whether access to information is general or whether information is zoned. It affects who sees what, or what is monitored. In a host of ways that one cannot begin to see unless one begins to understand the nature of this code, the code of cyberspace regulates. (Lessig, 2000)

How can we tease out voice and opinion making in relation to digitally mediated normative shifts in practices of governance and democracy?

6. Domination

Domination refers to the exercise of power through allocative resources (material and economic resources) and authoritative (capacity to persuade) resources. For Giddens, domination is not simply about brute control or subjugation. In social reproduction, the process of domination are largely unseen. According to (Hussain & Cornelius, 2009) 'the higher the legitimation and signification aspect of the social structure, the less is the possibility or, indeed, the need for a structure to evolve as one of domination.'

The ways by which states appropriate the digital realm for opinion shaping and discursive power are often part of the very structures of citizen participation. Marginal subjects may be forced into compliance for biometrics, and without laws that guarantee their right to privacy, the state aggrandizes its power and means to control them.

Sources

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