

# The SAGE Handbook of Sociology

## A New Approach for Theoretically Integrating Micro and Macro Analysis

Contributors: Jonathan H. Turner

Editors: Craig Calhoun & Chris Rojek & Bryan Turner

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[p. 405 ↓ ]

## Chapter 24: A New Approach for Theoretically Integrating Micro and Macro Analysis

One of the most contentious issues in sociology is over the question of how to integrate micro and macro levels of analysis. At the empirical level, it is rather easy to make micro-macro connections. For example, traditional survey research almost always does so when it regresses measures of behavior and psychological states (the micro) against background variables like a socio-economic status (SES) index (the macro). Of course, even here the linkage is more illusory than real since the macro variable is really an aggregation of individual responses to questionnaires rather than a measure of the actual properties of social structure; and the behavioral or psychological measure is merely what people say they do or think (of course, people lie or become delusional all of the time). None the less, the SES index, and perhaps some intervening variables, are often seen to 'cause' the dependent variable, often consisting of another index summing up responses on questionnaires or interviews about behavior and thought. Such 'explanations' are, in reality, time-bound descriptions about what people say about their background, behavior and thinking. Still, sociologists appear to be relatively satisfied with these kinds of empirical efforts linking the macro and the micro.

It is when we turn to explanations by more general and abstract theories about social structure, culture and behavior that problems of how to integrate the micro and macro become evident. At the heart of the issue is how explanations of population-level or societal-level phenomena are to be reconciled with explanations about behavior and interpersonal processes. Once this turn is taken, the problems of linking the macro and micro, or of filling the micro-macro 'gap', become evermore salient. And, over the past two decades, sociological theorists have become concerned, if not a bit obsessed, with how to close this conceptual gap (e.g., Alexander et al, 1987; Blalock and Wilken, 1979; Eisenstadt and Helle, 1985; Gurvitch, 1964; Hechter, 1983; Kemeny, 1976; Knorr

Cetina, 1981; Ritzer, 1985; 1988a,b, 1990, 1991; Smart, 2001; Wiley, 1988). Apparently many sociologists feel uncomfortable with distinct theories designed to explain diverse levels of reality, and we might ask why this is so, especially since far more mature sciences than sociology live with their own micro-macro gaps without undue agonizing. Even physics has not reconciled general relativity with sub-atomic physics, and certainly a field like economics lives comfortably [p. 406 ↓ ] with a clear division between macro and micro economics. But social theorists appear to be dissatisfied with such divisions.

As a result, a good many theories in sociology claim to address the problem of linking the micro-macro divide, but as I will emphasize, these efforts are about as illusory as the efforts of survey researchers who think that they have measured social structure and culture with aggregated responses to questionnaires. In this chapter, I propose one way of closing the theoretical gap between the micro and the macro (Turner, 2000, 2002), but first, let me briefly review some of the obfuscating issues before turning to the strategies that prominent theorists have employed.

## Obfuscating Issues

One obfuscating issue is the agency versus structure debate which is often viewed, particularly in European social theory circles, as another way of phrasing the micro versus macro question (e.g., Archer, 1982, 1988; Giddens, 1984). Those arguing for the primacy of human agency typically want to see humans as having some degree of free will, whereas those pushing the more structural side will tend to see human action as highly circumscribed by cultural and structural parameters. There is nothing inherently contradictory about these two positions, since human action can be constrained without being determined, while structures can be reconstituted by acts of individuals. But, simply saying this does not explain anything; and when the agency-structure question is conflated with the micro-macro issues, theories are typically rather vague. For example, Anthony Giddens's (1984) view of structure as 'rules and resources' that agents use in practice connotes an interplay between structure and agency but does not really say how this interplay operates, except with rather vague pronouncements about structural principles, 'sets', 'properties' and 'contradictions' on the structural side and equally unclear notions of 'unconscious motives and pressures', 'practical consciousness', 'discursive consciousness' and the like on the micro side. What emerges in Giddens's

theory of structuration is a category system but the dynamic relations among categories are not specified. Indeed, they are often connected by lines in diagrams, but the lines have no arrows or signs and, hence, it is difficult to know how the concepts relate to each other. As a result, 'explanation' of an empirical case becomes an exercise in using the categories as a conceptual scheme for interpreting empirical events. The scheme thus becomes an interpretative framework that allows the analyst to talk about micro and macro events, but without really integrating micro or macro dynamics *theoretically*.

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of 'habitus' is equally vague, arguing that individuals' modes of classification, appreciation, judgment, perception and behavior are connected to their place in social structures, particularly the class system, and that individuals' acts reinforce this structure. In Bourdieu's scheme, neither the micro-macro question nor the agency-structure issue is resolved; rather the issue is simply relabelled. 'Habitus' says very little about what aspects of individual cognition, perception, thought, or behavior are influenced by what dimensions of social structure, and vice versa; we are simply told that the connection between structure and agency is mediated by habitus which gives us a name for a process but little else.

Another obfuscating issue is the distinction between the subjective and objective (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Ritzer, 1988b: 516–18). Presumably, the subjective is what goes on inside of people's heads, while the objective is what we can see outside of people's heads. Those emphasizing the subjective often side with those pushing human free will and agency, and they generally argue for a socially constructed view of the universe, while those arguing for objective reality see the world as structured and as amenable to analysis scientifically. Like most dualisms, this one contains a false assumption – in this case, that the subjective cannot be observed or studied objectively. Rapid advances in imaging technologies that can map the neurology of the brain will soon explode this dichotomy, rendering it as [p. 407 ↓] meaningless as similar views that the mind and body are somehow separate or that rationality is distinct from emotions. Of course, individuals think, but why is this process not amenable to objective inquiry? Thus, like many older philosophical distinctions, the dichotomy between the subjective and objective is best abandoned because it will not help us deal with the micro-macro problem. Indeed, adhering to a view of an unobservable and, hence, mysterious subjective realm precludes the possibility that micro processes can

be reconciled theoretically with the macro processes that presumably can be studied objectively.

Another popular gloss on the micro-macro question is to assert that the social universe is multi-dimensional, consisting of 'action and order', which simply renames the structure-agency question once again. For example, Jeffrey Alexander (1982) makes such a distinction and, then, breaks down action and order into somewhat different types. Action is rational and nonrational (in my mind, a false dichotomy), while order reveals both integration and conflict. Further distinctions that define each are offered by Alexander but such schemes only define the territory; they do not explain either action or order, nor do they help explain the linkages between the two. Again, we are given a category system without theoretical statements on the linkages among categories.

Further illustrations of obfuscation could be offered, but let me end with this assertion: the micro-macro distinction will not be theoretically resolved by talk about multi-dimensionality or recourse to tired old dichotomies like agency-structure, rational-nonrational, subjective-objective, action-order and so on. Instead, we need to be much more specific on the properties of the social universe that are denoted by the labels of micro and macro. If we cannot do this, then the micro-macro becomes yet another tired dichotomy that we can throw on our philosophical heap of vague verbiage. Aside from these obfuscating approaches, sociologists have employed a number of strategies to close the perceived 'gap' between the micro and macro realms (Turner, 1983; Turner and Boyns, 2002).

## Strategies for Dealing with the Micro-Macro Gap

### Micro Chauvinism

In this strategy, it is assumed that the micro universe takes precedence in theoretical explanations. There are several versions of such chauvinism. One argues that social structure and other such 'macro' views of the social universe are reifications by

sociologists since the only empirically observable processes are individual people engaged in face-to-face interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Another version of this approach is that since all social structures are ultimately built from micro encounters among people, understanding of larger-scale structures is only possible by examining the micro processes by which they are built up (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Coleman, 1987, 1990; Collins, 1981a,b; Hechter, 1983, 1987). Here the reality of macro structure is not questioned, but the view that it can be understood in terms of its own 'emergent' properties is challenged. All that can really be seen and observed is individual people moving in space and interacting; and so, the macro can only be analyzed from its constituent acts and episodes of interaction.

## Macro Chauvinism

This strategy makes the opposite claim, in several ways. One is that all micro encounters are embedded in larger-scale social structures, and that the dynamics of face-to-face interaction can only be understood by examining the forces constraining all action and interaction among individuals (e.g., Mayhew, 1980, 1981; Turner, 2002). Another macro chauvinist approach argues that rates of interaction are what are important to know, not the precise mechanisms of interaction; and such rates are determined by the structural parameters that influence individuals' opportunities for interaction (Blau, 1977a,b, 1994). And a third macro approach simply asserts that once social structures exist, they represent emergent properties [p. 408 ↓] that are only understandable in their own terms (Parsons, 1951). These emergent properties reveal dynamics of their own that cannot be reduced to, nor explained by, micro processes, and hence, micro analysis is simply irrelevant to the study of macrodynamics (Turner, 1995).

## Theories of the 'Middle Range'

Robert Merton (1968) once made a call for theories of the middle range, whereby the global conceptual schemes of grand theory (particularly that of Talcott Parsons) and the empirical generalization of substantive research were to meet in the middle. Theory

would develop more abstract generalizations for substantive areas of inquiry, with general theory awaiting its 'Einstein' only after middle-range theories had accumulated. This strategy tended to produce what I have called 'theories of' (fill in the blank with a substantive field, e.g., family, delinquency, ethnic antagonism, gender inequality, etc.); and these theories were, in reality, empirical generalizations made to look theoretical.

## Conceptual Stepping Stones

Probably the most prevalent strategy for bridging the gap between the micro and macro has been the micro-to-macro conceptual progression, whereby the properties of action and interaction are first analyzed, followed by conceptualizations of evermore macro phenomena. Max Weber's (1968 [1921]) analysis of action, social relationships, associations and legitimated orders represented one early effort; Talcott Parsons's (1951) analysis of action, interaction in status-roles and social systems represented a similar strategy. The assumption is that by adding new concepts as more macro phenomena are conceptualized, the 'emergent' properties of relations among phenomena can be captured and, yet, remain connected to micro-level concepts, but typically, these schemes leave as many gaps as they close. For example, in Parsons's and Weber's movement from conceptualizations of action through interaction to, respectively, social systems or legitimated orders, the process of interaction is given short shrift; and since this process stands between action and structure, the gap between the micro and macro remains.

## Formal Sociology

Georg Simmel introduced the idea that rather than address the nature of the units in a social relationship, one should focus on the properties and dynamics of the relationship *per se*. In this way, it makes little difference if the actors are micro (people) or macro (organizations or nation-states), because it is the form of the relationship which is to be the subject of theory. Peter Blau's (1964) early exchange theory, Richard Emerson's (1962) network analysis of exchange and network theory in general (Burt, 1980; Wellman, 1983) all adopt this strategy. While it is often true that there is an isomorphism



in the nature of relations among micro and macro units, such is not always the case; the nature of the unit can make a difference in the dynamics involved, and so formal sociology has only limited utility as a strategy for bridging the gap between micro and macro sociology.

## Deductive Reductionism

In this strategy, high-level axioms about the nature of micro processes (for example, individual behavior or interaction) are placed at the top of a deductive system, with the laws of social structure being deduced from these axioms. George Homans (1961) was, of course, the most famous advocate of this approach, seeing sociological explanations as deducible from a few axioms about human behavior. Peter Blau's (1994) more recent work has elements of this strategy as he seeks to deduce rates of interaction from simple axiomatic assumptions about the nature of social relationships. This solution to the micro-macro problem is elegant, but its execution rarely gives much attention to the properties and dynamics of those more macro structures whose dynamics are 'deduced' (translation: glossed over) in such deductive schemes.

[p. 409 ↓ ]

In sum, these strategies for reconciling macro and micro processes fail to resolve the problem. And, if we add the agency-structure approaches of much European theory and the various multi-dimensional approaches typical of Americans to this list of strategies, it is evident that the problem is compounded rather than resolved. Most current strategies, to my mind, simply define the problem, asserting that action is constrained by structure, and structure is reproduced or changed by action. Yet, asserting a reciprocal relation only states the problem again, although we are often given a category system that obscures the failure to link the macro and micro conceptually. And so, if none of the various strategies that have been proposed conceptually link the micro and macro, we can ask: is the problem resolvable? The most advanced science, physics, and every science below physics have all failed to link fully the properties and dynamics of their macro and micro universes; and hence, sociologists should not be too upset if they cannot do so.

One solution to the problem of micro-macro linkage is one that I proposed a long time ago (Turner, 1983): stop worrying about it. Whether one uses micro-level concepts, macro-level concepts, or concepts in between is dependent on the nature of what we are trying to explain. If we assume that social reality exists at levels – that is, there are emergent properties in the social universe – then we choose the theories that best suit the level of phenomena we seek to explain. If we analyze world system dynamics, then symbolic inter-actionism is not very useful; or if we focus on an episode of emotionally charged interaction, then world system's theory or any macro theory does not have much to offer analysis. This was so obvious to me two decades ago that the whole question of micro and macro linkage seemed to be a red herring for sociology. Why waste our time on it? I still hold this view, but confess that it would be elegant if we could achieve some degree of theoretical integration across levels of reality. But if we are to approach this problem with any hope of success, we have to recast the issues and avoid the mistakes of the approaches I have briefly reviewed thus far.

## An Alternative Approach to Linking the Micro and Macro

It is often said that distinctions between micro and macro are analytical; that is, they are abstractions that we can use in analysis, but they are not reality itself. I have come to the view that these terms represent more than analytical distinctions; they are *the way reality actually unfolds* (Turner, 2002). I would add a meso level' here in drawing this conclusion, and so I am asserting that the social universe operates at micro, meso and macro levels. These levels *are* reality. Thus, my alternative approach asserts that these are not just analytical distinctions, and of course they are this too, but that these distinctions capture one of the most fundamental properties of the social universe: its operation at three basic levels of organization. The micro, meso and macro *are* reality, and hence, we will have three general classes of theories. This begs the question as to whether or not these theories can be integrated, but let me not get ahead of myself on this critical question. If reality unfolds along three levels, then we must develop some way to conceptualize the properties and dynamics of each level.

I propose that we begin to conceptualize social reality as driven by basic and fundamental *forces* operating at three levels: the micro, meso and macro. I use the term ‘forces’ much as it is employed in physics, as when gravity and electromagnetism are seen to push phenomena in certain ways. The idea of social forces is, of course, an old one; I propose that we revive the notion of social forces as originally intended in early sociology. Thus, theoretical sociology develops principles that explain the operation of forces, and in my view, we need theoretical principles about the forces operating at the micro, meso and macro levels of reality. In [Table 23.1](#) I list the forces that I see as critical to each level. These look very familiar because they have been a part of sociology for a long time; what I argue, then, is that we think of these phenomena in a somewhat different way – that is, as forces driving the operation and organization of the social universe.

These forces first generate, and then operate within, particular kinds of structures. At the [p. 410 ↓] macro level, the structures generated by the forces are *institutional systems*; at the meso level, these forces form *corporate* and *categoric* units; and at the micro level, the forces sustain *encounters*. Thus, the structural units and the forces driving their formation and operation constitute the social universe; and the goal of sociological theory should be to develop principles on the dynamics of each force as well as on the relationships among forces. It is in this latter concern with the relationships among the structures formed at each level that linkages among the macro, meso and micro occur, but before exploring these linkages, let me briefly review each of the forces listed in [Table 23.1](#).

Macro-level forces	
Population	The absolute number, rate of growth, composition, and distribution of people
Production	The gathering of resources from the environment, the conversion of resources into commodities and the creation of services to facilitate gathering and conversion

Distribution	The construction of infrastructures to move resources, information and people in space as well as the use of exchange systems to distribute resources, information and people
Reproduction	The procreation of new members of a population and the transmission of culture to these members
Power	The use of coercion, administrative structures, manipulation of material incentives and symbols to control members of a population as well as the degree of centralization/concentration of each and the bases of power
Meso-level forces	
Segmentation	The generation of additional corporate units organizing activities of individuals in the pursuit of ends or goals
Differentiation	The creation of new types of corporate units organizing activities of individuals in pursuit of ends or goals and new categoric units distinguishing people and placing them into socially constructed categories
Integration	The maintenance of boundaries, the ordering of relations within corporate and categoric units, and the ordering of relations among corporate and categoric units
Micro-level forces	
Emotions	The arousal of variants and combinations of fear, anger, sadness and happiness

Transactional needs	The activation of needs for confirmation of self, positive exchange payoffs, trust and predictability, facticity or the sense that things are as they appear and group inclusion
Symbols	The production of expectations (normatization) with respect to categories of people present, nature of the situation, forms of communication, frames of what is included and excluded, rituals and feelings
Roles	The presentation of sequences of gestures to mark a predictable course of action (role-making) and the reading of gestures to understand the course of action of others (role-taking)
Status	The placement and evaluation of individuals in positions vis-à-vis other positions and creation of expectation states for how individuals in diverse and differentially evaluated positions should behave
Demography	The number of people co-present, their density and their movements, as well as the meanings assigned to number, density and movements of individuals
Ecology	The boundaries, partitions and props of space as well as the associated meaning of boundaries, partitions and props

[p. 411 ↓ ]

## Macro-Level Reality

The macro level of reality consists of larger numbers of individuals organized in space over longer durations of time. The macro level of reality ultimately deals with the relationship of a population as a whole with its social and biophysical environments. In traditional functionalism (e.g., Spencer, 1874–96; Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951), these forces are often conceptualized as 'requisites' or 'needs' that must be met if a population is to survive in its environment, but this mode of analysis should be avoided; instead we should conceptualize the organization of a population as driven by forces. There are, I believe, five such forces at the macro level of reality (Turner, 1995).

*Population* Population is more than a demographic variable; it is a force that drives all aspects of human social organization. In particular, the size and rate of growth of the population are the most dynamic features of this force, although the composition, movements and distribution of a population are also critical properties of this force. Population sets into motion other forces; and when a population grows, as both Herbert Spencer (1874–96) and Émile Durkheim (1893) recognized, production must expand to sustain its members, distributive infrastructures and exchange become more extensive, reproductive forces become more complex and move outside kinship alone, and power must be consolidated to coordinate and control the larger social mass.

*Production* To sustain themselves, people must secure resources and convert them into commodities; and this process is one of the driving forces of human organization, creating the economy as an institutional system. The level of production is related to a number of key elements: technology, physical and human capital, property systems and entrepreneurial mechanisms for coordinating these elements. The higher the values for these elements, the greater the level of production, and vice versa.

*Reproduction* Humans must reproduce themselves both biologically and socio-culturally, and this force pushes for the initial formation of key institutional systems such as kinship. And as the complexity of a society increases, reproduction generally drives the formation of additional institutional systems, ranging from education through science and medicine to religion. Thus, socio-cultural reproduction becomes an evermore powerful force in human societies, generating new kinds of institutional domains.

*Distribution* There are two elements to distribution: first, infrastructures for moving people, information and resources about a territory, and second, systems for exchanging resources, information and people. Although they mutually influence each other, these two aspects of distribution need to be analyzed separately because they drive human organization in somewhat different ways. As infrastructures expand and as exchange occurs in markets using liquid media of exchange, the way a population is organized is dramatically transformed; and so as the scale of human organization increases, distribution forces become as important as production forces.

*Power* Two aspects of power are critical in understanding this force: first, the level and profile of *consolidation* of power around varying bases, including coercion, administrative control, symbolic manipulation or use of material incentives; and second, the degree of *centralization* of power along any one or all of these varying bases. When populations are very small, this force is not visible, but as a population grows, power becomes a dominant force in determining the way in which the institutional systems coordinating people's activities operate.

What I am asserting here is that, at the macro level of human organization, these five forces – population, production, reproduction, distribution and power – determine the organization of the population as a whole and the cultural systems that are used to sustain this organization. The key structural units generated by these forces are institutional systems – that is, economy, polity, kinship, education, science, religion, law and the like – and the culture of [p. 412 ↓] these systems. Macro-level theory is, therefore, about these forces as they generate and sustain institutional systems and culture. At the most general level, we should seek to develop abstract laws about the dynamics of each force (for my best effort, see Turner, 1995).

In terms of linkages among levels of social reality, the institutional complexes and culture generated by these forces are parameters within which the forces operating at the meso and micro levels of social reality operate. Reciprocally, institutional systems at the macro level are composed of the structures generated at the meso level, and the forces driving the formation and operation of these meso-level structures. But we need to do more than assert this fact; we must develop principles that explain the dynamics of this embeddedness. Before suggesting how we can do so, however, let me complete the review of the forces operating at each level of reality. Still, to anticipate

my argument: the effects of macro forces on the meso and micro are more constraining than the reverse, and this fact needs to be taken into consideration in developing theoretical principles that link these levels of reality.

## Meso-Level Reality

There are three forces operating at this level – segmentation, differentiation and integration – and the structures generated by these forces are what Amos Hawley (1986) has termed *corporate* and *categoric* units. A corporate unit is a structure and its related culture organized to pursue goals or ends (for example, group, community, bureaucracy), whereas a categoric unit is a social category which makes a difference in terms of how people act and are treated by others (for example, gender, ethnicity, age, social class). Thus, institutional systems are ultimately constructed from corporate and categoric units, but are not reducible to them; the forces driving the macro level are different than the forces of segmentation, differentiation and integration that drive corporate and categoric units.

*Segmentation* This force causes the formation of structurally and culturally equivalent corporate units. Thus, when more of the same type of nuclear families, bureaucratic structures and villages or towns are created, these are manifestations of segmentation. Segmentation operates mostly among corporate units, because to create a new social category is evidence of differentiation as a force.

*Differentiation* This notion of differentiation is as old as sociology, and it simply emphasizes that differences are generated in human organization. Differentiation can operate at all levels – as when people play distinctive roles (micro level) or differences in institutions are evident (macro level) – but the origin of differentiation at either the micro or macro level is the meso level of reality. Differentiation at the micro or macro level is a reflection of the forces driving the formation of corporate and/or categoric units. People play different roles, for example, at different points in the division of labor of an organization or on the basis of being a member of a social category, and the differences among institutional systems are in the nature of, and the relations among, distinctive types of organizational units and social categories (for example, family vs. factory, father vs. worker).



At the most general level, corporate units vary in terms of some key elements (Turner, 2000,2002):

Similarly, categoric units vary along a number of dimensions:

A theory differentiation must, therefore, explain the dynamics of, and relations among, these elements.

*Integration* When corporate or categoric units are generated, forces are activated to order relations within and between them. For integration within corporate units, these forces revolve around the structural and cultural constraints imposed by the institutional domain (for example, family, economy, religion) in which a corporate unit operates, and the dynamics inhering in the administrative structures used to coordinate and control activities in the division of labor. Integrative dynamics for relations between and among corporate units revolve around such processes as:

Integrative forces for categoric units cohere around:

Just as institutional domains constrain the operation of meso-level forces, so corporate and categoric units circumscribe the operation of micro-dynamic forces. True, in some ultimate sense, corporate and categoric units are constructed from episodes of face-to-face interaction, but like institutional domains which are built from these meso units, the dynamics of corporate and categoric units cannot be explained by their constituent encounters. Segmentation, differentiation and integration are forces of the meso level, and they are very different from those forces driving episodes of face-to-face interaction.

## Micro-Level Reality

The micro level of reality consists of episodes of face-to-face interaction, or what Erving Goffman (1961) termed 'the encounter'. In *focused encounters*, individuals face each other in an ecological huddle and generally have a common focus of attention, while in *unfocused encounters*, people avoid direct face-to-face engagement but none the less monitor each other's actions in public space. As a distinctive level of reality, encounters are driven by basic forces unique to this level: emotions, transactional needs, symbols,

roles, status, demography and ecology. These are summarized in [Table 23.1](#), but let me briefly elaborate upon each.

*Emotions* All interaction involves the arousal of variants and combinations of at least four primary emotions: fear, anger, happiness and sadness (Turner, 2000). Without emotions individuals cannot think, role-take and role-make effectively, or forge social [p. 414 ↓ ] bonds. Emotional arousal – whether positive or negative – drives all episodes of face-to-face interaction.

*Transactional needs* All interaction is motivated or energized by certain fundamental needs (Turner, 1987, 1988, 2000, 2002): the need to confirm self or identity, the need to receive positive exchange payoffs, the need for predictability in the responses of others and the perception that others can be trusted to behave appropriately, the need to perceive that a situation is real and is as it appears, and the need for group inclusion or to feel part of the ongoing interpersonal flow. These needs, I argue, are always activated when humans engage each other in encounters, and their fulfillment drives what people do and how they respond to the actions of others.

*Symbols* All interactions are guided by cultural forces, which I label the *process of normatization* (Turner, 2000, 2002) in which people develop mutual expectations for categorization (of others and the situation), frames (what is to be included and excluded from the encounter), forms of communication (appropriate genres of talk and body language), ritual (stereotyped sequences of communication to open, close, structure and repair the flow of gestures in the encounter) and emotions (the type and level of affect to be revealed). The viability of the encounter is, I believe, dependent upon the extent to which it has been successfully normatized along these dimensions.

*Roles* In all interactions, individuals use and read each other's gestures in order to present a role to others and to understand the role that others are trying to make for themselves (that is, they mutually role-make [R.H. Turner, 1962] and role-take [Mead, 1934]). I believe that individuals are driven to discover the role of others so that they can make a complementary role (or, if conflict is intended, make a contradictory role). There are several types of roles (Turner, 2002): 'pre-assembled roles', in which the gesturing marking the role is well known to all (for example, being a father), 'combinational roles', where elements from different roles are combined to make a meta-role (for example,

a daughter who is a host at a family gathering must combine the roles of daughter and host), generalized roles', where gestures mark the style or expressive content of a role (for example, being shy or aggressive), and 'trans-situational roles', which are often associated with categoric memberships and played out in most encounters (for example, the role of being a male).

When individuals successfully role-make and role-take along these dimensions or types of roles, the encounter becomes more viable.

*Status* Individuals not only role-take, they also position-take' in encounters, looking for signs and signals of the position of others with respect to diffuse status characteristics (for example, male or female), relative evaluation (prestige) of status, place of status in a network or division of labor, and clarity of status relative to other potential status positions (Turner, 2002). When individuals can successfully determine each other's status, the interaction proceeds smoothly, and conversely, when status is unclear or contested, the interaction will be tense.

*Demography* The number of people present, their characteristics (as members of social categories), their movements in and out of a situation, and their density all shape the flow of face-to-face interaction. Individuals understand the meanings associated with these facets of interpersonal demography, and these understandings drive how they respond to each other.

*Ecology* The organization of space is the final micro-level force, and this force concerns such issues as the amount of space, its bound-edness, its partitions, its usable props and other spatial and physical features of the place where the encounter occurs. Like demographic cues, individuals understand the meanings of different configurations of space, and they respond accordingly.

These, then, are the forces driving how individuals behave in, and organize, encounters. **[p. 415 ↓ ]** Emotions, need states, norms, roles, status, demography and ecology all exert independent effects on the flow of face-to-face interaction, but it is rare for an encounter *not* to be embedded within corporate and categoric units. Even if individuals are not part of a group, organization or some other structure with a division of labor, they are typically members of social categories – for example, gender, class, ethnicity

and age. This embedding of the encounter within corporate and/or categoric units gives us a clue as to how to proceed in linking the meso and micro levels of reality. And in turn, since corporate and categoric units are embedded in institutional domains, my argument suggests the structure of linkages among all three levels of reality. But a typology of structure is insufficient; we need to theorize about *the dynamics* of this embedding process.

## The Dynamics of Embedding

Encounters are embedded in corporate and categoric units, with these meso structures embedded in institutional domains. At any given time, then, embeddedness appears to work from macro down rather than the other way around. The point is buttressed by the simple fact that it takes many iterated encounters to sustain or change either a categoric or corporate unit, to say nothing of an institutional domain. No one encounter within meso structures, nor no one corporate or categoric unit within an institutional domain, is likely to effect much change. But a change in a meso structure, such as reorganization of the division of labor in a corporate unit, can influence many encounters; or if a new technology is introduced into the economy, many meso structures within this domain may be altered. To assert, as micro chauvinists do, that the meso and macro are constructed of chains of micro events maybe true in some ultimate metaphysical sense, but this assertion does not get around the problem of aggregation. It takes many aggregated micro events to influence more macro ones, and this fact alone, I believe, makes it unlikely that meso and macro structures are going to be explained by the dynamics of encounters. In a very small meso structure, such as a group, this might be the case, but the group is, in turn, probably embedded in a larger corporate structure and even more likely to be embedded in categoric units. These more inclusive meso units are not so likely to be explained by micro processes. I will have more to say about how the micro *can* work changes on the meso and macro, but the general point here should be emphasized: reality itself, not perceptions of analysts, reveals a macro-to-micro bias.

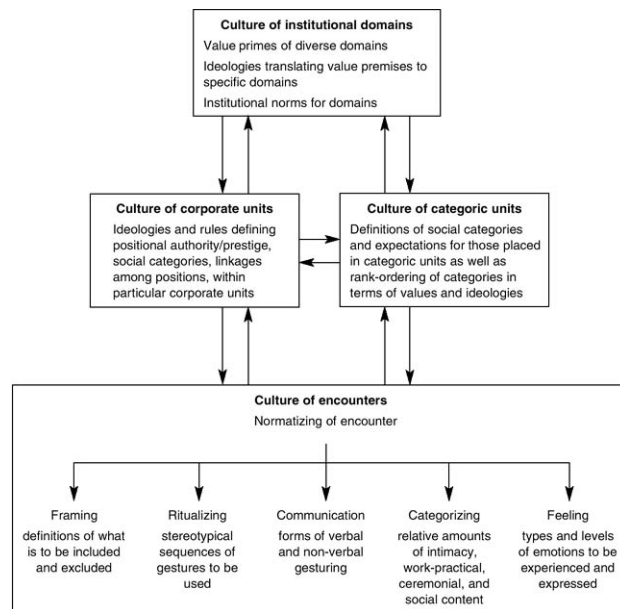
If we want to explain reality at all levels, then, we will probably explain much more if we engage in a top-down analysis. That is, how are the forces operating within institutional domains altering those at the meso level; and in turn, how is the embedding

of encounters in corporate and categoric units shaping the operation of forces at the micro level? We will explain more by answering these top-down questions than by asking the reverse: that is, how does the encounter explain meso structure, and how do corporate and categoric units explain institutional domains? Thus, in making theoretical linkages among levels of reality, we should begin with a macro-to-micro approach. We do not have to be chauvinists and dismiss the meso or micro; obviously, we could not explain a corporate unit or an encounter solely in terms of macro-level forces. Rather, the macro loads the values for the meso forces, and the meso loads the values for those driving the micro; we still explain each level in terms of its own distinctive forces, but by knowing in which institutional domains corporate and categoric units are embedded and in which meso structures an encounter is embedded, we can construct explanations that link the macro, meso and micro.

## Cultural Embeddedness

At all levels of social organization, culture is generated and used to regulate actions. The culture of a society – its technologies of information about how to manipulate the environment, its values specifying right and wrong and its texts of lore, history, aesthetics and [p. 416 ↓ ] philosophy – is translated into the culture of institutional domains, and from there into the culture of corporate and categoric units which, in turn, provide the cultural parameters for normatization of episodes of face-to-face interaction in encounters. [Figure 23.1](#) outlines what I see as the critical translations of culture that follow from the embedding. At the most micro level, culture is manifest in the process of normatization, but the contents of these expectations come from the broader societal culture as various elements are adapted to institutional domains and, then, to the corporate and/or categoric units in which the encounter is embedded. Talcott Parsons was not too far off the mark in his view of a ‘cybernetic hierarchy of control’, but he did not specify the structural units to which culture is attached, and as a consequence, the connections among levels of reality were left rather vague. New cultural contents can, of course, be added from bottom-up processes, perhaps beginning with chains of iterated encounters but more likely from new kinds of meso structures that, in turn, begin to [p. 417 ↓ ] alter the structure of institutional domains and, perhaps, the broader culture of a society as a whole, or even a world system of societies.

Figure 23.1 Culture and levels of reality



## Structural Embeddedness

As emphasized, encounters are embedded in the structure and culture of meso-level units that, in turn, are embedded in institutional domains. Thus, corporate and categoric units will reveal structures that reflect the blueprints of culture and the structural arrangements of institutional domains. For example, businesses look very much alike in all capitalist societies because of their embeddedness in an institutional domain driven by similar production and distribution forces as well as similar cultural elements. Encounters in such equivalent corporate structures will be normalized in similar ways because of this embeddedness in similar types of corporate units, although there are always cultural variations across societies and even within societies. For categoric units the process is much the same. For example, the class distinctions of most Western, capitalist societies are very similar because they are embedded in similar institutional domains, and interaction among people of the same or different classes will be very similar because of the encounter's embeddedness in the social categories marking the

class system. At times, corporate and categoric unit memberships are interwoven when, for example, a position in a corporate unit – say, student in a university- is also a social category; in such cases, interaction among students or between students and others, such as professors, will be much the same cross-culturally because of the similarities in the division of labor of corporate units and social categories linked to this corporate unit.

## Macro-to-Meso-to-Micro Theorizing

It is one thing to assert the power of embedding, but quite another to develop theoretical models and principles explaining the nature of the linkages across levels. There is insufficient space in this chapter to perform this critical task, and indeed, I have not done it for all levels. But I have sought to develop theoretical principles on the dynamics of encounters as embedded processes, seeing the values for each force operating at the level of the encounter as being constrained by embedding in corporate and categoric units and, by extension, in institutional domains (see Turner, 2000, 2002). This effort is not just a programmatic statement, as this chapter must be by necessity, but a preliminary effort to specify the abstract principles explaining relationships among levels of reality. For me, this is the only way to make linkages among micro, meso and macro levels of reality.

I do not want to end here with what may seem like a vague programmatic statement. Let me elaborate and illustrate with one example the kind of theoretical linkages that I have in mind. Any micro-level encounter is embedded in a meso-level structure, driven by the forces of the meso level. The approach that I am advocating does not try to connect the principles explaining the operation of forces at different levels of reality; these are unique to each level and are not, in my view, reducible to each other. What can be reconciled, however, are the effects of meso structures (produced by meso-level forces) on the loadings for each micro-level force, whether emotions, transactional needs, status, roles, symbols, demography or ecology. That is, the embedding of an encounter in corporate and/or categoric units will help explain the loadings of each micro-level force; and when we add to this variations in structure and culture of the corporate and categoric units, we can theoretically link the meso and micro. The same is true for linkages between the macro and meso levels of reality. To illustrate what I am arguing, take the force of normatization as a micro-level force. The values for



each element of this force – expectations for categorization of others and situations, for appropriate frames, for forms of communication, for rituals and for expressions of emotions – are determined by embeddedness in corporate and categoric units as much as by the actual flow of interaction. My argument is more complex than the illustration here, but none the less, let me offer two examples [p. 418 ↓ ] of the kinds of propositions that can be developed. First, the more an encounter is embedded in a corporate unit, and the more bounded, formal and hierarchical is the division of labor of this unit, the more clear-cut are expectations for the nature of the situation, for the forms of communication, for frames, for rituals and for the expression of feelings. Second, the more salient are categoric-unit memberships of those in an encounter, and the more discrete (for example, men-women) and differentially evaluated these categories (for example, black-white), the more clear-cut are categorizations of others; and, other things being equal, the more strained are efforts to establish mutual frames, forms of communication; and hence, the more ritualized are interactions and the greater is the potential for the emotional arousal exceeding feeling rules. These two propositions state in more precise ways how the properties of meso units – formality, hierarchy and bounded-ness for corporate units and discreteness and differential evaluation of categoric units – will load the values for a micro-level force, in this case different aspects of normatization. Thus, we have actual propositions and predictions about how the variable properties of one level will affect the operation of a force at another level. For me, this is a theory that connects the levels rather than being a general metaphor or ad hoc assertion. Obviously, these two propositions do not capture the full complexity of what is involved (see Turner, 2002, for more details), but the connection is at least theoretical. And as I have sought to do (Turner, 2000,2002), linked theoretical proportions can be systematically generated once we begin to view the variable properties of the structures emerging at one level as imposing constraints on the loadings of forces operating at the next level down. In my illustration, the properties of the structures generated by meso-level forces constrain the values for the forces operating in micro-level encounters. Similar arguments could be made for how the properties of various institutional systems load the values for the forces – segmentation, differentiation, and integration – operating at the meso level. In this way, I believe, we can generate *real theoretical linkages* among the levels of reality.



## Micro-to-Meso-to-Macro Theorizing

Before closing, let me theorize about how micro dynamics can effect meso and macro processes – if only to avoid the label of being a macro chauvinist. To argue that society is chains of interaction rituals (Collins, 1981a,b), symbolic interactions (Blumer, 1969), rational choices (Coleman, 1990), unit acts (Parsons, 1937) and the product of other micro processes does not specify *how* the meso and macro are constructed or changed by these micro processes. Most proclamations are highly metaphorical, but we produce more than metaphors. What is required are statements about the mechanisms by which micro processes can affect the meso and macro, as well as the conditions under which these mechanisms are likely to be activated. Again, I cannot go into much detail, but let me outline some of the ways that micro forces can and do alter the structures and cultures in which they are embedded (Turner, 2002; Turner and Boyns, 2002).

*Power and status dynamics* The power and status of individuals in an encounter influence their capacity to exert effects on the meso structures in which the encounter is embedded. The more power and prestige enjoyed by individuals, the greater their effect on the flow of encounters and, hence, potentially on corporate and categoric units. Moreover, the more membership in categoric units serves as a basis for the creation of corporate units (as in social movement organizations), the greater will be this potential for micro-to-meso influence.

*Centrality, density and embeddedness of networks* The more an encounter is embedded and central in a network of relations among encounters, and the more dense are such networks among encounters, the greater will be the potential impact of the encounter on meso structures. For as change in a central encounter occurs, its effects flow across networks of ties to other encounters, thereby [p. 419 ↓ ] altering the division of labor in corporate units or the social distinctions of categoric units.

*Institutional domains* Encounters in some institutional domains will have greater effects than in others. In general, encounters in institutions dealing with the external environment will have a greater impact on meso structures than those revolving around internal system processes such as reproduction (Hawley, 1986). Thus, encounters that alter the meso structures of the economy or polity will be more likely to alter macro

structures than those encounters in families, schools, churches and other internal institutional systems.

*Iterations* A single encounter rarely exerts much influence on meso and macro structures or culture. Rather, it takes repetitions of encounters to increase the potential for change; and the more the conditions outlined above prevail, the more likely are changes in iterated encounters to exert effects on corporate and categoric units and, by extension, institutional domains.

*Size* The larger is the number of individuals in an encounter, the greater will be its potential effect on the meso structures in which it is embedded. This effect can be direct, as when large numbers of individuals can sustain a focus on change, or it can be indirect, as members of a change-oriented encounter disperse to other encounters.

*Visibility* Encounters that are visible to others within corporate and categoric units will have more influence on meso structures than those that are not. Communication technologies can greatly enhance visibility (and size of the encounter as well), especially when the encounter uses public rituals to arouse more intense emotions among larger numbers of individuals. When encounters become emotionally charged media events, then they can have far-reaching effects on meso and macro structures.

*Emotional energy* As noted above, emotions are a powerful force. When encounters arouse intense emotions, these emotions can push individuals to seek change. Moreover, emotions are contagious, and if these emotions are orchestrated by rituals for specific ends, they can reach larger numbers of individuals in other encounters and work to generate change in meso and macro structures.

*Deprivations and negative emotions* When individuals' transactional needs are not realized, they will experience negative emotions. When such emotions are consistently aroused in encounters or across encounters, they motivate individuals to change the circumstances in which they must operate. More generally, any time expectations are not realized, whether from the failure to meet needs or some other source of dissonance, negative emotions are aroused and lead individuals to seek change. Thus, corporate and categoric units that consistently deprive people and arouse negative

emotions will be easier targets for micro-to-meso influence than meso structures in which needs are realized and expectations confirmed.

In sum, then, we can see that there are many paths for micro events to influence meso and macro events. In emphasizing that embeddedness gives corporate and categoric units and their respective cultures more influence on the flow of face-to-face interaction than vice versa, I do not want to imply an extreme macro chauvinism. Still, these paths to micro influence on the meso and macro are relatively rare compared to the influence of macro on meso, and meso on micro; it takes a confluence of these paths for change in corporate and categoric units to occur as the result of micro social processes. The world is not static, of course, and constant pressures are exerted on the meso and macro from the micro level, but if we are to explain a given situation at any level of reality, we first must deal with the unique forces operating at that level as they generate structural and cultural arrangements; and as we do so, we should also turn to the constraints imposed by the embedding of the micro in the meso and the meso in the macro because the values of each force will be determined, in large part, by this [p. 420 ↓ ] embedding. We will get far more explanatory power from theories that are constructed in this way than we will with grand pronouncements that the macro and meso are merely chains of micro events. To make such micro chauvinist arguments true, it is necessary to specify just how and in what ways the micro obviates the emergent properties of the meso and macro levels as well as the forces driving these properties. No micro chauvinist has ever done so. We can list the paths of influence, as I have done above, but this is far different than specifying the conditions under which micro events will structure corporate and categoric units as well as institutional domains.

## Conclusions

Sociologists must, I believe, recognize that the social universe unfolds along micro, meso and macro domains. Humans have created institutional systems to adapt to their environments, both the biophysical and socio-cultural environment of their own creation. These institutional systems are built from units that aggregate and order encounters into corporate units coordinating activities and into categoric units making social distinctions. The most fundamental structural units – institutional systems, corporate and categoric units, and encounters – are the outcome of forces driving their formation, maintenance

and change; and these forces are unique to each level of reality. Theories on the forces at one level are not reducible to theories about the forces at another level. This conclusion does not mean, however, that we cannot address the connections between levels, but it does mean that sociologists must stop being metaphorical, vague and chauvinistic about how to develop explanations that take account of what occurs at each level.

My view is that reality itself, rather than the analyst, reveals a bias toward macro-to-micro order. True, in the sociological equivalent of the Big Bang (perhaps the 'little bang') individual people (hunter-gatherers) created institutional systems and meso structures from their encounters, but once these came into existence, they almost always have constrained what transpires at the micro level. I am not being chauvinistic in drawing this conclusion because the forces operating at each level cannot be reduced to each other, or explained in terms of the forces of another level. Rather, I am arguing that the values for forces at one level are loaded by the structures in which this level is embedded – that is, the values for micro forces are very much constrained by the nature of corporate and categoric units, and the values for the meso level are determined, in part, by the structure of the institutional systems in which they are embedded.

From this view of reality, theories about social reality should, first and foremost, be about the operative dynamics of the forces operating at any given level. Without models and abstract principles about how these forces operate, we will never explain the social universe and, for the purposes of this chapter, we will never integrate micro-meso-macro theorizing. With the theoretical principles about the dynamics of each force at each level of reality, we are then in a position to make the linkages to another level of reality. But we cannot do so by trying to integrate the principles about forces; rather, we make the theoretical linkages by seeing how the outcome of these forces – corporate and categoric units at the meso level and institutional systems at the macro level – load the values of the forces operating at the level below them. Such linkages are made by seeing how the specific properties of structures at either the meso or macro levels will influence the forces at the next level down. When theorizing is done in this way, we can develop explicitly theoretical statements about how a property at one level will change the valences for a force at another level.

We would be wise, I believe, to focus on top-down linkages following this strategy, at least for a while. As I tried to illustrate, we can also move bottom-up, but these theoretical principles will be more complex and difficult to construct and test. Indeed, computer simulations may be the only realistic way to test their viability. But, it will be possible to make theoretical statements about the conditions under which the structure of encounters will affect [p. 421 ↓ ] the valences of the forces driving corporate and categoric units (and their cultures) and about the conditions under which the structure of corporate and categoric units will load the valences for institutional systems (and their cultures). But before this kind of analysis is pursued, we need to develop principles moving top-down; we will advance much more rapidly as a science when this latter strategy is emphasized.

Jonathan H. Turner

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