Andrew Abbott
Mechanisms and Relations

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Mechanisms and Relations

by Andrew Abbott

A Note to the Reader

The paper that follows was prepared for the Conference on Social Mechanisms held in Stockholm 6-7 June 1996. It was omitted from the published conference book [Hedström and Swedberg 1998] on grounds of space. Although surprised, I set the paper aside and went on to other things. There was good reason to do so. Not only was the paper's theme of "mechanisms versus relations" an occasional one. Its primary example – the American college application process – was occasional as well, arising in my then all-encompassing role as a college dean defending my university's educational traditions against its new president. As a distinguished economist, Mr. Sonnenschein was of course a practitioner of the mechanisms program. But the conclusions he derived by thinking mechanismally about college applicants seemed to me obviously wrong, and the plans he built on those wrong conclusions seemed fatal to the very college that he believed himself to be rescuing. My concerns over this university crisis drove the analysis in my paper. Thus both theme and example were rooted in a passing moment. So the paper languished. But in 2002, when I first created my web-site, I decided on a whim to put the mechanisms paper on it, along with some other papers unlikely ever to see publication. To my surprise, the mechanisms paper got noticed and discussed. So when the editors of "Sociologica" recently asked if I would allow it to be printed and discussed more formally, I decided I might as well do so. The debate between the mechanismal and relational types of social analysis is a perennial one, after all, and if some aspects of the paper have dated considerably, the underlying issue is as fresh as when it exercised the founders of sociology a hundred

years ago. In the decade since I wrote this paper, much has happened. My predictions about the college of the University of Chicago were largely borne out. But the explanatory question remains open as to whether the culprit was Mr. Sonnenschein's mechanismally-derived repositioning of the college or a population-wide sea-change that led to the disappearance of the quirky, intellectual, hyper-critical students who attended our college in the years before 1997. As for the two approaches, the mechanisms position has gone on to successful collections and textbooks [e.g., Hedström 2005], while the relational position got a "manifesto" from Emirbayer [1997]. Sadly, relationalism's energetic empirical program of network analysis has shown that one can be as unimaginative about relations as about variables. Indeed, the success of my late colleague James Coleman's "social capital" concept shows that by a deft intellectual move one can turn relations themselves into variables that can be treated in the wooden manner abhorrent to both mechanists and relationalists alike. Finally, rereading my paper in the context of the conference volume (which I bought to write this note) makes the reasons for its omission obvious. The paper argues that the mechanisms program is only one way to skin the social cat and that for many reasons one might prefer other taxidermies. It thus flouted the favoured arguments not only of the book's editors but also of the series editor above them. All of them are believers in rational choice, and what was rational for them to do with my paper was plain enough, so they did it. There's little surprising about that. I have left the paper exactly as it was except for the silent correction of some minor infelicities and the addition of one or two useful references. There is little to be achieved in updating the argument, for I have myself given over polemics for the harder task of writing actual social theory. I and others have said often enough what we ought to do. The task is to do it.

Introduction

A number of writers have recently urged a focus on "mechanisms" in social scientific explanations. While this focus has some practical benefits, it also involves important assumptions. In this paper, I shall consider the mechanisms movement from the viewpoint of a different theoretical tradition, one that focuses on the processual and relational character of social life and that traces its roots to pragmatism. While there are important similarities, there are also important differences. Clarifying these will improve both views. I shall take the Elster and Hedström and Swedberg (henceforth HS) papers prepared for this conference as emblematic of the mechanisms movement. Not only are they particularly clear statements of the mechanisms

view, but also reference to particular short texts avoids distracting complexities of interpretation. In what follows, I first sketch the mechanisms position as set forth in these papers. I then discuss similarities and differences between it and the views of the processual/relational tradition, focusing particularly on the handling of social space and time.[1]

The Mechanisms Position

The mechanisms position aims at "something intermediate between laws and descriptions," or as HS put it, between universal social laws and story-telling. Both papers subscribe to the Hempelian view that true explanations involve covering laws but believe that view impractical at present in the social sciences. A focus on mechanisms provides a level of generalization acceptable yet achievable, one that avoids vacuous laws on one side and excessive details on the other. The papers motivate this middle view in different ways. Elster finds mechanisms central in the explanatory repertoire of exemplary and classical works. Tocqueville, Aristotle, Hume, and Montaigne share his pages with Kahnemann and Tversky. He discusses mechanisms like "sour grapes," "contrast and endowment," "spillover and compensation," "crowding out," "conformism and anti-conformism." He finishes with a stage theory of revolution based on types of people subject to different mechanisms; particular mechanisms function at particular stages to create something that "does not reduce to mere narrative," because the "molecular mechanisms" can be tested. The result is rather close to Lyford Edwards's 1927 account of revolutions, against which Skocpol [1979] rebelled in the name of causal analysis.[2] Elster's analysis is very similar to Roland

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[1] The papers referred to were eventually published as chapters 1 and 3 of Hedström and Swedberg [1998]. I have not attempted to trace the quotes given in my text to the final published versions of those texts, which were, of course, possibly revised in light of the comments made in this paper. And I myself no longer have the original papers in my files. So both the reader and I must simply accept that I got the quotes right in the first place. In what follows there is occasionally a need for an adjectival form for "mechanism," as in "the mechanism view." While I have generally used the noun-as-adjective form as in that locution, that form sometimes fails. In such cases, I have used "mechanismal" rather than "mechanistic" (or, worse yet, "mechanical") because of the established connotations of the latter term(s), which seem to me in unfair to the current generation of "mechanics."

[2] Actually, Skocpol's position, although filled with causalist rhetoric, also believes in the kind of combination of mechanisms that interests Elster. Hence: "[Comparative historical analysis] encourages one to spell out the actual causal arguments suggested by grand theoretical perspectives and to combine diverse arguments if necessary in order to remain faithful to the ultimate objective – which is, of course, the actual illumination of causal regularities across sets of historical cases" [Skocpol 1979, 39].

Barthes' approach to formalizing narratives in *S/Z* [Barthes 1984].[3] In decomposing texts into formal structures, Barthes used five "codes," of which one was a "reference code" of commonsense accounts of social ontology: why things took place or what was the nature of beings. A Barthian analysis of Tocqueville would locate Elster's various mechanisms as elements of this reference code. The difference is that Elster thinks that the accounts are not merely adduced by a narrator (or by actors themselves) to make a sequence of actions followable [Gallie 1964], but rather that they describe an ontological reality. They are *histoire*, not *discours*. Thus where the contingency of mechanisms for Barthes lay in actors' or writers' choice of them, in their ambiguous nature, or in their endogeneity, for Elster contingency arises simply in the fact that "we may not be able to predict whether [particular mechanisms] will be triggered, and sometimes we may not be able to assess the net effect of two opposing mechanisms." Nonetheless, Elster himself acknowledges literary models: "Such interplay of mechanisms is the stuff of novels." What makes mechanismal accounts better than mere narrative, for Elster, is their molecular quality, the fact that they build narratives step by theorizable, generalizable step. [I have made a similar argument parsing sequences of social events into molecular steps: see Abbott 1983, 132ff]. These steps take us inside the black box of social causality. In most of Elster's examples, the black box is unpacked via what Stinchcombe [1968, 60-79] long ago called demographic explanation; particular mechanisms are said to apply to different groups of people. People "are" Kantians or carnivalists, and the balance of numbers between people of these various kinds dictates the outcome. Elster admits of individuals within whom mechanisms conflict ["operating in different individuals or in the same individuals at different times", p. 18], but the sustained example presumes types of people. For Elster, then, mechanisms emerge from the classical texts and begin as a way of formalizing narrative. HS motivate their turn to mechanisms quite differently. For them mechanisms have become important because of the substantive vacuity of what passes for theory in sociological practice. In their view, an earlier generation of mechanism-based theories lost ground, in the years after 1955, to "conceptual or sensitizing schemes" on the one hand and to purely variable-based theorizing on the other. Neither recent version of theory appeals to them; the one is too vague, the other too data-driven. So they call for a resurrection of the mechanism concept. They associate the mechanisms view with Merton's "middle level theory" concept, which they feel was eclipsed by a theorizing based on variables themselves

[3] Barthes was only the most baroque expositor of this model of narratives. All the "algebrists of narrative" – from Propp to Greimas, Bremond, and Todorov – worked in this style. For an overview, see Chatman [1978].

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that was almost deliberately agnostic about mechanism.[4] HS also root their analysis in a discussion of the desiderata of explanations. Mechanisms are necessary because they "provide accounts." HS to some extent oppose the mechanism view of explanation to the covering law view. In the probabilistic world of modern science, covering laws are specifically predictive, not explanatory. Mechanisms, they tell us, go beyond mere prediction; they encourage "deeper, more direct, and more fine-grained explanations" and help us "distinguish between genuine causality and coincidental association."[5] These two statements betray a fundamental aspect of both the HS and Elster views of mechanism. For both, the heart of the matter is reduction. Although Elster pretends at the opening of his paper that mechanism as reduction and mechanism as non-law are different concepts, by the end of the paper he has admitted that they are the same. For their part, HS are explicit that "in sociology, however, the elementary 'causal agents' are always individual actors." Mechanism means reduction.[6] Tied to this theme of reduction is the idea, strong in both papers, that the foundation of explanation is individual human action. That is, the target of reduction

[4] I cannot find in the published version of the HS piece any references to David Freedman's work [Freedman 1987], which is mentioned in this note; these must have been removed. For historical accuracy, I have let the note stand as is, however, but have added a citation for Freedman. One can hardly disagree with the HS diagnosis of the vacuity of sociological theory. Most theorizing in empirical sociological work consists of a few just-so stories buried under citations to the literature. "Sociological theory," by contrast, is mostly pretentious play. But HS's detailed account of the history has some problems. First, the Freedman critique is not really about irrelevant assumptions, but about the fact that model estimates are conditional on the truth of the (causal) model and hence cannot accept or reject that model. Freedman is underlining the mathematical fact that the correlations themselves contain no information about direction and causality. Second, this critique is not recent. Freedman originally made it almost two decades ago in discussing the American occupational structure. He ultimately redirected that attack (in order to get it published: it was strongly opposed by the "Duncan mafia") at Keith Hope's work in the symposium published in the Summer 1987 issue *Journal of Educational Statistics*. Third, the HS paper's historical implication that the main critique of the variables theoretical paradigm as paradigm came from a "Columbia School" seems mistaken to me. Critique of the atheoreticality of variables-based thinking has been rather widespread. In particular, a substantial portion of that critique has come from sociologists specifically interested in "narrative" as an approach to social life, e.g., Peter Abell [1984; 1987] and myself [Abbott 1983; 1988]. One could also mention here Herbert Blumer [1956] and C. Wright Mills [1959], both of whom attacked variables-based thinking. Since writing this paper, I have done a short history of causality in sociology [Abbott 1998].

[5] The phrase "finer grain" comes originally from Elster 1989.

[6] HS seem unaware of the immense literature on causality, not to mention Hume's still unconquered assertion that causality is in fact nothing but a name for coincidence and association, a position they almost explicitly deny. In particular they have missed Mackie's [1974, 62] rescuing of the "contributory cause" view characteristic of "variables analysis" in his concept of INUS (insufficient but non-redundant parts of unnecessary but sufficient) conditions. This defence of standard sociological causation is made at length by Marini and Singer [1988]. The notion of reduction as paradigm for explanation has received extensive analysis by William Wimsatt [e.g., 1976; 2006]. There is, however, no real answer to the Humean critique of causality, which argues that correlation and prediction are the best we can do. Everything else is more or less fictional. The mechanisms view differs from standard sociology in wanting those fictions to be more detailed and to concern action.

– the level at which an account becomes satisfactory – is individual human action, generally conceived as independent choice by individuals living in an environment of other choosing individuals. It is striking that both papers choose as their extended examples diffusion/threshold processes (Elster's revolution and HS's self-fulfilling prophecies, network diffusion, and threshold behavior) for these are among the most common reductive renditions of human behavior. Indeed, when Durkheim attacked reductive accounts in *Suicide*, Tarde's imitation theory – another version of diffusion – was his main target.[7] HS do mention the concept of "situational mechanism," a mechanism that accounts for behaviors through individual adjustment to some kind of supra-individual social order.[8] But they allow it to drop with evident distaste. Indeed, in their discussion of studies of class HS eventually imply that phenomena like class are mere aggregations of individual regularities. While they state their attack on the class concept merely as an operational critique – class as studied in most empirical work is "nothing but a constructed aggregation of operational titles" – the assumptions of their paper make it clear that this is an ontological position as well. The word "class" is at best a nominalist convenience. In summary, the mechanisms position as laid out in these two papers rests on what is usually called the program of methodological individualism. It aims to account for social level phenomena by reducing them to aggregates of individual actions. Most often it conceives of these individual actions as fully coherent; it acknowledges in passing the empirically obvious multiplicity of mechanisms within individual agents, but hopes to get along without it eventually. Multiple mechanisms across individuals and multiple conflicting mechanisms within an individual are Ptolemaic epicycles, tolerated only because they account for explanatory failure. They are not quantum mechanical "ambiguities in principle," not fundamental constituents of the scheme, themselves to be theorized.[9] Both these versions of mechanism lean strongly, if not exclusively, towards the idea that the mode of action among acting individuals is rational choice. (One could conceive of other modes of individual action). However, it is unclear how tightly the papers wish to define "rational," and so I shall for purposes of this paper regard their exposition of mechanism as based merely on "intentional action" in the broader

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[7] There is in fact a Columbia connection for the threshold model. This general approach was set out at length in Nicholas Rashevsky's interesting and quixotic book on mathematics in history [Rashevsky 1968]. Coleman worked as Rashevsky's research assistant at one point in his Columbia career and had discussed these kinds of ideas with him [Coleman, personal communication].

[8] The HS genealogy of the concept of situation is incomplete. They trace it back from Stinchcombe to Goffman. They don't mention that Goffman got it from its inventor, or at least its modern "namer," W.I. Thomas.

[9] As far as I can tell, the term methodological individualism was put into general use by Watkins in 1952 [Watkins 1953].

sense, without specifying exactly how many of the paraphernalia of normal rational choice theory are involved.

The Relational Position

I wish to oppose to the mechanism position a view that I shall call the relational position. In order to facilitate comparison, I shall vastly exaggerate the qualities of both sides. In reality, the two views interpenetrate a good deal and have much in common, particularly in their polemics against standard empirical social science. But emphasizing points of difference advances inquiry quickly. By the relational view I mean the notion that the meaning of an action is comprehensible only when it is situated in social time and place. A fundamental assumption of the mechanism view as set out here is that the meaning of a certain activity is given in itself. By contrast, the relational view assumes that the meaning of an action arises from its relations to other actions – both temporally, as a successor and a forerunner in coherent sequences of social events, and structurally, as a vertex in a synchronic ensemble of actions. Beneath this lies a more profound assumption that actions, not actors, are the primitives of the social process. The substratum of social life is interaction, not biological individuals who act. Moreover, since interaction is primitive, the very existence of continuous individual actors is a matter to be explained. The reasons for these assumptions are complex. First, it is an empirical fact that the socially acting selves that inhabit biological individuals are built up out of prior social interactions. This is obvious ontogenetically, as Mead, Piaget, and the various studies of feral children have demonstrated. To be sure, there is a certain internal coherence provided to the self by biological foundations, as Mead recognized in the concept of the "I." But other than our own empirical assumption there is no logical warrant for taking this biological coherence to be more important than the social coherence of trans-individual structures. In Elster's terms, there is in fact no empirically discernable difference between conformism that arises because some people are conformists and conformism that arises because all of us take part in a larger conformism some of the time. When I act conformally, it could as well be that I act as part of a larger conformist structure as because I am having one of my (rather few) conformist days or because, more surprising still, I have become a conformist *tout court*. A second reason for making interaction primitive flows out of the first. Making interaction primitive makes it possible to give an account of the self. By making the self be continuously recreated in the flow of interaction we bring it out of the realm of assumptions and into that of investigation. At the same time, by making interaction primitive we allow for the

endless interplay of cross-individual structural definitions of the flow of action, an interplay that is an evident fact in social life. That is, along with the ability to account for the self comes the ability to discuss change in other social structures, which otherwise can be explained only as shifting aggregates of atomic individuals (or parts of individuals). An action that is today defined as the rough hand of class oppression was yesterday a mere shop-floor work rule. This change may not be merely one of cultural redefinition, but perhaps literally a matter of structural coordination; the coordination of other rules around it may have transformed an old rule from an isolated case into part of a systematic structure. This transformation is not visible under a system where an action's meaning flows from its originator, the acting biological individual.[10] Finally, and more broadly, taking action and interaction as primitive is really our only effective way to deal with change in social actors and structures. It is far easier to explain permanence as an accidental outgrowth of change than vice versa. (Indeed, the reverse is impossible, which is why accounting for the self is such an embarrassment for the social theories of methodological individualism). It should be noted that by making perpetual change foundational – something we do when we take interaction as primitive – we make explaining change relatively trivial. Explaining stability becomes the central theoretical challenge. The relational view shares with the mechanismal view the basic assumption that acts are at the center of social analysis. In this assumption, both sharply contrast with generalizing schemes and variables-based theorizing. These latter approaches both envision the social world in terms of given entities with varying properties like "bureaucracy" and "gender" and "education" that are seen to affect each other in some way. Such properties assume the character of real social universals, in the Medieval sense [for an extended analysis see Abbott 1988; 1992a]. Both the mechanismal view and the relational one reject this position. For them activity is the heart of social life. The social world is made up of actors doing things. But their reasons for rejecting the real universals of standard social science are slightly different. The mechanisms view insists that activity is central to social life. But it retains the assumption of given entities – the individual actors. In the relational view, by contrast, one of the central reasons for the focus on action is to allow for an account of entities. Thus while both the mechanismal and relational views focus on activity, they make different parts of activity central. To see the exact difference, it is useful to invoke Burke's dramatistic pentad: "Any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what

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[10] There have been attempts at methodological individualist accounts of the self, mostly under the rubric of behaviorism. B.F. Skinner's work is a notable example. In my view, such accounts are both logically absurd and empirically inadequate.

was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" [Burke 1969, xv].

In these terms, the mechanism approach presupposes an agent, usually the biological individual, and a purpose, usually the realization of some varying set of preferences. By contrast, the relational view presupposes an act, usually a thing that was done, and a scene, usually a set of connections in social time and social space that create the concentric and crosscutting loci for action. Moreover, the relational view makes scene the dominant term of the pair. For the relational account defines an act as a making of relations within a scene. The "thing that was done" was done by making new connections and disconnections among the various strands of activity that constituted the scene within which the act itself occurred. It is by such acts, indeed, that permanent entities arise. Social actors are cobbled together by actions that turn existing potential boundaries into actual ones [for an extended account, see Abbott 1995a; 1999]. Entities are continuous chains of such actions that keep turning out the same way [Whitehead's name for this phenomenon was "personal order"; see Whitehead 1969, 39ff]. In addition, the relational approach does not take the meaning of an action as fixed. In this sense there is no "thing that was done," because the making of certain connections in the present may give rise to a much larger connection later. Action, that is, has a profoundly narrative character. As Danto [1985, ch. 8] argues, action is perpetually referring to the future. In climbing Mount Ventoux and writing his celebrated essay on that climb, Francesco Petrarca knew he was climbing and writing, but did not know that he was "opening the Renaissance," as that essay is often said to have done. Only later actions could make that statement retrospectively true, even though the seeds of truth lay ungerminated in Petrarca's climbing and writing that day.[11]

The openness of action to future redefinition, however, is not its only openness. Action is also open to redefinition by the contextual actions of others. I may intend to make a fortune by selling stock short; whether I do or not is determined by the actions of others. Such simple contextualities are of course a major explanatory goal of economics. But action is not multiple in meaning simply because of such contextual ambiguities. It is multiple because when I act as an individual, various social actors act through me. Since I am a dean, my actions within my office are legally the actions of an entity called the University of Chicago. Now one could say this was simply a matter of social construction, enduring and monumental though that construction may be.

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[11] I am embarrassed to say that while I remember this example from Danto's book, I cannot find it despite some searching. It should be noted that Danto makes his argument about narrative, not about action per se. But I think it applies just as well to action itself.

But setting legal fictions aside, my actions in diverse settings are sometimes taken as the actions of "men" as an organized group, or as those of "sociology," and so on. In the relational view, the agent is thus substantively multiple, not simply multiple by courtesy. In summary then, the relational account shares with the mechanismal one a focus on activity in social life and a strong rejection of the notion of emergent universals in social systems. However it differs from the mechanism view in emphasizing act and scene as the primitive foundation of analysis, as opposed to the agents and purposes of mechanism. It problematizes the very notion of an entity capable of action (the notion of agent), viewing entities as constant by-products of repeated action. Its emphasis on scene leads it to view action as inherently open to redefinition – by later action, by actions of others, by the inherent multiplicity whereby many agents participate in the "I" who acts.

Endowment and Contrast as Mechanisms and as Relations

Having established the basic parameters of the two views, I would like now to turn in more detail to social time and social space. Since the relational view focuses on these dimensions of analysis, it is important to understand their place in the mechanismal alternative. It is useful to take a simple example. Elster analyzes a mechanism that seems to be relational: endowment and contrast (heretofore EC) effects. Endowment effects are essentially positive contagion effects. A past good (bad) experience makes me feel good (bad) in remembering it. Another's good (bad) experience makes me feel happy (sad). The contrast effect is precisely the reverse. A past bad (good) experience may make my present seem happier (sadder) by comparison. Another's good fortune (misfortune) may make me envious (happy to have escaped). Note that these effects can arise either over temporal distance (within case) or spatial distance (across cases). Note also that both effects can be at work in the same individual: Elster tells us "the exact course of events will depend on the relative strength of the different mechanisms at work." Although these effects may involve comparison with others, they are defined in an ego-centered way. That is, they are defined as properties of individuals. Appropriately enough, given HS's tracing of the mechanism concept to Columbia roots, this parallels the Coleman treatment of networks on an ego-centered basis (in terms of properties like centrality) rather than on a purely structural one (in terms of common patterns of relations to alters). Thus, Elster repeatedly speaks of people "dominated by the contrast effect" or "vulnerable to the sour grapes mechanism;" he is uninterested in the relational algebra of the mechanisms. However, interesting properties emerge when we start to place

these "vulnerable individuals" in relation. In the spatial case, such EC effects are essentially positive and negative spatial autocorrelations between socially connected individuals. Consider N units arrayed in a simple rectangular array whose reactions to their adjacent others can be specified in terms of mixtures of binary EC effects. Each individual becomes happy or sad at time t+1 based on his reaction to how his EC effects rate his immediate environment at time t. In such a system, we can define a particular starting arrangement of "happy" people, let us say, and see whether and how that arrangement of happiness moves through the system. Simulation studies in the Santa Fe tradition [e.g., the "game of life," Gardner 1970] show that even when the individual EC pattern is uniform across all individuals, certain arrangements of initial states will propagate successfully in such a system while others will be extinguished quickly. That is, even under ego-defined mechanisms of this kind, regular, dynamically stable social structures can emerge. However, structures propagating in such spaces of egos governed by autocorrelational rules are not real structures. They are not emergent realities with the (causal) power to bind their own and other actors' futures. They are mere appearances produced by a lower level mechanism. Thus they offer a pretty but still reductive account of emergent structure. To make the move to the relational view, we must push Elster's position even further by replacing his ego-centered stance on mechanisms with a structural one. The first such move would be to construe EC effects under the concept of structural equivalence. Let us again take EC effects as relations in social space. Assume, for example, that we have N individuals whose EC relations are defined by an N by N by 2 array whose elements are the (possibly asymmetric) weights of E and C (the two effects span the third array dimension) for the ith individual relative to the jth. (This allows for dueling mechanisms with linear asymmetric weights. It essentially generalizes the last model by removing the assumptions of its geometry of adjacency). We can say that individuals occupy "roles" if they share profiles of EC relations to others. Indeed, one could define social structures based on those structurally equivalent positions. For example, such a model might identify a scapegoat role and conversely a "pole of envy," because both play contrastive roles for so many similar others. Indeed, in a more or less linear status system, such structural equivalence might explain the empirically widely known stability of the extremes. A similar kind of structural equivalence can be defined for temporal EC relations. Individuals might have characteristic profiles for their EC effects over different ranges of past. Some people might like a trajectory that emphasizes contrast effects *vis-à-vis* a recent negative past but positive endowment from a distant past: "I've been down but I'm digging out." Others might thrive on a perpetual sense of loss from a recent positive past that had overcome a negative initial endowment: "I achieved it all but now I'm losing it." Such EC trajectory pro-

files could easily serve as a structural equivalence on which social structures could be founded. Or one could imagine complementary structures: perhaps individuals' temporal EC patterns might dovetail in ways that made social relationships between them – marriages, for example – more enduring than non-dovetailed patterns. These are interesting structural possibilities. But when we embed EC effects in both space and time, it becomes possible to make a more radical move. For one can now put into question the very units that are considering their endowments and contrasting with each other and with their own pasts. Since the most radical case I can make in this regard would involve the human personality, I shall argue that case. In the mechanism view, a constituted, given personality is governed by a potentially varying mix of EC effects towards other social actors and towards its own past experience. A personality exists and has as properties certain proclivities to feel endowment and contrast effects. Suppose we held, *per contra*, that the available environment of other actors and past experiences, an environment that constrains the possible endowments and contrasts to be drawn, in fact governs the way the personality is constituted. The personality, that is, is itself continuously reconstructed by drawing relations of endowment and contrast with others and with the past. In saying this, I mean something stronger than simply a reversal of causation. In the mechanism view, a personality has characteristic EC reactions that in parsing past and present environments produce certain feelings. I could be arguing simply that the past and present environments in some way determine these EC reactions, that whether a good past makes us feel good is determined by that past. But I am arguing the stronger point that the acting self is continuously remade in interaction and that the environment of possible endowments and contrasts – the environment of others and past experience – provides the ground whence comes this remaking. It is less a question of whether a good or bad past or environment makes us feel good or bad than it is a question of how a good or bad past or environment makes us. Put another way, the task of producing a personality at any given moment is the task of taking the various endowments and contrasts afforded by our own past and by our current environment of others, and of then creating from them an emotionally sound feeling-state that "works" in the current situation and that effectively perpetuates a lineage of similar states that we can call our personality. Thus, I do not really believe that at any given time we have given endowment and contrast feelings or proclivities. We have, to be sure, a past record of such effects, something we know well, as we do the emotional prices in the present of redefining our pattern of endowments and contrasts – recasting our early marriage years as bad, redefining ourselves as just like our parents, and the like. Rather, at any given moment, it is open to us to redefine ourselves as beings by redefining the pattern of endowments and contrasts that we use to define ourselves. The

self, in this view, is a shifting congregation of interactions with others, its emotional state an equally shifting projection from endowments and contrasts and autonomous effects.[12]

Mechanismal and Relational Accounts of College Choice

To illustrate this argument, I shall consider an empirical case with which I am currently much concerned for administrative reasons. My university would like more top-quality undergraduates. So we must think about the question of how students come to matriculate with us. The President of the University, a well-known general equilibrium theorist, of course believes that this matriculation decision is a rational choice under a budget constraint and conditions of information scarcity. He thinks that the choice is made by an existing agent, the potential student or, perhaps, the composite unit of student and family. For President Sonnenschein and for the market research firm he has hired to research the matter – a firm staffed completely by economists and MBAs – the deciding agent faces a battery of potential colleges, a body of published information and misinformation about those colleges, a set of beliefs about the conditional future results of attending those colleges, and a considerable body of knowledge about "what actually goes on" at them. On the basis of these facts and certain preference conditions, the deciding agent makes a rational choice and may or may not choose the University of Chicago. Now of course this whole model is pretty silly. Because as the deciders figure out quite quickly, they face almost no real information, but only a welter of noise. All college catalogues make their schools look pretty. All colleges claim to have small classes, intensely committed faculty, and successful alumni. What families actually know about colleges is a compound of hearsay and rumor, generally based – if based at all on reality – on the reality of several decades before. Published rating information largely concerns quality of applicants and of certain physical plant resources and does little to differentiate

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[12] We are whom we define ourselves by and against. In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke's gospel, the first defines himself by contrast with the second: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterous, or even as this publican. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess" [Luke 18:11-12]. The Pharisee feels good about himself because he contrasts his situation with another's. But the publican feels bad because he defines himself only by the much greater contrast with God: "[He] would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner" [Luke 18:14]. It is not merely that the publican has the property of self-knowledge, where the Pharisee does not. Rather the very shape of his personality is different. Oddly enough, it is bigger and fuller because instead of "making himself" *vis-à-vis* another man, he has done so *vis-à-vis* God.

colleges within certain broad bands. So the university seeking to improve the quality of its applicants has as little reason to rely on influencing a rational decision as the deciders have to try to make a rational decision on the information they possess.[13] Now the Elster theory of endowments and contrasts would vastly improve this view. For the deciders are making their decisions on the basis of feelings generated less by "unrooted," general comparisons than by specific endowments and contrasts. They feel good about the University of Chicago because they found a parking place there when they visited; what was good once will be good again. Or they feel bad about it because they remembered its terrible dorm food when they later settled down to a catered lunch for prospective students at Brown or Yale. That is, particular endowments and contrasts play a central role, probably considerably more central than that of a general rational choice made under a budget constraint. Perhaps, then, the best way to think about the college decision is as a matter of composites of such endowments and contrasts. The simple mass of good and bad memories and current information about colleges is supplemented by a mass of particular contrasts arising from comparisons made when reading material, talking with others, visiting colleges, and so on. It is the interplay of these mechanisms, more than a particularly rational choice among specified alternatives, that really makes the decision, even if we admit the presence of a budget factor as a strict constraint or a compensating factor. But note that I have smuggled another important difference in with the EC variant of rational choice. That is temporal order. That the catered lunch followed the dorm food might explain the salience and importance of the contrast. Had the order been reversed, the meaning might have changed. Thus, our understanding of the decision to attend or not attend a given college may be improved less by interpreting it as a matter of competing endowments and contrasts than by embedding it in real time. To give our local economists their due, they have tried to conceive of matriculation as the result of three concentric rational choices: to inquire, to apply, and to attend. But the time of these choices is not the real time order we have just introduced in the search process – visiting one university before or after another. It is just a matter of logically concentric decisions. The move to a relational theory of social entities like

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[13] One could make an "efficient markets hypothesis" argument about college applications. On this view, all inside (that is, real and accurate) information about what is a good college is acted upon by those who know it. Thus they focus their applications on places their inside information shows to be good places. This will inflate application rates at such places above the rates expected otherwise and will therefore convey information to the astute observer, who would then rationally aim to get into the schools with the most "excess applications." The problem with this model is estimating the baseline applications. Inside information undoubtedly is conveyed to the applications figures, but I think it is swamped by application fads (e.g., Brown in recent years) and by the vast mass of misinformation. Real signals are too small to be visible in such a context.

the self requires a far more radical rethinking of the question of "why students end up attending the University of Chicago." In the first place, it regards that question as a question about a process, not about a decision. In this sense, it views history prospectively. Yet even the best rational choice model views coming to the University as a sequence of choices that retrospectively define the ways one could have chosen to come to the University of Chicago. If a student chose not to apply to Chicago, but only Harvard and Brown, say, such a choice model is not interested in that student, even though such students constitute much of the everyday environment of the students who have applied to Chicago and hence would play an important part in both the EC and relational views. More important, we might phrase the difference by saying that the relational model is interested in how a student becomes a person who matriculates at the University of Chicago. The process of college search, application, and matriculation is a process of becoming somebody, becoming a kind of person, not a process of choice by someone already fixed. The university's interest is in attracting more top-quality students to that particular avenue of becoming. The difference between this way of formulating the question and the rational choice one is obvious. Hence I disregard the latter hereafter. But I need here to underline its difference from the kind of mechanism view argued by Elster. Let me summarize the arguments so far: 1. Dueling EC mechanisms: a personality has characteristic EC reactions that parse past experiences and present environments and produce certain feelings and (indirectly) consequent choices. 2. Relational selves: the acting self is continuously remade in interaction using the environment of possible endowments and contrasts – the environment of others and past experience – as a ground for doing so. These views can be simply rephrased as follows. In the first, a student chooses a college because he had good experiences with it (very broadly defined to include information and so on) and because others he likes had good experiences with it, and refuses it because he or others had bad experiences or, perhaps, because those he dislikes are positively inclined to it. In the second view, a student chooses to inquire about, apply to, and attend a particular college because this enables him to create a functioning self in his current environment, broadly understood as his surrounding others and a past biography he is "rationalizing." Attending a particular college is manufacturing a self as attender.

Let me give first a personal example. Why did I go to Harvard as an undergraduate? I knew very little about the quality of education at Harvard or elsewhere. I in fact knew little about what one studied in college. I made few inquiries about other colleges, and since my school (Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts) was visited by recruiters from most elite colleges, there was no need for campus visits. I paid little attention to the whole process. Indeed, I applied only to Harvard

and Wesleyan, having decided – again on minimal information – that Dartmouth was too athletic. My actions were overwhelmingly based on the simple fact that a steadily increasing portion of my school's senior class had gone to Harvard, reaching 20% in my eleventh-grade year. Year after year, the intellectual and social top of the class had gone to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton; on towards 40% of each class, in fact. To make any other college one's first choice, in those years at Andover, was to make a quite extraordinary assertion about one's personal identity. My decision to go to Harvard was a decision not to invoke such a radical identity, and thus a decision about where in Andover I was located. It had next to nothing to do with the realities of Harvard or any other possible future, and everything to do with the present. It was about making trying to make myself into a standard member of the school's elite, just as playing soccer or taking honors mathematics envisioned the same result. In the more general case, a student considers a particular set of colleges to pursue because of a set of identity choices in his or her immediate present. Perhaps he or she chooses to apply to a college because friends do. Perhaps it is a part of the long and intimate battle with parents about who he or she is to become – about occupation or utility or politics as contested in the family. Perhaps it is about escaping a particular identity – avoiding some obvious college because a hated or contemned adult went there, or because it is such an obvious choice, or because it is near family. Even at the stage of initial interest – the stage of inquiring about colleges – such identity factors are essential. For most students college is the first major turning point in life, the chance to leave home and enter a new trajectory in life [cf. Abbott 1997]. It therefore raises central identity choices, like the attempt to escape from parental and school authority. And college choices also embody identity statements about what seem to be purely individual identity choices, like ambition, for example. Many students apply to elite colleges for the same reason that Weber's Protestants worked hard; in order to persuade themselves that they are among the elect. There are crucial meta-concerns as well. Much of the college choice process is shaped by the student's decision about of how much to appear to care about it, for that too is a central attribute of current identity in both family and school environments. At the same time, there is always a subterranean, lurking rationality, embodied in the historically ancient satisficing concept of the "safe school." The identity process is circumscribed, at its boundaries, by hints of rational constraint. But in general, the college choice process is far from embodying a sequence of concentric rational choices about alternate futures. Quite the contrary. The college choice process is an extended phase of middle adolescence, embedded completely in the present-oriented identity contests of that age. It is all about who the student is and little about future education or even rational preferences about what the student will

become, whatever the appearances imposed on it in retrospect. Of course, students know better than to admit to such identity struggles. And so the market research firm hired by my President, which has like him apparently forgotten its own high school years, asked a random panel of elite students whether it is applying to certain colleges in order to help with career, in order to get good small classes, to study with senior professors, and so on. And the students dutifully report careerism and concern for their education, even those things are often far from their minds. Better questions – but without any hope of valid answers – would be whether the applications were generated to impress a girlfriend, or to show that one was not a dork, or to get as far as possible from one's parents, or to convince oneself that one was going to have a successful life, and so on. We phrase these questions as if they were about arrogating properties to oneself: defining oneself as impressive, non-dorky, independent, or successful. Within the EC model, that is what they are. But they are just as easily viewed as being about identifying oneself with particular groups of others. That is, they are about connections and disconnections between self and others and about identifying one's feelings and decisions with those of others. In this sense, they are as much about who is making the decision – individual, erotic dyad, in-crowd, family – as they are about what is being decided. Even wanting to be a personal success – a lawyer, for example – has little to do with real foresight into one's future chances and experience and much to do with an identification with local or public exemplars. Thus, the relational view holds that what is at issue in the process of college choice is the literal identity of those who are deciding and that that identity is largely made by making meaningful connections and disconnections between self and various other groups. College choice is not just a matter of individuals making decisions. College choice is a language by which cliques talk to cliques, parents talk to children, guidance counselors talk to students, students talk to former students and so on. Colleges themselves don't see this. College choice as they see it concerns students' appraisals of the future. But students themselves make those choices – as do the cliques, the parents, and the guidance counselors who are also "making those choices" – because of concerns in the present. Not that the future is not considered. But even the issue of how much the future is considered is subject to the metadiscourse by these various actors. Cliques fight each other precisely over issues like careerism, and those fights have consequences, willy nilly, for the colleges chosen.[14] Once we admit that the decision is not a single person decision, we open the whole matter of choice to

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[14] The argument made here emerges from a hybridizing of the Simmelian argument about individuals "at the intersection of social circles" with a Meadean argument about the processual generation of the social self. A conspicuously brilliant exposition of the Simmelian side of this argument is Breiger's argument about "the duality of persons and groups" [Breiger 1988].

new causal models. Under certain conditions a clique may acquire the ability to virtually dictate the choices of its members. Similarly under certain conditions parents may dictate choices, or counselors, or others. In all these situations, understanding the social structure of the decision becomes crucial, remembering of course that the process of making the decision is a part of the process of continuously recreating that social structure. (Counselors may be pushing particular colleges to enable high "success" in their own admission statistics, parents may be calculating their role in the decision based on considerations about their ability to control their children or to force them to become financially independent, etc). In summary, the very identity of the deciding unit is often in play. It is also important to realize that students creating their identities via college choice (and via many other things, of course) do not have completely free hands in the process. Some identities don't work in current environments. They don't create defensible, replicable selves that work in a context of friends, cliques, parents, and siblings, and that square in some sense with individuals' personal biographies as they currently understand them. Such failing identities must be deserted for new ones, with consequent impact on college choice. This process is so familiar in adolescents that we may overlook it. (And I should note that it is probably more constant over the later life course than we think). And replicable selves are just as important for cliques, counselors, parents, and other trans-individual groups involved in the college choice process. A high school clique lasts only when the various distinctions and boundaries drawn around it can be connected into a defensible unit, a core that won't collapse through redefinition into other units. Pushing a particular college choice could be a foundation for such defensibility, but it could also be a fatal weakness. Only the current social constellation around a clique can define that outcome. For other participants in the process, college choice may play a more peripheral role in group maintenance. But no doubt many a marriage has had its shape somewhat redrawn by the conflict over resources, ambitions for self, ambitions for children, class status, and so on that arises in the college choices of its children. Ironically, actual choices for certain colleges often have completely unforeseen consequences. To be sure, within-college variance in student experience is probably greater than between-college variance over many of the actual decision sets that students face. This mutes the unexpected results. But the thousands of hyper-ambitious students who arrive at various elite colleges each fall face a shocking discovery that most of them stand much lower in their new community than in their old. By contrast, the unfortunates whom accident denied their first choices can often be much more successful, once the irritation of attending a second or third choice wears off. Here we see the important process of redefinition of actions by later developments.

Conclusion

The relational view and the mechanismal view are thus similar in important ways, but different in others. They are similar in their polemic against standard sociological thinking. They are similar in their focus on activity in social life. But they differ in their foci within activity: the mechanismal view focusing on agent and purpose, the relational one on action and scene. The same mixture of similarities and differences carries over into the implications of the two views for social investigation. Both imply moving away from regression-based variables methods to methods that look directly at patterns of activity. They both imply, in the short run, a move "from causes to events" [Abbott 1992b]. They involve methods on the one hand aimed at structural patterns [e.g., network analysis, see the essays in Wellman and Berkowitz 1988] and on the other aimed at regularities in processes [e.g., sequence analysis, see Abbott 1995b]. Beyond these commonalities, however, there is a split. Once regular patterns are found, for either structures or narratives, the two approaches divide. The mechanisms approach seeks simplified formal accounts based on the assumptions of individual actors, rational choice, and potentially dueling mechanisms. The relational approach seeks an explicitly processual understanding in which outcomes, actors, and relations are all endogenous. In the college choice example, therefore, the EC mechanism approach will seek models for the quantitative balance of endowments and contrasts in different populations of potential students, looking at both individual propensities and the actual environment of good and bad experiences. The relational approach, by contrast, will spend its time unpacking the identity politics of the late high school years. The EC approach will seek a way of "reverse engineering" the EC process, say by getting students to come to Chicago early and rely on positive endowment effects. The relational approach will seek to find a way of packaging application to Chicago such that it functions effectively in high school identity contests for those students whom the University wants to attract. Both approaches will differ explicitly from the standard one, which would be to regress everything in sight on the binary decisions to inquire, to apply, and to attend, and then to work to change whatever had the largest negative beta. For both mechanismal and relational approaches take the generally relational view that the meaning of a causal factor is shaped by its surround. While they differ in important and profound ways, both the mechanismal and the relational views represent vast improvements on our currently impoverished theorizing.

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Mechanisms and Relations

Abstract: Reacting to the original papers outlining the importance of "social mechanisms," this paper contrasts two views of the social process, the mechanismal and the relational. In the sources here analyzed, the mechanismal perspective is largely based on methodological individualism and generally presupposes rational, or at least intentional, action. A fundamental assumption of this approach is that the meaning of an action is given in itself. The relational view by contrast holds that the meaning of an action arises only from its relation to other actions, both temporally and structurally. The relational view takes not actors but interaction as primitive and focuses on the scene (context) of action rather than the intentions of actors. The paper investigates these differences by examining the Elsterian mechanisms of "endowment" and "contrast," both theoretically and through the example of application of students to institutions of higher education in America.

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