Extended Abstract: A Population Perspective on Reflexive Social Construction

This paper presents the outlines of a demographically based interactionist theory of social reproduction. What is proposed here is a methodological individualist theory of reflexive social construction in which distributions of individual characteristics within a population shape the context in which social learning occurs. This learning process simultaneously creates and reshapes those population distributions, setting the context of interaction and learning in the following period. In this sense, this is a theory of the duality of social structure of the type that has a long history in the social sciences (Simmel 1911; Mead 1934; Simmel 1955). In modern social theory, this theme has been revisited prominently in the work of Giddens (Giddens 1984) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1984).

Expanding on the themes central to these works, this paper draws on a number of theoretical traditions from the disciplines of sociology, psychology and anthropology. Its main proposition is that a central mechanism in the processes of learning, socialization and self-construction are predicated on and structured by empirically observable demographically structured contexts of interaction. At the same time within the framework proposed here, demographic reproduction and replacement function as the primary mechanism of social reproduction and change, through a mechanism which can be seen as a continuous analogue to Ryder's cohort replacement model.

Over forty years ago, Norman Ryder proposed one of the most popular social-demographic theories of the modern era, the cohort replacement model (Ryder 1965). In Ryder's framework, individuals are socialized as a function of the interaction between prevailing material, ideological and especially educational regimes at the time of their youth. After this socialization occurs, their beliefs and representations of the world presumably motivating their behavior are relatively fixed. Social change in Ryder's model comes about through cohort replacement, where incremental societal changes occur as each cohort (with potentially different socialization experiences) first rises to become a larger proportion of the overall population then declines as new cohorts replace them. I suggest here that Ryder's model is essentially correct in its specification of demographic replacement as the principle mechanism behind social change. The cohort replacement model, however, is limited in a number of ways. Addressing these issues leads us to a broader, more comprehensive demographic theory of social construction.

Though the cohort replacement model is intuitively appealing, it is explicitly conceptualized as a discrete process. Cohorts are socialized, they age, and new ones replace the old. This type of mechanism is empirically tractable, tracing aggregate changes, and has direct analogs in a number of empirical demographic models such as life-tables and projections. In these latter models, however, the definition of cohort boundaries has been and always will be arbitrary. The same is true in Ryder's framework, and the position elaborated here is that the underlying mechanism of social reproduction can best be understood as a *continuous* one, with each individual socialized with unique and at least to some degree heterogeneous learning experiences based in their contextual (or environmental) frames of interaction. The second major limitation of the cohort replacement model, stemming from the first is that the mechanism of socialization with its locus in youth and educational experience is under-specified. The theory outlined here

subsumes these processes into a broader, more interactionist model of socialization through learning processes.

It has long ago been observed that to understand such processes, it is necessary to grasp both the cognitive mechanisms through which information is integrated into consciousness and the structure of information exchange (Merton and Kitt 1950). This theory addresses both directly. To model the cognitive aspect of learning, I lean heavily on schema theory from psychology and cognitive anthropology. Schema theory is one of the most powerful and prominent models of cognition and the transmission of culture in the modern lexicon (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Mandler 1984; D'Andrade 1995). In brief, schemas are flexible interpretive frameworks (which one can think of as 'rules' or 'scripts' though such descriptions are inadequate for a number of reasons) for both understanding (potentially) complex situations and for motivating action within them which can be activated by minimal stimuli (D'Andrade 1992). Schemas are efficient mechanisms for integrating new information with old and also for decision making, decidedly so compared to other common models of cognitive processing commonly assumed in the social sciences. They are modified through time, and are often transposable, meaning they can be applied to novel situations with key similarities to those from which they were derived (see Sewell (1992) in reference to Bourdieu).

The idea that schemas make concrete is that large parts of consciousness – interpretive frameworks, and the predicates and motivations for action are in some way a weighted aggregate of reflexive learning episodes experienced largely through interaction. This is perhaps one of the great underlying and often explicitly unacknowledged principles in social theory, starting at least from the English enlightenment (Bacon, Urbach et al. 1994). Importantly, schemas are individual constructions contingent on individual experiences, introducing variation in interpretive frameworks and motivation at the population level. This means that a particular schema, say, to take a familiar demographic example, for how many children are optimal to have may be seen as a random variable. Though there may be a central tendency within a population for particular schemas (when culturally acknowledged these may potentially correspond to concepts such as rules and norms) there will always be variation in them due, at least in part to particular learning experiences.

Having discussed a plausible, general level mechanism for interactionally based construction of interpretive frameworks, I turn to the second part of Merton and Kitt's prescription for a broader understanding of social learning processes, the structure of interaction. It is through the mediation of interaction through time that information is exchanged (both formally and informally) and schemas formed. If interpretive frameworks are constructed as weighted aggregates of interactions, we need a way to conceptualize the scope of and measure such interactions. To do this, I draw from both Blau's macro-demographic theory (Blau 1984; Blau 1994) and social network perspectives. Both of these provide complementary perspectives on the structure of interaction and provide opportunities for empirical examination of the learning process at different levels.

Blau's theory of macro-structural influences on behavior has two key components. First it posits that each individual in a population can be seen as holding a specific combination of characteristics across multiple dimensions (e.g, race, sex, wealth, and by implication, cognitive schemas as discussed above). Second, it holds that the

distribution of individuals in a population influences the likelihood of interaction between any two of them. The implication here is that both of these elements in interaction – distribution of characteristics in individuals and the distribution of these individuals in a particular population in interaction can be used to explain individual heterogeneity of perception and motivation for action. Perhaps most importantly, the association between and interaction of these elements is empirically measurable at a broad level of abstraction. Blau's theory thus provides an empirically testable macro-level framework for integrating environmental (interactional) exposure into to consciousness and behavior. One potential problem however, is that interpersonal interaction may be seen as structurally over-determined. It is for this reason that this explicitly macro-level framework can and should be supplemented and extended with network analyses, which focus on the same substantive mechanisms but at a different level of abstraction (Mitchell 1973). Socio-centric (or structurally focused) network perspectives have approached the problem of social construction of certain types of schema through structural equivalence (Wasserman and Faust 1994). In these models, however, it is the cognitive side of the equation which may be seen as over-determined. Ego-centric, or 'personal' network analyses, which I argue here have been under-utilized for this purpose should play an important role in our understanding of both structure of association and the valued context of that structure.

Network analyses, particularly of the ego-centric variety have become popular in the last decade in demography, in part because they offer the potential of a refined empirical lens on the nature of learning working through interactional structure. This type of analysis supplements the macro-structural framework discussed above by drawing the focus on micro-environmental aspects of interaction and allowing for the structure of mixing (at least to some degree) to be directly observed instead of inferred. It also allows, at least in theory for valued relationships that can be used for ascertaining the type of information potentially passed between individuals. With appropriate data, we can test on a very intimate level at least some limited forms of the weighting aggregate for different outcomes and behaviors (Montgomery and Casterline 1996). The most common of these questions in the demographic literature regards interactional influences regarding the adoption and use of contraception (Behrman, Kohler et al. 2002; Montgomery, Kiros et al. 2003) and knowledge concerning AIDS (Buhler and Kohler 2002; Behrman, Kohler et al. 2003).

As should be clear, these are only specific examples of the broader class of individualist learning phenomenon one could consider with this theory. In this paper I look closely at the way the general framework presented here relates to more common demographic models of learning processes, and at a broader level theories of reflexive social construction. After describing potential mechanisms linking each of the elements described above, I address several issues related to emergent phenomena and discuss the position of methodological individualism in this theory and as part of a core of demographic perspective.

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