

Middle Range Theory as a Source for Linking Personality to Social Structure

Stephen M. Marson PhD ACSW¹ & J. Porter Lillis PhD²

^{1&2}Sociology and Criminal Justice Department, University of North Carolina, Pembroke, North Carolina.

ABSTRACT: For a century, the pursuit of a grand theory of human behavior has existed. One critical goal for a grand theory would be the ability to link social structure with personality. However, starting in the 1980s, we began recognizing a very gradual disinterest in the goal of linking social structure and personality for the formation of grand theory. Today the optimism for a unified field theory of all human behavior has all but disappeared. With the declining interest in the pursuit of a grand theory, efforts to link social structure with personality has also waned. Renewed interest in a grand theory appeared to be reemerging in the arena of middle range theories. The hope for linking social structure and personality on the basis of middle range theories becomes a highly viable alternative within the context of employing artificial intelligence.

KEYWORDS: Social Structure, Personality, Middle Range Theory, Grand Theory, Artificial Intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the sociological interest in linking social structure to personality has several different streams of thought. The foundation of this confusing and obscure origin can illuminate the purpose and importance of the entire enterprise. The central problem in addressing the linkage between social structure and personality is organizing the information in a coherent manner. Historically, the original concepts are fragmented and disconnected. Perhaps the best way of providing coherency to the historical development is by asking questions and answering them, followed by an explanation of how these are all connected. We begin with four questions:

Why is the concept of linking social structure and personality important?

Where did the idea of linking social structure and personality originate?

As a unit of study, how did linking social structure and personality enter the arena of disinterest?

How can theories of the middle range resurrect sociological interest in linking social structure and personality?

Importance

The overall importance of linking social structure to personality can be summarized by making four empirically based observations:

First, the successful discovery of the process of linking social structure to personality will provide a profound insight into how personality development emerges from social forces and therefore provide an in-depth understanding of the impact of social structures. Missing from our current literature is how the ranges within social contexts shape and individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Daly, 2021).

Second, Sherman, Lerner, Renshon, Ma-Kellams and Joel (2015) clearly demonstrate that those with high social status have greater understanding of the social structure. This greater insight of social structures produces the catalyst for greater empathetic understanding with those who have less social status and power within an organization.

Third, in a more practical matter, the linkage and impact of social structure on the personality can more clearly inform policies and interventions that improved social outcomes. These social outcomes include micro enterprises such as psychotherapy but also include macro-outcomes such as community organizing to advocate for issues like environmental responsibility (Daly, 2021).

Fourth, linking social structure to personality becomes a catalyst for a deeper understanding of social inequality and social justice. Marson (2023) demonstrates that linking social structure to personality illuminates social inequality and racial tensions.

Origin of Linking Social Structure to Personality

The catalyst for the desire to link social structure with personality can be traced back to Albert Einstein. Einstein's (1905) pursuit and vision of a unified field theory exploded within the academic community during the 1930's. It was a time of great scientific optimism. The concept of a unified theory of the physical world filtered into the social sciences. In particular, evidence suggests that Einstein influenced Talcott Parsons. Parsons incorporated Einstein's concept of relativity into a sociological framework when he demonstrated how Einstein's idea of the interdependence of space and time could be applied to the social structure. It is apparent that Parsons used these concepts to develop his theory of action which emphasized the interdependence of different elements within a social structure. In addition, Parson drew analogies between the physical world and social systems. Embedded within Parsons' thoughts is his acceptance of Einstein's view that physical systems were governed by laws of causality. As a result, Parsons concluded that social systems were governed by norms and values that shape human behavior (Parsons, 1937).

Based on these Einsteinian notions of interconnectedness, Parsons realized that if a unified field theory of human behavior existed, there must a theoretical link between social structure theory and personality theory. This linkage was an imperative for a unified field theory of human behavior. In essence, the linkage between social structure and personality became a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of a grand theory of human behavior. For decades, the mission of many sociology scholars was to search for this linkage between social structure and personality in the similar manner as physicists pursue the integration of the theory of general relativity with quantum mechanics.

Disenchantment with Linking Social Structure to Personality

Historically, one can easily recognize a scholarly drive to establish a linkage between social structure theory and psychological theory. The flagships for this endeavor included the works of Bates and Harvey (1975), Cohen (1961), Elder (1973), Parsons (1937/1964) and Starr (1974). Back as far as the 1930s, we can see the instruction of material related to linking personality with social structure in college catalogs. In fact, occasionally one can find courses on the graduate level with titles such as "Social Structure and Personality." Of course, the fountainhead for the search for unified theory of human behavior is the work of Parsons (1937).

In the late 1980s we began to see a decline of interest in systematically addressing the topic of linking social structure to personality (House, 1981; House & Mortimer, 1990; McLeod & Lively, 2004). The catalyst for this disinterest emerged from writings that were hypercritical of Parsons' pursuit of a unified theory within the social sciences (Treviño, 2020). Today, through the use of artificial intelligence, no courses in sociology could be found on the graduate or undergraduate levels that exclusively deal with the linkage between social structure and personality. However, we do find sections within courses that address social structure and personality but only in undergraduate courses.

The amount of literature rejecting the concept of a unified field theory within the behavioral sciences is overwhelming (Blumer, 1956; Gouldner, 1970; Mills, 1959). The primary issue limiting the process of linking social structure to personality is the failure to recognize one critical assumption. In order to link social structure and personality, the prerequisite is a unified theory of sociology and a unified theory of psychology. In both disciplines, we can identify theory textbooks. If one examines the table of contents of any of these books, when will immediately recognize that both disciplines have a wide assortment of theories. There is no single theory that unifies sociology. There is no single theory that unifies psychology.

Most of these theories in both psychology and sociology have proven the test of time, but nevertheless no theory in either sociology or psychology can capture the theoretical parameters that embrace the totality of the discipline. Paralleling Einstein's failed efforts to produce a unified field theory within physics, the gradual realization emerged that a unified theory of human behavior was recognized as an unlikely event. However, there is no need to surrender the possibility of linking

Stephen M. Marson PhD ACSW - Middle Range Theory as a Source for Linking Personality to Social Structure
social structure and personality. Theories of the middle range appeared to be a solid foundation for this type of linking.

Middle Range Theories for Linking Social Structure to Personality

Despite the harsh criticisms of a unified field theory of human behavior, in some circles within the sociology community and in psychological social psychology, linking social structure with personality continues to be perceived as an imperative (Antonoplis, 2024; Jokela, 2017; MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021; Schnittker, 2013). Historically, the work of linking social structure to personality was under the purview of sociology. However, in our current climate, we see major sources in the arena of psychology that has established goals of linking personality with social structure (MacLachlan & McVeigh, 2021). These authors, both in sociology and psychology, offer a call to arms and encouragement, but afford no guidelines for research or theory construction.

The pathway to the successful linkage of social structure to personality may fall within Merton's vision of "theories of the middle range." Merton (1949) defined theories of the middle range as...theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during your day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior social organization and social change (p. 39, emphasis added).

In reading Merton's original work, most scholars will emphasize his commentary after his definition of "theories of the middle range." His general intent has been interpreted as an effort to expand sociological knowledge within specialty areas. These areas would include family, juvenile delinquency, gerontology, reference groups, social mobility, role conflict, etcetera. One could attribute Merton as the catalyst for sociologists to pursue specialty areas of research. That is, to acquire an in-depth understanding of these specialty areas. However, one needs to take a very close look at Merton's original definition. Within his definition he includes the criteria of employing theories of the middle range to develop a unified theory.

In scouring the literature for criticisms of Parsons' proposal for a unified theory field theory, one will consistently find Merton (1949) to be cited. For decades, sociology students have been taught that Parsons' student, Robert Merton, had misgivings of the entire enterprise of constructing a grand theory. In a close reading of Merton's work, it becomes clear that Merton did not reject the notion of a grand theory but rather he thought that a viable pathway to a unified field theory of human behavior would emerge from the building blocks of middle range theories. The question we must ask is:

Can middle range theories be employed as a mechanism to link social structure to personality?

The answer is yes. In addition, we must not forget that Parsons is known as the father of Medical Sociology based on his work of the "sick role" (Willis, 2015). Parsons' work in Medical Sociology clearly falls within the realm of middle range theory.

One critical characteristic of sociological theory that inhibits linkage to psychological theory is the absence of feelings. For example, suicide is an emotionally draining experience for the person. Yet, within Durkheim's (1897) study of suicide, the human emotions that are abundant within the suicide process are neither analyzed nor mentioned. In fact, acknowledgements of feelings within the human experience are rarely mentioned within the context of any sociological theory. Human feelings are the centerpiece of most psychological theory (behavioralism is one exception). A feeling component is a necessary condition for the linkage of social structure personality. Since the "feeling" component was originally Parsons' (1964) concept, following is an example that he would appreciate.

In their study, Marson, Lillis and Dovyak (2024) employ Durkheim's Suicide: A Study of Sociology as a theory of the middle range. The authors analyze Durkheim's four concepts (anomic, fatalism, egotism and altruism) within the context of role theory. Durkheim's four environmental conditions are unambiguously fertile soil for unsavory situations in which emotionally draining social role change is the outcome. Within role theory, human emotions exist. Different emotions emerge

Stephen M. Marson PhD ACSW - Middle Range Theory as a Source for Linking Personality to Social Structure

from the type of role change which is linked to Durkheim's macro concepts. The problematic emotions that are embedded within the role occupant becomes a key component for the delivery of psychotherapy. This analytic process demonstrates that at least some middle range theories have the capacity to link social structure to personality and provide a basis for psychotherapy and the possibility of a grand theory.

The Present and Future

In the final analysis, we accept the position that it is not humanly possible to pull together the totality of middle range theories to construct a unified field theory of human behavior. However, such an endeavor is possible for artificial intelligence. In studying artificial intelligence, we have concluded that the employment of artificial intelligence to link social structure with personality is a reasonable possibility with today's technology. This linkage would provide the basis for artificial intelligence to facilitate the creation of a grand unified theory of human behavior.

The process of employing artificial intelligence to construct a grand unified theory of human behavior would be a herculean task. Two particular herculean tasks would be required for this effort. Both of these tasks would require a person who has an advanced understanding of theory construction and an advanced understanding of the workings of artificial intelligence.

The first task would require knowledge of the databases in which narratives and data are housed. The issue is not merely having access, but a deep understanding of how the various databases function within the technical realm. The second task would require the technologist to have the skills for training artificial intelligence to analyze the output from the various databases. Both tasks are extremely complex and would require an enormous amount of time. In addition, based on the current state of computer memory, the platform for the artificial intelligence would require an enormous amount of electric power.

SUMMARY

Early sociology was optimistic and confident that with the scientific approach that informed it, the social world of humans, ranging from small group human interactions to large societal changes could be understood, and even improved. Embodied in that hope for some theorists was the search for a grand unified theory that would link social structure with personality. However, interest began waning in the 1980's. Interest is burgeoning again as middle range theories can be understood to bridge sociological theory to psychological theory.

The current era also presents theorists and researchers with amazing technological advancements that could provide for the collation of all written and published sociological and sociological adjacent works. This would help modern theorists in compiling and then finessing out the components of all theories to compose a grand unified theory. Though individual theorists may enjoy decades in pursuit of their individual research interests, and there are innumerable theorists, past and present. Edited works seek to combine the best theories, or those of similar nature or scope, but those represent a small subset of the overall theoretical contributions that have been made.

The technology of artificial intelligence would allow for the entirety of published sociological and psychological thought to be organized into coherent and rich summaries, and then from those theories we can begin to extrapolate a grand unified theory. The value of such repository of theory and research is undeniable. The humanity of so much effort and so much work can only be fully discerned with the help of technology. The linkages, patterns, and theoretical insights of such an undertaking would be invaluable, important, and timely. This paper argues that linking social structure to personality is important and that middle range theory provides the theoretical bridging. Compiling all middle range theory and deduction of a grand unified theory is beyond the scope of a single researcher -- or many. Artificial intelligence provides the tools to allow researchers to really and truly begin this unprecedented endeavor.

One word of caution. If artificial intelligence can be successfully employed to construct a unified field theory of the human experience, a particularly fun part of the social sciences will

Stephen M. Marson PhD ACSW - Middle Range Theory as a Source for Linking Personality to Social Structure disappear. There will be many jobs for interpretation, application, and assessment, but this part of the exciting search could be well over.

REFERENCES

- Antonoplis, S. (2024). Studying personality and social structure. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12932>
- Bates, F. L. & Harvey, C.C. (1975). *The structure of social systems*. Garden Press.
- Blumer, H. (1956). Sociological analysis and the "variable". *American Sociological Review*, 21(6), 683-690.
- Cohen, Y. A. (1961). *Social structure and personality: A casebook*. Holt, Reinhart & Winston.
- Daly, M. (2021). Personality traits and social structure. In M. MacLachlan & J. McVeigh (Eds.), *Macropsychology: A population science for sustainable development goals* (pp. 63–85). Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- Durkheim, E. (1897). *Suicide: A study of sociology*. Free Press.
- Einstein, A. (1905). On the electrodynamics of moving bodies. *Annalen der Physik*, 17(10), 891-921.
- Elder, G.H. (1973). *Linking the social structure and personality*. Sage.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1970). *The coming crisis of western sociology*. Basic Books.
- House, J. S. (1981). Social structure and personality. In M. Rosenberg & R. Turner (Eds.), *Sociological perspectives on social psychology* (pp. 525–561). Basic Books.
- House, J. S., & Mortimer, J. (1990). Social structure and the individual: Emerging themes and new directions. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 53(2), 71–80.
- Jokela, M. (2017). Personality and Social Structure. *European Journal of Personality*, 31(3), 205-207. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2106>
- MacLachlan, M., & McVeigh, J. (2021). *Macropsychology: A population science for sustainable development goals*. Springer eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50176-1>
- McLeod, J. D., & Lively, K. J. (2004). Social structure and personality. In J. D. Delamater (Ed.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 77–102). Kluwer/Plenum.
- Marson, S.M. (2023). Recommendations for the Study of Human Diversity. Presented at the 39th National and 5th International Congress of National Day of Social Workers. March 9 (online hosted in Iran).
- Marson, S. M., Lillis, J.P. & Dovyak, P. (2024). Linking Durkheim’s Suicide to psychotherapy. *Durkheimian Studies*, 28(1), 70-88.
- Merton, Robert K. (1949). *Social theory and social structure*. Free Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Parsons, T. (1937). *The structure of social action*. McGraw-Hill.
- Parsons, T. (1964). *Social structure and personality*. Free Press.
- Schnittker, J. (2013). Social structure and personality. In *Handbooks of sociology and social research* (pp. 89–115). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6772-0_4
- Sherman, G. D., Lerner, J. S., Renshon, J., Ma-Kellams, C., & Joel, S. (2015). Perceiving others’ feelings. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(5), 559–569.
- Starr, J. M. (1974). *Social structure and social personality*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Treviño, A.J. (2020). Pounding on Parsons: how criticism undermined the reputation of sociology’s Incurable theorist. In P. Kivisto (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of social theory*. (pp. 179-204). Volume 1, Chapter 10, Cambridge University Press.
- Willis, E. (2015). Talcott Parsons: His legacy and the sociology of health and illness. In: Collyer, F. (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of social theory in health, illness and medicine*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978113735562113>