The Missing link Agency: Contribution from social theory and critical realism

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between agency, social structure and resilience. In the resilience literature, agency has been recently highlighted as the key factor determining the adaptive capacity and reducing the vulnerability. Researchers have identified that there are three dimensions which constitute adaptive capacity, i.e. resource, social structure, and agency. Of these aspects, the resource aspect has been most well-studied, whereas; the agency aspect is the least studied. This paper aims to open the ‘black-box’ of agency by introducing some of social theories, especially that of Bourdieu and on critical realist theories, especially that of Elder-Vass and Archer.

The paper argues that agency is both constrained and enabled by the social structure. The social structure is constraining agency because to economise their cognitive and social energy, actors act according to the social role that are given by the social structure. We term this as habitus aspect of agency a la Bourdieu. At the same time, we argue that agency is enabled by social structure. When actor cannot obtain an outcome that they expected by acting according to their social role that they are given, they start to reflexively deliberate over the social structure. This is termed as reflexive aspect of agency and this is when the ‘invisible’ power relations often inherent in the social structure become ‘visible’ in the eyes of many actors.

And this leads us to the second point of the paper. Some of the resilience literature brings forward the notion of ‘collective agency’. The paper argues that fundamentally, groups or collectives cannot possess an agency as they cannot possess intentionality. Although in some cases, especially in tight-knit communities, it seems as if groups are thinking and acting on behalf of individuals, however it is important to note that it is some individuals from the groups which are acting on behalf of other individuals in the group or collective. The term ‘collective agency’ is dangerous since it ignores the fact the power relations involved in the community, i.e. there are individuals who have the power to act on behalf of the whole group, i.e. the dominant group, and there are individuals who are deprived of such a power, marginalised group. Rather than using the term ‘collective agency’, we argue that it should be considered as enabling aspect of social structure so that the constraining aspect of the social structure can be taken into account in the same way. By doing so, we want to take into account the issue of power relations in building adaptive capacity and resilience and ‘re-politicise’ the debate of capacity building.

Keywords: Resilience, Agency, adaptive capacity, institution

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