Causality and social ontology - On relational structures and cognitive rationality

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Abstract
In this paper I discuss how modern sociological theory proposes social ontological frameworks that explicitly or implicitly employ views on causality that are qualitatively different from a positivist notion of causality. Thereby the concept of causality is allowed back in sociology after the interpretivist showdown with positivism in the mid twentieth century threatened to eliminate the concept of causality from sociology. I discuss the approaches of newer middle range theory, realism, and Pierre Bourdieu. I propose to combine Raymond Boudon’s model of the actor based on cognitive rationality with a relational structural approach. In regards to the latter I argue in favour of Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus compared to the notion of a stratified reality presented by realism. I exemplify by discussing social theory of inequality and lifechances, where the theory of habitus and the theory of rational action constitute major approaches. Thus, I propose a synthesis aiming at a continued development of the social ontological frameworks in sociology.

1 Introduction
The concept of causality has played an important role in sociological controversies. Positivism succeeded in leaving a significant mark on the concept of causality in the first half of the 20th century by proposing its nomothetical notion of causality. Interpretive approaches critical towards positivism, however, more or less abandoned the concept of causality together with the rest of positivist vocabulary. This showdown with positivism threatened to push aside causality as a central concept of sociological thought, in spite of the fact that classical sociology long before the heydays of positivism had outlined seeds of conducting causal analysis that pointed beyond positivism. The pressure on the concept of causality was even amplified by other major contributions within the philosophy of science. Especially Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigms catalysed the linguistic turn towards an epistemological turn of social philosophy, implying that the discussion of social ontology was somewhat thrown into the shade in the later 20th century, to the advantage of scrutiny of epistemological problems. This further added to putting the concept of causality in the shades.

Through a study of modern sociological theory, however, it becomes clear that new ways of conceiving causality has emerged that brings the notion of causality in sociology to places radically different than within positivism. The question of how to make use of the concept of causality evidently involves both ontological and epistemological aspects. In this paper, I focus on ontological aspects of causality from the point of view that causal analysis in sociology relies on assumptions about social
ontology. I discuss some major ontological frameworks that have been proposed in recent sociological theory with a focus on the notion of causality employed in these theories.

First, I discuss the line of thought outgoing from Robert Merton’s middle range theory and James Coleman’s revision of Merton where he puts forward the macro-micro-macro-model. Through this model the concept of causality translates into the analysis of transition mechanisms between the macro and micro level, on the micro level, and from micro level to macro level. John H. Goldthorpe carries on this line of thought and continues Coleman’s use of rational action theory in sociology. Particularly, I discuss Raymond Boudon’s modification of the rational model of actor by his use of cognitive model of the actor.

Second, I discuss the realist tradition, as it differs from the middle range tradition on major points. One is an assumption about relational social structures, and another is the use of an interpretive model of the actor. Within realism the concept of causality translates into social mechanisms that off-spring from the relational depth structure of reality mediated through social action.

The third line of thought I bring into play is that of Pierre Bourdieu. Generally, he does not put much emphasis on the notion of causality. This has probably to do with the distance he takes to positivist thinking and also to the middle range tradition. However, Bourdieu’s concepts also rely on ontological assumptions and explicitly he puts forward relational structural concepts through his concept of field. By emphasizing the homology between objective and cognitive structures through the concept of habitus he establishes another way of linking the macro and micro level.

A common denominator is that these approaches attempt to bridge major gaps in sociology between the macro- and microlevel, structure and action etc. They do so by combining different ontological building blocks in different ways, both when it comes to the structural concepts, the model of the actor and the link between them. On the basis of a discussion of the similarities and differences, finally I discuss possibilities and perspectives of integrating a relational structural approach with a cognitive model of the actor.

Finally, I discuss how the issues I have discussed can be exemplified within controversies in the sociology of inequality and lifechances. Thus, I discuss how the dividing lines between major approaches in modern sociology show within this field of research and briefly I try to illustrate the necessity of integrating elements of these approaches.

1 This point of view especially has been put forward by a number of realist philosophies, that might be seen partly as a reaction to the epistemological turn.
2 Causality and social ontology – on sociological analysis in modern theory

The focus in this section is on how to deploy causal explanation in sociology and especially I focus on what I prefer to call newer middle range sociology, realism and Bourdieu’s sociology, and how within these approaches a number of ontological building bricks are put together in different ways, mainly when it comes to different concepts of social structures, different models of social actors and different ways of linking the macro and micro level.

2.1 Newer middle range theory - elaborating on the macro-micro-macro model

When Robert Merton put forward his proposal for middle range theory in sociology he criticized the tendencies to partly grand theorizing, partly the lack of social theory in many empirical studies. A major importance of Merton’s middle range approach was to catalyze the notion of social mechanisms and this mechanisms approach has inspired a range of positions that all emphasize that a focus on social mechanisms must be central to modern sociology (see Hedstrøm and Swedberg 1998).

Merton’s approach has been criticized for being weak in terms of social ontology, as discussed by Ray Pawson (2000). According to Pawson this to some extend was part of Merton’s effort to avoiding the pitfall of grand theorizing. The main criticism, however, has been on its rootness in structural functionalism. Merton’s concept of social mechanisms was linked to structural functionalism as social mechanisms was defined as ‘social processes that have designated consequences for designated parts of the social structure … [and] … produce a greater degree of order or less conflict than would obtain if these mechanisms were not called into play’ (Merton 1968: 43, 45).

The structural functionalism of Merton’s theories was criticized by James Coleman. He argued for the replacement of structural functionalism with a model of the actor. By employing the rational model of the actor, Coleman became one of the most important initiators of rational choice theory in sociology. Especially, Coleman argues that in order to make adequate explanations of social phenomena we have to address as well the social mechanisms that characterize the macro-to-micro-transition, the micro-micro-transition and the micro-to-macro-transition. Hence Coleman established the so-called macro-micro-macro model (see Coleman 1990).
The macro-to-micro transition involves elements that constitute conditions, interests and goals for individual action. Coleman emphasizes analysis of how the structure of positions that constitutes social organisation is brought into existence, and how individuals that fill out the positions are motivated, and how such a system of motivations are maintained. However, social structure does not determine actions of individuals, completely. Space for action is left open, which gives the actor the possibility to make choices. Coleman asserts that a rational choice model holds more explanatory power compared to supposing that the actor does not act rationally. In addition reducing the psychological complexity on the micro level leaves more room for the components of the model that describe the interplay between macro and micro level. Furthermore, the legitimacy of involving teleological explanations on the micro level is that the real interest of sociology is the analysis of social macro phenomena. According to Coleman, however, it is the micro-to-macro transition which poses the major challenge to sociology, as this stage of analysis is often not addressed properly. This third type of transition describes how individual action produces actions and characteristics of the system interdependently, thereby creating the context for future action. Also when it comes to the micro-to-macro transition social organisation is important, due to actions have different consequences depending on the social context of the actor and his or her structural position.

Coleman’s approach has inspired John H. Goldthorpe whom to some extend adopts Coleman’s model by claiming that causal explanations in sociology must consist of three stages (Goldthorpe 2000). First, social regularities on a macrolevel must be established by the use of statistical techniques. Like Max Weber, Goldthorpe sees such regularities as the starting point for the second stage of the analysis which is to specify hypothesis about underlying social mechanisms and processes that generate correlations. However, Goldthorpe adopts Coleman’s model of the actor grounded in rational choice. When it comes to the nature of assumptions on rationality Goldthorpe emphasises their analytical kind, by arguing that in their central tendency actions can be understood as rational. Thus, the action of a population of social actors is assumed to have common as well as non-common elements. The latter does not depart systematically from the former, and in the aggregate the non-common elements more or less eliminate each other, whereas the pattern evolving reflects the common aspects of social action. The third stage of analysis is that such explanations must be validated by testing whether they result in certain intended or non-intended patterns on an aggregated level.

Raymond Boudon has proposed a quite similar model of explanation which he labels the M = MmSM’ model. A macro sociological phenomenon M must be explained as a

\[^2\] Goldthorpe generally uses the term rational action theory rather than rational choice theory.
function $M(m)$ of individual actions that are functions $m(S)$ of a structure that makes up the situation of the social actors. Analytically this structure can be seen as a function $S(M')$ of a set of defined data $M'$ on a macro sociological level (Boudon 1986).

A difference, however, occurs when it comes to the model of the actor where Boudon demonstrates a 'softer' version of rational action theory by suggesting a cognitive model of rationality (Boudon 1998). Boudon claims that it is the cognitive and normative beliefs that actors hold about what is true or false, right or wrong, etc. - that is, their 'strong reasons' - that guide their action. Subsequently, these strong reasons must be the basis of the microanalysis rather than the utilitarian version of rational choice theory emphasising the more or less objective interests of the actor and the calculation of utility. Boudon employs the term of cognitive rationality to grasp such 'strong reasons'. In this respect Boudon opens the door to a more interpretive model of the actor compared to traditional rational action theory. In regards to the model of the actor Boudon brings us closer to a classical weberian position. However, by adding the cognitive dimension Boudon brings the notion of rationality further than implied in Weber’s distinction between goal-oriented and value-oriented rationality. The cognitive model of the actor does not eliminate the utilitarian one, as the utilitarian one can be seen as a special case of the cognitive model. Which kind of rationality applies actually depends on the structure of the situation in which action occurs, and therefore Boudon claims that we must abandon ideas of a universal model of the actor.

Also the way Boudon conceives social structure calls for commentary. Boudon cautions against a realist fallacy which he ascribes to structural approaches among others (Boudon 1986). Thus, he emphasises the distinction between reality and models of reality that the researcher presents, and he argues that an approach of sociological analysis focused on social mechanisms can help avoiding the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Hence, social mechanisms are not to be interpreted in a realist but rather an heuristic way. This also goes for his notion of social structure. Boudon criticises structuralist approaches for trying to reveal structural powers and trends in history which has contributed to complicate and distort the concept of causality. According to Boudon social structures are rather to be conceived of as combinations of caracteristica that tend to occur together, and so he refers to sets of structural data or macrosociological data as is the case in his model, refered to about as $M'$. Thus, Boudon’s concept of social structure is of an idealist (weberian) kind.

Such positions as the ones represented by Coleman, Goldthorpe, and Boudon might be named newer middle range theory or perhaps mechanismsbased approaches. A common denominator is the analytical distinction between different types of social mechanisms. This tripartition also holds the key to an understanding of the notion of causality implied within these approaches, as causality translates into the interplay
between the macro and micro level implied in these three general types of social mechanisms.

2.2 Realist ontology - on relational social structures

From a very different angle critical realism focuses on social mechanisms too. In the following I shall refer to a broad range of positions such as critical realism, transcendental realism etc. under the heading of realism and not go into details about differences between positions within the realist approach (Archer 1998, Danermark 2002).

According to realism reality is stratified. This implies a distinction between on the one hand the empirical domain reflecting events happening on the factual level, and on the other hand a deeper level of reality where social mechanisms generate the events that occur at the factual level. This distinction depends on the notion that social structure has causal powers offspringing from their relational character. Indeed, this is a different way of conceiving social structures than in the approaches of newer middle range theory.

According to realism social structures are defined as sets of internally related objects. A relation between A and B is internally related, if A would not be what A is, if B was not related to A, the way B actually is. The relation between A and B is symmetrical if the same applies for B. Social objects have causal power because of their relational structure. Thus, there is a necessary connection between the relational structure of an object and its causal properties.

However, only social action can be an effective cause. Causal social powers are mediated through social action, and they depend on how they are realized by social actors. Simultaneously actions are the releasing factors for and the effect of the generative mechanisms of social structures. Actions, however, are not determined by social structure, as actors possess the ability to reflection and to ascribe meaning to their actions. Steaming from their intentionality actors formulate projects of action, and structural relations can either advance or counteract these projects. Thus, social structures make possibilities and limits for action. Likewise action has the potential to reproduce or transform social structures. To understand action realism emphasizes an interpretive model of the actor and denounces the rational choice theory. The interpretivist approach is necessary to understand the intentionality of the actor. The interplay between social structure and social action implies that realism is about 'the uncovering of causal properties and the processes whereby social actions arise from the complex interaction of internally related mental dispositions, meanings, intentions, social contexts and structures (Ekström 1992: 107).
In addition, the interplay between social structure and action implies that the relation between causal properties and their effect is external and contextual, contrary to the internal relation between social structures and their causal properties. Thus social phenomena are characterized by open rather than closed conditions. Social mechanisms are not always released. When they are, they do not always produce the same effects. Often many social mechanisms operate at the same time and can reinforce or weaken each other. Factual events can be composed of the effects of different mechanisms. So causality has the character of tendencies that manifest themselves in a complex interplay with other tendencies. The causal powers of structural relations do not cease to exist even though they are not realized in a specific situation or are not realized in their purest form.

So, the realist tradition employs a notion of causality fundamentally different from the positivist concept of causality, which reduces causality to correlations between externally related phenomena in the domain of the factual. However, with its emphasis on the causal properties of relational social structure realism differ from the ontology of the middle range approaches, which, seen from the viewpoint of realism, do not distance themselves enough from positivism, since the middle range approaches do not grasp the relational depth structure of reality.

The assumption on stratified reality as well as the relational character of social structure are basically of an ontological kind. Thus, realism does not merely regard social mechanisms as a heuristic device in sociological analysis. Realism also differs from a weberian notion of causality. Like Weber the realist tradition emphasizes to analyse the processes behind statistical correlations, but in Weber’s sociology this analysis implies the uncovering of specific empirical meanings and relations. Furthermore theory and concept formation through the creation of idealtypes are heuristic devices to reveal such meanings and relations. Contrary to Weber, realism puts emphasis on the real relational nature of structural causal properties.

Evidently there is also an epistemological aspect of this, as we have to infer the existence of social mechanisms from representations of the events that occur on the factual level. This is where the interplay between theory and empirical material reaches crucial importance, and where realism claims that processes of abduction and especially retrodDUCTION are more important than induction and deduction. RetrodDUCTION implies to reconstruct the basic condition that makes a phenomenon into what it is, and inferring on the causal properties that make the phenomenon possible, thereby moving from the empirical and factual domain into the domain of a deeper lying reality.
2.3 Bourdieu - field and habitus

Also Bourdieu relies on a relational notion of social structure, but contrary to realism Bourdieu does not refer to a stratified reality. Instead he points to the homology of the social world in it first and second degree, that is between relationally defined social positions and the habitus of the agents. Rarely Bourdieu makes use of the concept of causality, mainly because of his criticism towards positivism and also towards the middle range tradition which he claims relies on a unidimensional social ontology based on a naive realism (Bourdieu 1984 (1979), Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Bourdieu employs his concept of field to grasp the relational character of social structure, and he defines a field as ”…a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). In every field a struggle takes place about the capital that gives access to the specific goods that are at stake in the particular field. Capital only exists in relation to a field and its spreading also outlines the structure of the field. The actual and potential situation of social actors in relation to the distribution of capital in a field, enables them to fill out certain positions and give them power by controlling of the production and reproductive mechanisms of capital in the field.

According to Bourdieu a tendency towards homology exists between the objective positions and cognitive systems of dispositions, such as schemata of perception, appreciation and action that make up the habitus of social actors (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Habitus are ’corporeal’ dispositions and by this Bourdieu especially underlines their prereflexive character as opposed to the concept of rationality we find in the rational choice model of the actor. Instead Bourdieu uses the notion of practical rationality to describe the \textit{practique} of social agents. This notion of \textit{practique} is opposed to behaviour or action. Thereby he tries to distance himself from both structuralism and the existentialist voluntarism which were prominent positions in French social philosophy at the time Bourdieu launched his theory.

By using the concept of habitus Bourdieu develops Durkheim’s thesis that cognitive systems derive from social systems, where Durkheim failed to establish the causal link that explained why cognitive systems of classification take shape (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 12). Critics, however, has claimed that by using the concept of habitus Bourdieu rather obscures the relation between social structure and action. Thus, Boudon (1998: 176) has criticized habitus for being a black box and Axel van den Berg has claimed, that Bourdieu just reformulates Coleman’s micro-macro problem and only moves the black box down one level, which still leaves open the question what make actors choose one alternative instead of another, within the limits set by habitus. Thus, critics have pointed to a structural bias in Bourdieu’s theory and questioned whether Bourdieu’s use of the notion of habitus is too deterministic and leaves too little reflexivity to the actor (Jenkins 1992). However, Bourdieu often stresses that this is not
the case and points to the generative character he ascribes to human habitus. So habitus can generate many different social practiques but they occur within the limits of the cognitive structures that are incorporations of the social structures that have produced habitus in the first place. Bourdieu emphasizes that he does not deny that individuals face choices and take initiatives and desicions. However, he also claims that rational desicion-making is nothing but a makeshift aimed "at covering up the misfirings of habitus" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 24). Thus, the downplaying of rational action is a major point in dispute in Bourdieus social theory.

3 Cognitive and practical rationality - dual modes

The approaches that I have discussed so far have all in common an attempt to avoid the reductionism that otherwise have been predominant in much of mid twentieth century sociology. However, criticisms of reductionism also prevail between middle range sociology, realism and Bourdieu. Thus, the criticism against middle range sociology for implying a naive realism by not theorizing the relational character of social structure, and the criticism by middle range sociologists against Bourdieu for downplaying rational action and vice versa. Despite of the critique of unidimensionality even the Coleman model implies a way of concieving causal relationships that points away from the positivist notion of causality by suggesting that sociological analysis has to aim for establishing the social mechanisms that explain macro social phenomena. In comparison, however, the realist tradition implies ontological foundations for engaging in causal analysis very different from the positivist notion of causality. The same applies to Bourdieus approach which shows similarities to the realist tradition yet major differences concerning theoretical concepts such as field and habitus. However, it is regretable that Bourdieus strong rejection of positivism and middle range theory keeps him from developing a new concept of causality related to his concepts.

The discussion of the approaches shows a number of different basic ontological assumptions are combined in various ways. When the ontological frameworks of these approaches are decomposed we find different structural concepts, models of the actor, and ways of combining these components. Often these approaches present themselves as almost incommensurable, which is the case when Bourdieu referring to rational choice theory claims Jon Elster to be 'the unfortunate hero of this untenable paradigm’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 126), or when Goldthorpe rejects that actors are subject to "systematic influences of a (sub) cultural kind, whether operating through class differences in values, norms, or beliefs … or through more obscure ‘subintentional’ processes ” (Goldthorpe 2000: 184), by which he obviously refers to Bourdieus theory of habitus. However, it is important, in a continous search to develop the ontological frameworks available as tools of sociological analysis, to challenge the boundaries
between these approaches. One way of doing so is by developing new frameworks of ontological concepts. Another more modest ambition is to try ongoingly to recombine the building bricks of leading theories in new ways.

Recently Cynthia Lins Hamlin (2002) has critizised the notion of social structure in Boudon’s sociology, yet she argues that his cognitive model of the actor is his most significant contribution to sociology. She elaborates on the possibility of combining Boudon’s cognitive model of the actor with the realist relational structural approach. So, the theory of cognitive rationality that Boudon proposes is regarded to have advantages in terms of the model of the actor, but requires qualifications of realist structural concepts, according to Hamlin.

A weaker link in realism and Boudon’s approach, however, is the relation between the structural concepts and the model of the actors, the link Bourdieu develops with his theory of habitus. The critique of the habitus theory of just moving down the black box one step does not seem convincing, compared to leaving out such an internal link merely by stating that structures set limits and possibilities of action and that action reproduces and transforms social structure. At least Bourdieu takes the analysis one step further in his theory about the relations between objective structures and the cognitive matrixes of perception, classification and social practique. Perhaps the level of the habitus is exactly how far it makes sense to go\(^3\).

Similar to Hamlin’s attempt to combine Boudons model of the actor with the structural concepts of realism, I think it could be interesting to try to combine Boudon’s model of cognitive rationality with Bourdieus concepts of field and habitus. However, such an attempt point beyond these sociologists own intentions and of course such an attempt is of a tentative kind. The excersise demands the modification or widening of the concept of habitus and practical rationality from the prereflective and bodily domain to the domain of cognitive rationality. And the move might not be as big as it seems since habitus is already a highly cognitive phenomenon, as Bourdieu underlines by employing notions as cognitive structures and matrixes.

The arguments for a synthesis may be found, unexpectedly, from our neighbouring discipline of psychology and more specifically the psychology of cognition, which examines the mechanisms of perception and action in terms of psychology and neurobiology. According to Ulric Neisser (1976), human cognition makes use of schemata by which we economise mental capacity. This is done by storing redundant information in the form of schemata of a general kind, instead of storing the specific content of information. Also when it comes to perception and action we make use of

\(^3\) Bourdieu rejects establishing general frameworks and emphasizes the concepts make sence in practical reasearch, however, Bourdieu often discusses these concepts in a general way (see eg Bourdieu 2000)
such schemata, and this makes possible a state of 'being' in the world drawing on the generating capacity of these schemata. This theory of schemata bears resemblance to Bourdieu's habitus concept. Thus, an 'automatisation' occurs when it comes to usual, or one might add habitual, action. According to Neisser, however, this mental economy also provides the ground for reflexive attention to be directed towards more important and acute stimuli. He claims that we can switch from this state of 'being' in the world into a state of more conscious activity which involves acting on what we know and which involves reflexivity. This change can happen when faced with a problem, or on the basis of other stimuli. This notion on reflexivity points beyond the concepts of habitus and practique and in sociological theory finds resemblance in Boudon's cognitive model of the actor. However, Neisser also claims that such changes happen according to predispositions to react upon certain impulses rather than others, and this dispositional character of the changes bears resemblance to Bourdieu's habitus theory. A crucial point is that when it comes to these modes it is not an either/or but rather a both/and. Neurobiological research (Hougaard 2002) suggests that these different states of mind can be measured by brain activity in different parts of the brain, but they also show a degree of momentary reciprocity, since activity in different brain centers tend to repress one another one mode being prevalent at a particular time. However, both modes are ground modes and switches happen many times during a day.

Knowledge of such processes on a micro level deeper than we usually theorize in sociology, provides a ground for moving beyond the antagonism between a practical and a cognitive rationality in the sense that in real life we switch between these states of mind or states of action. This further underlines Boudon's claim that there is no such thing as a universal model of the actor. However, the insight from psychology suggests that as much as the concepts of habitus and practical rationality requires to incorporate a theory of cognitive rationality, the theory of cognitive rationality also needs to incorporate the notion of habitus and practical rationality.

A further problem to be addressed is the relation between rationality and social structure. As just mentioned, Boudon argues that we have to abandon a uniform model of the actor since the kind of rationality (where he refers to the cognitive or the utilitarian modes) that characterizes an actor depends on the structure of the situation. Following the argument above one might add that rationality holds a dispositional component, and so rationality must be linked to the structural concepts eg. of field and capital. This implies that rationality like habitus must be seen in relation to the capital and strategies of a field. It might be reasonable to assume that certain structural positions and paths produces certain modalities of rationality. So, (individual) rationality is to a certain extend also a social construct, and hence variable. This also means that rationality is a resource or means of strategic action formation and make it possible to obtain advantages in the ongoing struggles in a field. This implies that
manoeuvring in the field are enhanced by rationality. That some agents master this to a
higher degree than others can be explained in a similar dispositional optique as the
relationship between habitus and social practise.

A reason why such a dispositional approach to rationality might meet resistance can
be explained according to the same argument by which Bourdieu rejects theories relying
on assumptions of the rationality of actors. His argument is that an intellectual,
scholastic understanding of rationality has been the dominant discourse about rationality
and that intellectuals and scientists tend to universalise their own notion of rationality
(Bourdieu 2000). Thus, a dispositional approach to rationality on the basis of a notion of
cognitive rationality has to fight the same universalist discourse of rationality.

4 Theory of social inequality and lifechances – one of the battlefields

Evidently such diving lines between major approaches of modern sociological theory
manifest themselves not only on a general metatheoretical level, but also in various
domains of social theory. In this last section of my paper I will discuss how the dividing
lines that I have adressed so far manifest within theory of life chances and social
inequality. I briefly illustrate how the need to break down barriers between theories can
also be established from below, supported by empirical findings.

In the 1970s and 1980s theories of social mobility emerged that superseeded earlier
quite unfruitful and antagonistic clashes between liberal theory of industrialism and
neomarxist theory. The former claimed that industrialisation would lead to increasing
rates of social mobility in an ‘open’ modern society, whereas the latter maintained the
proletarization of the working class through ever increasing control of working life. It
appears that these theories suffered from a tendency to heavy nomothetic prophesy on
the evolution of society. However, theories emerged that were open to historic
contingency. These included the theories of Boudon, Goldthorpe and Bourdieu, but also
the realist tradition presented major contributions to this field of study.

In the 1970s large quantities of data on social mobility were collected from various
countries. The data lead Goldthorpe to conclude that there seem to be tendency for an
increase of absolute mobility rates for all social classes, in various countries. However,
at the same time relative mobility rates were amazingly constant. This means that for
instance when it comes to education, there is a tendency for the absolute chances of
obtaining higher education to be on the rise for both persons with higher and lower class
backgrounds, but when comparing odds of obtaining higher versus lower education
relative between different social classes the pattern rather shows stability. This means
that relative inequality in lifechances is maintained. In correspondence to these
empirical patterns Goldthorpe proposed a theory of so-called relative risk aversion,
suggesting that youngsters generally try to avoid ending up in a social position lower
than their parents. Thus, young people with a higher social background opt for higher education to secure their position to a larger degree than youngsters from a lower social background. For the latter taking further education might even involve the risk of failure whereas opting for vocational education might suffice or even improve chances of maintaining the social position of their parents.

Goldthorpe’s theory to a large extent build upon a similar theory put forward by Boudon in the mid 1970s (Boudon 1974), though it did not include similar empirical evidence as the impressive crossnational studies conducted by Goldthorpe (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). Boudon made a distinction between primary and secondary effects of stratification. The primary effects describe differences in skills and abilities that are ascribed to different class backgrounds whereas the secondary effects go beyond such difference in skills. Instead the secondary effects can be conceptualised as consequences of social distances that have to be overcome in order to obtain a certain class position or level of education. Such distances involve different costs depending on class of origin. According to Boudon these costs can be both economic and social. The latter may be due to loss of social relations among youngsters from low social class when they enter higher education compared to youngsters from higher social class. So, Boudon introduced one of the first crucial attempts to combine rational action theory and theory of stratification and social mobility. The first versions of his theory was formulated in a utilitarian way, and only later he introduced his cognitive model of rationality. Within this line of thought Boudon aimed at explaining how young people and families from different social classes makes different decisions about education that explains prevailing differentials in educational attainment and social position. Boudon also examined these processes in the aggregate following Coleman’s emphasis on micro-to-macro mechanisms and analysed how an increasing demand for further education in all classes in combination with expansions of educational systems initiates a process of educational inflation, where status expectations following a given level of education inevitably falls.

Likewise, it was in the 1970s that Bourdieu launched his central works in the same domain of sociology. Characteristic to Bourdieu’s theory was his denouncement of much of the vocabulary on social stratification and mobility research, and the concepts of field and habitus added new basic concepts to inequality research. Bourdieu criticised prevailing theory for being based on a unidimensional ontology and for not leaving behind the traits of positivism that according to Bourdieu still were found in the middle range branch of sociology and in the empirically oriented mobility research. He pointed to the complex morphological tranformations that through reproduction and conversion strategies overwhelmingly reproduce the advantages of dominating social groups. This especially takes place through the sorting in the educational system mainly adjusted to the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes. This also had methodological
implications where Bourdieu criticised some of the statistical methods (e.g. regression techniques) of prevalent mobility research. Instead Bourdieu made use of the correspondence analysis as a means of analysing the complex interplay between social positions and dispositions (Bourdieu 1984 (1979)). Interestingly when looking at some of the statistical material he uses in other works some of this resembles the empirical material found in Goldthorpe’s works. In the appendix of Reproduction (1990 (1970) Bourdieu examines precisely the same relative chances of achieving certain levels of education according to class background, though Bourdieu never uses the concepts of relative versus absolute mobility rates we find in Goldthorpe’s theory. This leaves the impression that at least on the quantitative side it comes down to the same types of data, and the differences rather lie in the theorization of the empirical material, that is in the ontological frameworks applied, and so in the interpretation of the underlying sociohistoric processes.

However, the clash between rational choice theory and habitus theory did not conquer the entire stage of mobility and inequality research. From the perspective of realism Margaret Archer has pointed to the fact that none of the remaining theories explain why educational systems actually expand. Hence, she presents a theory about how this expansion takes place as an irrational and unintended consequence of an intricate interplay of forces made up by the state, professions, interest groups, parents etc. Once again the result is inflation of credentials.

Now, the fact that different theories compete about explaining empirical material is of course a general condition of science, so a cry for a crisis in sociology should not be exaggerated. My previous discussion shows, however, that the different approaches rely on quite different assumptions regarding social ontology. As I have outlined I propose an integration or a recombination of some of the ontological building blocks of these theories. Preliminary empirical research supports this attempt.

As already mentioned, when it comes to explaining why the so-called relative mobility rates Goldthorpe points to his theory of relative risk aversion. He also specifies components that supposedly have the power of influencing and changing the stability in relative mobility rates. This is, especially, changes in the real distribution of resources between social classes. He shows that there are signs that in a country like Sweden a period of increasing distributional equality was accompanied by narrowing the gap in relative mobility rates, a tendency that however faded with the fading of progress in income equalization. I examine whether similar trends can be established in Denmark and preliminary results show that this might be the case. However, Danish data also shows a inertness in mobility rates that points beyond income distributional effects. To some extend this might be explained from within the rational approach, by claiming that as differentials in payoff between e.g. skilled jobs and long term education narrow, it might not be rational to opt for further education. Thus there is a countereffect of
income equalization when it comes to the influence on social mobility. However why do educational choices then still show such a highly stratified pattern. The lack in randomness of educational choice according to social class suggests that other forces are at stake, and we have to adopt to dispotional analysis by using the concept of habitus to understand this. Bourdieu provides insight to how these processes incribe in struggles between social groups about control of capital within various fields, and how this can be understood as reproduction and reconversion strategies of different social groups. However, the habitus approach experience difficulties in explaining educational decisions on the micro level, and the inclusion of Boudons theory of primary and secondary effect of stratification combined with his concept of cognitive rationality can strengthen an understanding of these processes.

The shortcomings of these theories point to the necessity for further integration between them. In this paper I have tried to outline a possible pathway for such an attempt on the general level of social ontology, by combining a theory of field and habitus with a theory of cognitive rationality.
**Literature**


