

Duality of Structure

Do individuals create society or does society create individuals?

Anthropologists and sociologists have been trying to find the answer to this question, and no one has come to an agreement about it. Everyone knows that society is made up of people, and that it can only exist and function with those people. At the same time, it is also true that society has an effect on its people. You are more likely to find people who are similar to you or live similar lives as you in your society. That is because you are all raised similarly in a society.

If all people are raised similarly in a society, then are those people making choices for themselves? Or are they just choosing from the choices society gives them? Some people say that a society limits the choices an individual can make, and gives them a path they have to take. However, most people don't like that idea, because there are many choices we make everyday that don't feel like they have been decided by society. Do we have choice, then? How does society limit our choices?

For example, think about your religion. You join your religion at birth, because your family believes in that religion. Most religions have rituals or activities that allow you to confirm or reaffirm your belief and fully join the community using your own free will, like when Catholics have Confirmation. They are baptised at birth, but at the Confirmation ceremony, they choose to accept and stay Catholic. Even if you didn't choose your religion as a child, continuing to practice your religion is a choice you are making. If you change religions, that is also a choice. But why did you make that choice? Was it because you believed in your religion, or because of pressures from society?

You have no say in what religion you join, and being part of this religion gives you rules to follow in your everyday life, like what you can eat and wear. These rules have an effect on the choices you make. For example, if you are Muslim, you would only eat Halal food, and if you are Catholic during Lent, you would stay away from meat. You still make a choice on what you eat, but you are limited by the rules of your religion.

If you can make choices about your everyday life, but are limited by your society, then does that mean that society creates individuals, and we have no control over our society? Many philosophers and anthropologists disagree with this. They believe that individuals can change society just as much as society changes individuals, if not more. Societies stay the way they do because people stick to the status quo, or do what is expected of them. But if people were to go against the status quo, things would change.

For example, Greta Thunberg, a 17-year old girl from Sweden, has become a very popular activist in the last few years. Greta was a normal teenager who used her voice to speak out on environmental issues and climate change. She started by doing a school strike for climate change outside the Swedish parliament,

and then other students followed her example. Today, she is one of the leaders of the fight against climate change, and is one of the most recognized environmentalists in the world. Many people, both young and old, were inspired by her and quickly joined the battle for the environment, helping out in their own small ways, like donating money, being careful about waste, and raising awareness.

An individual going against the status quo does not always change society in obvious ways, but a group of people could. That first person who goes against the status quo may not be successful, but still changes society because they open doors to the people after them. Greta Thunberg alone might not have made any change, but when her actions encouraged other children to follow her lead, together they began to make change. Seeing someone be brave and behaving in a way that is unexpected can inspire others to do the same. As more and more people agree to act in a different way, that way slowly becomes the norm, and society changes.

Now we see why anthropologists and sociologists have not been able to answer the question of whether individuals create society or society creates individuals. Most have agreed that both need to happen, and that we cannot talk about one without the other. Society needs individuals for it to exist, but individuals need society for their lives to be meaningful. When an individual is born into a society, there are rules, norms, and limitations that already exist. The individual follows these rules and is shaped by the society, but the society is also shaped by the individuals that live in it, and the choices they make, whether they are within society's limitations or not. Human action and social institutions are constantly influencing each other, with social institutions limiting individual choices, and individual's actions changing those limitations.

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Greta Thunberg: Who is she and what does she want?. Feb 28, 2020. *BBC news* [website].
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