



Article

'Cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in' or 'we are not a government poodle': Structure and agency in museums and galleries

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Abstract

Arguments within political science, public administration and public policy about how to both conceptualise and operationalise structure and agency in analysis have tended to operate at the level of ontology – and occasionally at the level of epistemology. This paper argues that development at the methodological level is required to make sense of the complexities of this debate. An analysis of how structure and agency can be applied to the museums policy sector is utilised to demonstrate the importance of linking methodology to epistemology and ontology, and to show the analytical consequences that arise from this.

Keywords

Policymaking, public administration, theory, methodology, museums, structure and agency

Introduction¹

Public policy and administration – and political science in general – in Britain have recently witnessed sporadic outbreaks of concern about the relationship of structure and agency for making sense of the empirical complexities of their subject matter, alongside discussions of some of the ontological and epistemological issues with which this relationship is associated. The generally under-developed interest in these latter concerns in the analysis of public policy and administration has meant

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that their relationship to the methodological dimension of analysis has been perhaps less considered than might be useful (Hay, 2006). To demonstrate the validity of this claim, the specific example of an under-researched policy sector² – that of museums and galleries – is used to demonstrate the analytical consequences of adopting differing epistemological positions towards the relationship of structure and agency, particularly in terms of the methodological consequences that these give rise to. In effect, any policy sector could be used for this purpose but by using a politically under-researched arena, the pre-conceived positions that are attached to other sectors can be avoided, and the analytical purpose of the paper can be made clear without continuous reference to existing debates and positions. The conclusions that may be drawn from this discussion may not be startlingly original in philosophical or theoretical terms but are important in demonstrating the importance of thinking through the methodological implications of the ontological and epistemological choices that analysts make.

Structure, agency and analysis

While consideration of the relationship between structure and agency has a long – and highly contested – tradition with sociology (Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1988, 1995, 2003; Parker, 2000; Martin and Dennis, 2010)³ it is only relatively recently that a direct consideration of this relationship has become a part of the landscape of British political analysis.⁴ Part of this development is connected to considerations of the ontological and epistemological bases underpinning possible understandings of the component parts of the debate (Hay and Wincott, 1998; Sibeon, 1998; Dowding, 2001: 97–100; Hay, 2002: 89–134; Lewis, 2002; McAnulla, 2005; Jessop, 2007; Hay, 2009a, 2009b; Pleasants, 2009; Cruikshank, 2010), and part to the increasing use of the relationship as a mechanism for the analysis of political and policy phenomena, ranging from institutional racism (Wight, 2003), to democratisation in South Asia (Adeney and Wyatt, 2004), to local political participation (Lowndes et al., 2006), to British governance (Goodwin and Grix, 2011). The basic concern in this work is with identifying the combination of individual choices and actions and the contextual settings within which these individuals are working within that give rise to the policy actions that are produced. Thus, in the case of museums, it is concerned with the relationships of managers, other employees, volunteers, visitors, trustees, owners, political representatives, and academics with a range of perceived exogenous variables that affect their choices – ranging from the implicit and explicit policies of various national and international governmental and non-governmental organisations to the mediating role undertaken by a range of variables such as the functional and professional status of the people involved, organisational patterns of work, degrees of managerial independence, inter- and intra-organisational relationships, and so on. Gray (2012a, 2012b), for example, has identified 13 distinct contextual/structural factors at work in the cultural policy field in general, and the museums sector in particular.

The extent to which these exogenous factors act simply as a set of structural constraints and opportunities that are independent of actors, and the extent to which they are effectively a matter to be managed purely through the choices and decisions of individual actors, or groups of actors, within the museums sector provides the basis for investigating the consequences of the inter-play between structure and agency for what takes place within the sector in policy terms. Such a division between, respectively, a collectivist and an individualist understanding (Archer, 1995: 34–57) limits the extent to which the active relationship between structure and agency can be empirically investigated. The critical realist positions adopted by Archer (1988, 1995, 2003) and Jessop (2005: 40, 2007) focus attention on precisely this dynamic relationship between structural context and individual actors, but do so in very different ways, with the approaches that derive from their respective emergent and strategic-relational assumptions having distinct methodological implications.⁵ An emphasis on these distinct approaches to realism reflects not only their position in the structure-agency debate in political science but also the increasing importance of realist approaches in both the social and natural sciences (Chalmers, 1999: 226–246; Olsen, 2010).

In the emergent view, structures differ in terms of their causal impacts as a consequence of their embedded location within a network of relationships that provide multiple determinations of empirical events that are independent of the individual actors who are a part of these structural forms (Elder-Vass, 2010: 47–53). In other words, structures have their own effects on actions that are different to those generated by agents. Thus, structure and agency are seen as having distinct ontological statuses which require distinct approaches to their investigation at both the epistemological and methodological levels of analysis (Archer, 1995: 165–170). In the strategic-relational view, on the other hand, it is simply the role that is played in providing a strategic context for action to take place within that determines structural effects. In this case, it is not possible to distinguish between the causal roles of structures and agents at the ontological level, particularly as they are seen as operating in terms of a dialectical relationship which necessitates an acceptance that they are simply different facets of the same underlying process (Jessop, 2007: 42). The consequence of this epistemological and ontological divergence is that the emergent view requires a specific methodological justification for differentiating between what count as being examples of structure and agency when undertaking analysis while the strategic-relational position does not. Given that the latter position means that the same variable can be considered to be both an example of structure and agency at the same time – depending upon the question that is being asked – this leads to some lack of clarity about the precise relationship that exists between them at the epistemological level, and it is this that leads to the lack of methodological clarity that the dialectical approach gives rise to. This difference raises questions about how structure and agency are to be investigated at the methodological level. Fyfe (1996), for example, argued that galleries have both institutional and structural forms that contribute to the maintenance of social order through the production of cultural capital, while, at the same time, they

can also be seen to be active agents in the production of cultural meaning. Setting aside the problems of reification that this implies,⁶ the differentiation between organisational and behavioural consequences indicates that some analytical distinction might be required to make sense of how and why these distinctions matter – and, indeed, whether what is identified as agency might not simply be a mislabelling of structural effects or vice-versa.

A second example from the position of agency again shows the methodological differences that can be generated from differences at the epistemological and ontological levels. The strategic-relational view sees actors as behaving strategically within particular structured contexts that can provide both limits and opportunities to them (Hay, 2002: 127–128; Jessop, 2005, 2007: 41). This entails an acceptance of some form of instrumental, means-end rationality as providing the basis for agency activity (even if individual agents get things wrong in the application of this rationality). This rationality can then be seen to set limits to the appropriateness of agency choices, leading to a variant on contingent path dependency as a consequence of the bounded nature of agency understanding (Hay, 2002: 209–212). The emergent approach, alternatively, is open to the possibility that actors may operate on the basis of a range of rationalities that are decidedly non-instrumental in nature,⁷ but which provide as equally as compelling a justification for action. In this case, the basis for action derives from the ‘internal conversation’ (Archer, 2003) that actors are engaged in – with this deriving directly from agency itself, rather than from the dialectic of structure and agency that the strategic-relational argument proposes. In terms of the functioning of the museums sector, this marks a difference between expectations of reflexive individuals acting proactively to manage their environments, as in the claim that ‘we are not a government poodle’ (West and Smith, 2005: 275) in terms of how museums staff dealt with instrumentalising policy pressures in the early 2000s (Gray, 2008), and a more varied expectation that is open to the possibility of some museums staff seeing themselves as, and being, constrained and policy reactive in the face of exogenous pressures, whilst others do, and are, not (McCall and Gray, 2014).

While empirical evidence cannot be used to determine whether ontological and epistemological positions are in some absolute sense ‘correct’ or not (Hay, 2009a: 263), or ‘better’ than other positions, it can, of course, be used for a variety of other reasons (including the testing of hypotheses and predictions, and the clarification of causal mechanisms) within the context of the particular sets of assumptions which are part and parcel of any given ontological position. Approaching the question of structure and agency from the perspective of methodological concerns, rather than epistemological and ontological ones,⁸ can serve to indicate the extent to which differing positions have managed to undertake the ‘careful conceptualisation, precise measurement and fastidious causal thinking’ that are ‘the hallmarks of political methodology’ (Brady et al., 2009: 1005), whilst taking on board issues of reliability, measurement bias and validity (Kellstedt and Whitten, 2009: 92–94). Such a methodological approach, however, demands more than the practical (and, seemingly, unproblematic) application of research common sense: ‘recondite problems remain

such as linking theory to methodology' (Brady et al., 2009: 1007), and the need to 'form a coherent link between epistemology/social ontology and research methods' (Burnham et al., 2008: 31) both require consideration – and the solution to them is not necessarily as straightforward as a focus on the mechanics of methodological concerns might lead the analyst to assume.

Museums and galleries as a policy sector

It is a truism to argue that all policy sectors have their own specificities which demarcate them from one another, even if the question of what a 'policy sector' consists of is not as clear as might be imagined – just as is the debate about the meaning of 'policy' (Colebatch, 1998). Is a 'sector' simply made up of a set of organisations that are differentiated from other sets by nature of their functional activities? If so, then which functions count? In the case of museums they are indisputably multi-functional, with their particular functions – ranging from education to entertainment and from display to curation⁹ – overlapping with those that are undertaken by a large number of other organisations operating in a range of institutional settings. Or is a 'sector' constructed by means of institutional definition (as in the case of 'local' or 'state' government)? Or is it by some other means altogether – such as the division between process, client, area or purpose dating back to the 1930s (Peters, 2010: 139–154)? Any definition of a sector involves making a series of methodological and ontological decisions in the first place as a means of bringing it into being as an object that can be analysed. As such, attempts to create an unambiguous object of study depend upon the establishment of a consensus amongst analysts that is not objective but which can become treated as such (Osborne and Rose, 1999: 368). Be this as it may, the normal expectation of what a policy sector consists of would include ideas about particular characteristics of policy 'type' (Hood, 1983: 2–7; Howlett, 2011: 41–59), organisational structure (both in terms of institutional forms and inter-organisational arrangements), sets of actors (including their relative degrees of professionalisation, and democratic and functional legitimacy) and their modes of operation (whether in the rather nebulous form of policy 'styles' or in terms of patterns of accountability and management structure) that serve to establish a set of policy environments and working practices that differ from those to be found in other settings. At this level, this is nothing more than a form of descriptive listing exercise that could be used as a basis for straightforward concept definition and variable selection to organise empirical work (as proposed in many political methodology works: see Pollock, 2012: 8–12, for example) and, unfortunately, does nothing to clarify the relationship between the specifics of individual policy sectors and general theoretical, analytical and methodological claims about how they may be understood and investigated.

The case of the museums and galleries sector in Britain could be descriptively characterised as being largely professionally dominated; largely semi-detached from other parts of the political system in terms of its internal functioning as a consequence of this; predominantly building-based (the recent development of

concerns with intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003) notwithstanding); politically uncontentious (with the exception, in Britain, of sporadic concerns over the Elgin marbles and admissions charges to both national and local museums); and decidedly small in terms of their staffing and expenditure.¹⁰ In many respects, this shares characteristics with the cultural policy sector in general, and in Britain in particular, where it is hardly a priority for central government (Gray and Wingfield, 2011), being a matter more of 'low' rather than 'high' politics (Bulpitt, 1983: 3). In terms of the specific policies that are pursued within the sector, there is normally seen to be a clear division between those which are derived directly from the workings of internal agency, operating on the basis of the 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2003) and those which are derived from a variety of exogenous sources. In the case of the former, the setting for the exercise of agency itself rests upon a variety of professional imperatives and ideologies that have their own structural basis. In the case of the latter, the source of the exogenous policies that are involved depends itself upon agency for their production. Thus, in practice, both agency and structure are in a process of constant interaction to produce a result. The perceived instrumentalisation of museums policies – policies designed to achieve objectives associated with other sets of policy concerns, such as social inclusion (Newman and McLean, 1998, 2004; West and Smith, 2005), or modernising government (Lawley, 2003) – is largely based around the idea of a dominance of exogenous structural effects. Whether this instrumentalisation was an intended or unintended consequence of changes elsewhere in the political system, or whether it derived from a conscious strategy of policy attachment by staff within the sector (Gray, 2002; Nisbett, 2013) could be the subject of empirical investigation but, in any case, it reinforces the idea that the sector, as a whole, is not an independent setting dependent simply on individual agency and entirely free from other sources of policy activity and choice.

The complexities that this simple example generates indicate that there needs to be some means of establishing how agency can be differentiated from structure if analysis is to become capable of actually explaining anything. The necessity for some clarity in establishing what the terms of the debate consist of can be demonstrated by reference to the comparison undertaken by Goodwin and Grix (2011) of sports and education policy as part of their desire to re-establish the importance of structure for understanding developments in British governance.¹¹ Goodwin and Grix (2011: 538) distinguish between 'institutions and structures', with the former being made up of a collection of organisations (and organisational actors), agencies (542) and positions (546), and the latter a set of regulatory mechanisms (545), patterns of accountability and control (549), and constitutional arrangements (543). Unfortunately, there is no explanation of, or justification for, this division – although it would appear that 'institutions' are specific sites for action, and 'structures' are behavioural contexts for action to take place within. Even if this were the case, 'institutions' at times seem to become actors in their own right as, for example, when County Sports Partnerships 'effectively "buy" outcomes with their funding' (551), or where 'the state and its agents are only one set' of actors

(539): whether this is simple reification or not is not the point here, instead it moves away from treating institutions and structures as sites or contexts of action to something else altogether. At the very least, the differences between structure and agency have become blurred and some clarification of the analytical framework that is being employed in this case would be helpful.

Applying the Goodwin and Grix (2011) differentiation between ‘institutions’ and ‘structures’ to the museums sector demonstrates the difficulties that their approach generates for empirical investigation. In this case, the institutional component would be made up of specific examples of individual museums and galleries (such as the National Portrait Gallery or the New Walk Museum and Gallery in Leicester), and organisations with a specific functional role to play within the sector (such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for national policies in England; or the Arts Council England, Museums Galleries Scotland, CyMAL: Museums, Archives, Libraries Wales, and the Northern Ireland Museum Council for museum accreditation; or the Museums Association as the organisation promoting and protecting professionalism within the sector; or the large number of Friends organisations and groups which contribute volunteers and raise funds for many museums and galleries). Such a listing can be extended beyond this to a variety of pressure and professional groups with an interest in the sector, even if it is not their primary concern (such as Arts Development UK) and political parties. The difficulty with this listing exercise is that there is no clear basis for determining which institutions are relevant for analysis in any particular case. An adequate specification at the methodological level would be expected to provide this, but this specification still evades the difficulties of providing a linkage between methodology and, at least, epistemology.

The same difficulty applies to the structural component: where do the boundaries lie between relevance and irrelevance in any particular case? In the case of the museums sector, the legal position within which it is located – the British Museum, for example, is covered by specific legislation dating back to 1753, and local authority museums by legislation dating back to 1845 – has clear consequences for their organisation and functional actions, but how is its’ significance to be identified in any particular case? Equally, the financial base upon which individual museums and galleries rest – and which differs between ‘national’, local authority, university, military, commercial and charity-established museums – provides a central structural component to their work, but to what extent does it actually affect the specific choices and decisions that are made within the sector? Again, an adequate methodological solution can be developed to handle this, but a methodological solution based on labelling and description in empirical terms does not resolve the epistemological and ontological questions that remain. Approaching the issue from the latter direction would provide a justification for identifying the form and nature of structures – whether defined as ‘rule-resource sets, involved in the institutional articulation of social systems’ (Giddens, 1984: 185), or as ‘a whole entity that is structured by the relations between its parts’ or as ‘the way that a group of things is related to each other’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 80) – but this does not establish the

methodological basis upon which empirical analysis of these ‘structures’ can take place, only the identification of what they are.

Structure and agency: Strategy and emergence

Clearly, the attempt to discuss museums and galleries as forming part of a policy sector that can be subject to analysis in terms of questions of structure and agency raises a large number of issues that cannot be simply resolved by some form of definitional *fiat*. To develop the case that more attention needs to be paid to the relationship between methodology and ontology and epistemology, a comparison of the strategic-relational and emergent approaches towards structure and agency will be used. The purpose of this comparison is not to argue for the inherent superiority of either, but to demonstrate that the ontological and epistemological choices that analysts make have clear methodological implications, and that these should be paid far more attention to than is often the case. While both approaches derive from an ontological position of critical realism (Archer, 2000: 465; Jessop, 2005, 2007: 45), they are quite distinct at the epistemological level. Jessop, and associated authors such as Hay (2002: 126–134), argue that the distinction between structure and agency is entirely analytical while Archer, and associated authors such as Elder-Vass (2010), argue that it resides at the ontological level. In the context of the museums sector, this raises questions about how the role of particular actors within it can be understood, and the extent to which they can act independently within the constraints that the sector faces as a consequence of its lack of political centrality, its limited strategic capabilities (Gray, 2009) and its location within an external environment that continues to be ‘complex, uncertain and diverse’ (Lawley, 2003: 75).

The dynamics of the relationship between structure and agency will change over time – even if for long periods, there will be a relative consistency and stability at work – and can be investigated for the purpose of understanding how and why change takes place; how and why stability within the relationship can be generated; as well as for the identification and explanation of the role of structure and agency in affecting specific events at specific times. In the same manner in which a consideration of the argument of Goodwin and Grix generated concerns about how to define and understand ‘structure’, a clarification of what is meant by ‘agency’ is equally as important for analytical purposes. Deacon (2004), for example, has noted the consequences of adopting different understandings of ‘agency’ for understanding social welfare, and for the production of different models of welfare reform as a result, indicating that there is no unambiguous specification of how to understand the functioning of agency in any given circumstances. Likewise, Harrison (2013: 32–35) identifies different understandings of agency, with distinct consequences for analysis, in the field of heritage studies. Clearly, there is more to the analysis of structure and agency than simply distinguishing between ‘people’ and ‘things’. Making use of the core concepts in the debate at the methodological

level requires a great deal of ontological and epistemic foundation-work in the first place, as some standard discussions of political methodology are well aware (as in the already cited Brady et al., 2009; Burnham et al., 2008). This task, however, in the context of structure and agency, is neither as clear-cut nor straightforward as might be assumed from some other texts on methodology (Manheim et al., 2008: 6; Pennings et al., 2006: 56).

A major part of the emergent argument about structure and agency rests on the case that there is an ontological difference between the two, and it is this difference that generates a requirement for an analytical dualism (Archer, 1995: 132–134; see also Willmott, 1999). This ontological difference is seen to lead to differences both in how structure and agency function, and in the time-span which underpins their relationship. Archer argues (1995: 89–90) that structure necessarily pre-dates agency, even when the effect of agency is to change existing structures into new forms. Thus, the legal frameworks within which museums operate¹² which can be identified at any given time as a structural characteristic that is independent of the actors within the system – generally operates over much longer time-scales than is the case for the making of specific decisions (through the direct exercise of agency) about what exhibition a particular museum or gallery will be mounting during the next school-holiday period.¹³ Any such decision, however, can then set limits to what else might be done in terms of the utilisation of space within the museum or gallery and thus becomes a short-term structural constraint in its own right. Clearly, there is an interaction taking place between structure and agency in this case, but this interaction depends upon considering them to be operating in different ways, as well as over different time-spans. The analytical dualism that is the consequence of this is based on the principle of emergence – ‘one term diachronically or perhaps synchronically arises out of the other, but is capable of reacting back on the first and is in any event causally and taxonomically irreducible to it’ (Bhaskar, 1994: 253; see also Elder-Vass, 2007) – with the focus of analysis being upon the inter-relationships of structure, agency and socio-cultural interaction (Archer, 1988) in creating the conditions of social life.

Jessop (2007: 34), on the other hand argues that the differences between structure and agency are not ontological at all but are purely analytical and, as a consequence, emergence is something of a red-herring with ‘dualism masquerading as duality’ (p. 41). In the strategic-relational approach, a dialectical form of analysis is stressed as being the appropriate mechanism for investigating the relationship of structure and agency as, while they may have different effects and separate causal powers, they are not essentially different in nature and neither are they, in practice, independent of each other (Marsh, 2010: 218–219). The focus in this case is as equally on the relationships between structure and agency even if these are understood in a rather different fashion, take a different form, and involve different ideas about the nature of the variables that constitute the relationship to that which Archer proposes. This means that distinctions between structure and agency in strategic-relational terms are determined by the nature of the analysis that is being undertaken rather than by anything else. Thus, the choices about exhibitions

that are made within museums can be treated as examples of either structure or agency depending upon what questions are being asked. An examination of the methodological consequences of these alternate positions can demonstrate the impact that they have on the shape and direction of empirical analysis in terms of the relationship between structure and agency in the museums sector.

These consequences can be seen, for example, in terms of how both structure and agency can be operationalised. In the case of structure, the emergent position identifies this through the application of a series of analytical tests that establish the causal attributes that 'structures' have, and the theoretical and epistemological validity of treating variables as structural in nature (Elder-Vass, 2010: 71–76). The strategic-relational position, on the other hand, holds 'structure' to be simply contextual in nature: 'the setting within which social, political and economic events occur and acquire meaning', with the assumption that context provides a means for the ordering of political behaviour (Hay, 2002: 94). At the methodological level, the two approaches end with distinct versions of what may be relevant 'structures' for analytical purposes. The strategic-relational approach, for example, tending towards systemic variables, such as the 'ecological dominance' of capitalist economic relationships (Jessop, 2007: 26) and the discursive role of ideas (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Hay, 2013), whilst the emergentist approach incorporates, in addition, less systemic and more locational (or 'regional' (Benton and Craib, 2011: 5)) variables – such as the specific nature of both inter- and intra-organisational relationships and the specific, direct control of financial resources that organisations might have – for the production of policy (Elder-Vass, 2010: 48–53; Gray, 2012a: 6–12). In terms of agency, the differences tend to be between the strategic-relational emphasis on forms of instrumental, means-ends rationality within the context of structured relationships, with these assuming a 'knowing', if not positively reflexive, proactive agent (Jessop, 2007: 212–217; Lowndes et al., 2006), as seen in ideas of a 'performing' museology (Leahy, 2012: 3) and the emergent view of multiple forms of rationality (as well as possible examples of means-end arationality and irrationality), with agents who may be 'knowing' and reflexive but who can equally be reactive and completely non-strategic in their choices (Roiseng, 2008). The former view has the advantage of a certain parsimony in analytical terms, while the latter makes fewer assumptions about the bases of choice and action that agents may employ, leaving these to empirical investigation to identify. Accepting the strategic-relational position allows for the development of a clear methodological approach based on the analysis of outcomes and their relationships to the behavioural assumptions that have been made: the emergent position, however, is less clear-cut and depends as much upon the precise processes of choice, and their relation to the outcomes that are then produced, as it is on anything else.

Examining the inter-relationships between structure and agency in the museums sector brings these methodological issues to the fore. The epistemological differences between the strategic-relational and emergent approaches, noted above, to this issue mean that methodology is not just concerned with differences in

technique, but that it is also concerned with differences in kind. At a practical level, as evidenced in policy practice, there are clear differences in the financial contexts within which publically funded national, local authority, trust and university museums and galleries operate, as well as between these and those of private and independent museums and galleries. Indeed, the specificity of the multiple contexts that individual museums and galleries confront makes it necessary to establish a means by which a differentiation between individual component variables at the structural level can be undertaken if sense is to be made of the actions that are undertaken within them: not all national museums, for example, are operating under the same conditions in terms of their collections,¹⁴ and this can act as a powerful structural dimension to these institutions in terms of the perceived requirements for display, exhibition and conservation that they have. These structural elements are distinct from the professional choices and decisions that may be made by individual agents in the shape of curators and conservators. Equally, not all local authority museum services are the same in terms of their party political control – or even which faction within party groups bearing the same label is in control – or in terms of the size of their museum services. Both of these have independent effects upon the overall context within which agency is located in these cases and a justification for including or not including them as examples of structure is required.

The central questions in terms of analysing structure and agency in the museums sector are not necessarily the relatively simple ones of considering the relationships of a range of exogenous and endogenous variables in affecting how the sector functions (although this can be informative of wider political (Gray, 2007) and operational (Macdonald, 2002) issues). Instead, they may be found in the more complex issues of how stability and change in the sector are produced and maintained (Archer, 1995: 294–297, 308–324; Hay, 2002: 136–139). It is not simply the case that people within the sector are confronted with often conflicting demands from a range of internal and external sources which require managing on a daily basis (with this being described, in one case of one museum service, as involving ‘gentle flirting with older men’, and, in another, as ‘dealing with the Council crap’). It is also the case that these demands and processes have wider implications for the roles and functions which museums are expected to undertake and fulfil within society, whether in terms of education (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), or of combating prejudice (Sandell, 2007), or of any other activities that are deemed as appropriate by actors both within and outside of the sector as a whole. These roles and functions are multiple in nature and are subject to reappraisal at both the structural level and in terms of the decisions and choices that are made by actors within the system. Methodologically, this would indicate that parsimony in terms of making assumptions about agent motivation may not necessarily be appropriate for identifying the independent effect that policy actors may have in terms of managing structural effects, particularly if these assumptions lead to forms of methodological collectivism and/or structuralism (Hay, 2004) that minimise the independent role of agency, or into forms of methodological individualism that potentially over-simplify the

cognitive bases upon which actors operate (Hampsher-Monk and Hindmoor, 2010). The alternative to simplification, however, may lead to the development of forms of fairly crude positivism (where the ‘facts’ are assumed to speak for themselves), or individualist discourse analysis (where the actors are assumed to speak for themselves) (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 31–40; see also Bevir and Rhodes, 2006: 18–19 and footnote 2 on 176).

The consequences of these epistemological and methodological issues for understanding how the museums sector functions can be demonstrated through a brief examination of an element within the museums sector that could be interpreted as being ‘ideational’ in the strategic-relational approach, or as part of the socio-cultural environment in the emergent approach, but in either case operating as a structural variable, either through providing a part of the context within which museum staff are operating, or as a constraint on action that is independent of individual actors.¹⁵ The ‘new museology’ (Ross, 2004; Stam, 1993; Vergo, 1989) that developed from the 1970s onwards brought together a range of ideas about the functions of museums and the focus of museum work that had wide-ranging managerial implications for the sector, and which developed into an ideological framework of some popularity. The relative failure of the approach to fully replace already existing professionally-dominated ideological beliefs that centred on more traditional museum concerns with the centrality of collections¹⁶ could be explained in the strategic-relational approach as being the result of either the strategic selectivity that museum staff utilise for the purposes of managing and controlling their operational environments to allow them to achieve their goals (leading to an analogous position to Dunleavy’s (1991) bureau-shaping model of organisational change), or of the dominant position of core professional groupings and their ability to control the ideological context of museum functioning. From the emergent position, it would be more a consequence of differential responses to ideological changes that are mediated through a range of structural variables (such as functional and professional status within individual museums or museum services, degrees of managerial independence, or the nature of external management demands: see Gray, 2012a). Neither approach would necessarily disagree about the importance of the same sets of structural and agency factors in this case, but there are considerable differences between them in terms of the ontological status of these factors and, consequently, how they should be handled epistemologically and methodologically.

In some ways, this is simply demonstrating that the two approaches will vary in terms of their interpretations of the effect of a particular component part of social action on matters of organisational structure and action, but in other ways, it raises questions about how analysis can be undertaken to generate these conclusions – the epistemological component of analysis. In the strategic-relational case, it would be necessary to both define and identify the specific context within which action takes place, and to make a statement about the motivational assumptions which are to be used to explain the patterns of strategic selectivity that are generated and utilised by individual actors. Both of these can be undertaken through the usual

methodological processes of concept and variable selection and definition, the specification of inter-relationships between them, and the development of means to measure and/or assess their effect, and to establish their validity and reliability. In the emergent approach, a clarification of the causal status of structural and agency variables takes priority before the inter-relationship between them can be examined, and this establishes a two-step approach to identifying the basis for empirical analysis. As the emergent approach also posits an ontological difference between structure and agency, there is also a requirement for the establishment of distinctly different understandings of the empirical nature, form and status of variables and concepts in each case. Thus, while the strategic-relational approach can adopt the same methodological principles and approaches to all of the variables that it is concerned with – as it is based on the assumption of a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, with these being merely analytically different to each other – this is not a viable option for the emergent approach to adopt.

Conclusion

The application of a methodological Occam's razor would indicate that the strategic-relational approach is perhaps more easily applied to empirical research than the emergent approach might be, largely as a result of the conflating tendencies that the former has as a result of treating structure and agency as simply analytically, rather than ontologically, distinct phenomena. This allows for the development of a flexible means to analyse any given case that allows for some relative parsimony to be developed in terms of accepting particular forms of simplification of agency motivations. The result of this is that determining what structure and agency consist of in analytical terms becomes purely a methodological choice determined by the nature of the questions that the analyst is seeking to answer. The emergent approach, on the other hand, requires the development of a more complex analytical approach on the basis of the ontological separation of structure and agency that it posits. This allows for the development of a clear methodological distinction between the two dimensions of structure and agency that rests on both the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are being made, and the precise specification of what are to be counted as being structural and agential variables. As such, there is a depth to emergent analysis that is not possible in the strategic-relational approach – even if, methodologically-speaking, it is analytically much more cumbersome and certainly less intuitive. At the very least this, brief, comparison demonstrates that there is a great deal more to the making of methodological decisions for the investigation of issues in public policy and administration than is often assumed to be the case. The complexity of the ontological and epistemological issues that are generated by a consideration of questions of structure and agency serves as a means to illustrate the point that a closer examination of how these issues can generate distinct methodological approaches to empirical analysis deserves consideration, and is something that could usefully be applied to other areas within public policy and administration as well. At the very least, it

demonstrates that methodology is not simply a matter of picking the right tools from the tool-box for the job in hand, but is much more complicated than that, and a more explicit consideration of the linkages between methodology and the ontological and epistemological contexts within which it is being applied would serve to not only clarify what choices analysts need to make but also the bases upon which these choices rest.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual conference of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom in Cardiff, March 2013.
2. At least in the case of political science, there is a thriving museums studies literature.
3. This is only a small selection from the available literature and emphasises the continuing debates between phenomenologists, structurationists and realists.
4. International relations has also recently developed an interest in the issue of structure and agency: see, for example, Wight (1999; 2004) and Mohan and Lampert (2013).
5. Jessop (2005) and Hay (2002: 122–126) are both critical of what they see as the ontological and epistemic failings of Archer's (1995) morphological approach, while she is equally as critical of the dialectical approach to the analysis of structure and agency that they favour (1995: 63, 142–149).
6. Bhatti (2012: 168–182), for example, sees cultural meaning as being generated by agents through processes of subjective interpretation and contextualisation, indicating that in this instance only people can be agents.
7. Such as the 'ritual' rationality (Royseng, 2008) that has been identified as being present in the field of cultural policy where a belief in the positive benefits of the arts outweighs anything as messy or inconclusive as actual evidence in justifying state support for the cultural sector.
8. Indeed, some analysts argue that a concern with the ontological and epistemological dimension of the structure and agency issue is misplaced as the 'real' concern is methodological anyway (Sharrock and Button, 2010).
9. Including, for example, the representation of the museum's locality, the creation of urban societies and modes of knowledge and authority and the presentation of civic prestige (Hill, 2005: 2, 3, 65); providing a 'ritual site' (Duncan, 1995); and being a 'site for healing' (Suchy, 2006: 52), amongst many others.

10. In common with all policy sectors complaints of under-funding and lack of political support are endemic to the museums sector; see Wilson's comment (2002: 196) on the British Museum in the 1920s: 'The Museum was starved of money and there was little sympathy for it within government'. Whether anything has changed in this respect since then is open to question.
11. They state (Goodwin and Grix, 2011: 537–538) that their intention is to provide an empirical analysis of two policy sectors to bridge the gap between interpretivist and structuralist analyses of the changing nature of government and governance within the British political system – an intention which raises some serious ontological concerns in itself.
12. With these covering everything from the discretionary legislation allowing local authorities to provide them (and to charge for entry to them), to charity law – which is a central feature of many private and Trust museums, not least for its effects on tax liability – to statutory anti-discrimination legislation which affects all museums in the United Kingdom as a matter of general principle.
13. Although, it will normally be a reasonable guess to assume that it is likely to involve dinosaurs or ancient Egypt or, in the case of Leicester, Richard III.
14. As a superficial comparison of the National Gallery, the Royal Armouries and the Natural History Museum would demonstrate.
15. The recent exchange between Archer and Elder-Vass (2012) indicates that this is something of an over-statement in terms of developments in the emergent argument: Archer stresses the structural effects of the socio-cultural environment in the first instance, while Elder-Vass combines structural and agency effects in the form of 'norm circles' (see also Elder-Vass, 2010: 122–133) to explain the manner in which values, ideologies and beliefs have an effect on agent choices.
16. Even though the new museology has had some effect on museum practices, this has been partial in terms of both breadth (not every museum has adopted it), and depth (some museum staff have been more enthusiastic in their acceptance of the new ideas than have others, even within the same museum and gallery) (see Janes, 2009; McCall and Gray, 2014).

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