Reflexivity as Situated Problem-Solving

A Pragmatist Alternative to General Theory

by John Holmwood

1. Introduction

In this paper, I distinguish sociological pragmatism from a more dominant approach within sociology that frequently claims an affiliation to it, that of general theorising via an action frame of reference. The latter seeks to establish an a priori set of categories of structure and agency as the precondition of sociological inquiry. There are a number of different versions, ranging from Parsons's [1937] action frame of reference, to Habermas's [1984; 1987] "universal pragmatics", Giddens's [1976; 1984] "structuration theory", Alexander's "neo-functionalism" [1985] and Archer's [1995; 2013] "morphogenetic" approach. While there are significant differences among these versions – or at least there are as far as their advocates are concerned – my concern in this paper is what they have in common and how they differ from the sociological pragmatism that I advocate. The latter, I argue, offers a distinctive approach to issues of agency that avoids the problems intrinsic to a general, foundational framework.[1]

In referring to "sociological pragmatism," I suggest that the pragmatist thought associated with Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead expresses a distinctive and intrinsically sociological position, associated with the idea of problem-solving as a signific-

[1] As Rockmore puts it, referring to Apel and Habermas as radical pragmatists, "pragmatism can be described as a concern with knowledge after foundationalism, but [...] radical pragmatists are all concerned with the very foundationalism that pragmatism gives up" [Rockmore 2002, 60].

ant aspect of the creativity of action. Pragmatism is not, however, a unified position. Peirce, for example, is utilised by Habermas and Archer in defence of the a priori approach that I suggest is contrary to the thrust of sociological pragmatism.[2] Similarly, while Joas [1996] has emphasised "problem-solving" in his account of the creativity of action and, in common with Habermas, has also drawn on the work of Mead, I suggest, he, too, dilutes its anti-foundational orientation and, thus, blurs the distinctiveness of sociological pragmatism *vis-à-vis* a general theory (where the latter embodies what is claimed to be a universal pragmatics). In part, as I shall go on to suggest, this derives from Joas's [1996, 230] adoption of "constitution theory" from Giddens.

In this paper I will address how reflexivity arises as an issue for sociological theory in terms of two key concerns. The first is that of the relationship between the sociologist and those whose behaviours are the object of inquiry, a relationship typically conceived as one involving "dialogue." The second is that of the nature of the actor's understanding of his or her own behaviour conceived in terms of an "inner dialogue," or what Margaret Archer calls an "internal conversation" [2003].

What unites the different proponents of a general theoretical approach is the argument that these two concerns are peculiar to the social sciences and that they require to be expressed within an a priori frame of reference organised in terms of categories of structure and action. I shall argue that this attempt at an a priori statement has two consequences. The first is the attenuation of the dialogical relation between inquirers and those whose actions are the object of inquiry. The second is a reified conception of the actor in terms of a theory of the self and its powers. The two consequences are related, in the sense that, as we shall see, the different modes of self-reflexivity attributed to actors are represented as hierarchically ordered, such that the most advanced mode is the one that is most closely aligned with the mode of reflexivity attributed to the sociological understanding itself.

This latter development will be discussed in the context of Margaret Archer's [2003; 2007] recent work on the "internal conversation" and its empirical application in accounting for social mobility. The connection between the two should be clear; the hierarchical ordering of modes of reflexivity fixes in place the a priori framework that expresses sociological reflexivity. The final part of the paper will address the way in which the emphasis on agency within the foundational approach represents indi-

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[2] Lewis and Smith [1980] seek to distinguish the voluntaristic nominalism of James and Dewey from the realism of Peirce and Mead and, thus, of readings of Mead that conflate the difference between his approach and that of Dewey. However, in doing so, they reify the very dualisms that pragmatist thought was seeking to overcome. As we shall see, the typical critique of Mead within sociology is different from that of Lewis and Smith, involving the charge of an "over-socialised" conception of the self.

viduals as agentially responsible for their own "sub-optimal" circumstances, without recognition of the possibility of sub-optimal sociological accounts in any situation where the (apparently) "rational" expectations of sociologists are confounded by the behaviours of actors and the meanings implicit to them.

I shall argue that sociological pragmatism challenges takes issue with each of these aspects of the dominant approach. Where general theory seeks to identify some aspect of agency that is independent of social structure, I shall argue that sociological pragmatism operates with a different concept, that of the "social self" [Gronow 2008]. For proponents of the general approach, this is tantamount to sociological determinism and a denial of creative agency. In contrast, I shall argue that a "social self" is necessary to account for creativity, and that the difficulty attributed to sociological "determinism" arises instead in general theory. The problem is a consequence of the role that a general problem of order has within their work (in contrast to the pragmatist concern with specific problems of order), and, thus, it is a problem of their characterisation of the social. It is the concern with a general problem of order, which leads general theorists to seek an aspect to agency independent of the social.[3]

2. Structure and Action: Dualism or Duality?

My association of Parsons, Habermas, Giddens, Alexander and Archer is a clue to the nature of the problems that I suggest are intrinsic to presuppositional general theory. Each sets out a formal framework of structure and action that assigns to each category an appropriate contribution in social explanations (independently of the specific substance of what is to be explained). At the same time, each writer finds in their fellow advocates of general theory similar kinds of problems, either an unsatisfactory reduction of structure to action, as in the case of Archer about Giddens [Archer 1995, 97-98], or of action to structure, as in the case of Giddens about Parsons and Habermas [Giddens 1982, 112-114]. However, since each supposed reduction occurs in relation to an attempted synthesis of structure and action, each failed attempt is usually also marked by the simultaneous appearance within it of the category deemed to be reduced to the other, where it appears as an un-integrated (or un-reduced), "residual" category. Each "failed" approach, then, manifests both reductionism and a contradictory dualism, at the same time as the critic argues that a non-contradictory dualism (or duality) is possible. In the process, the critic frequently

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[3] The implications of sociological pragmatism for a critique of post-structuralist tendencies in sociological theory are developed elsewhere [Holmwood 2011].

re-states the original intention of the author being criticised to produce just such a non-contradictory account of structure and agency.

Ironically, given the criticisms subsequently directed at his work, this unsatisfactory dualistic form of social theory was first explicitly identified by Parsons in terms of a distinction between those categories that are integrated within a frame of reference and those that are un-integrated and residual [Parsons 1937; Holmwood 1996]. A contradictory dualism could be resolved, he suggested, by a frame of reference in which each category was given its appropriate due in a consistent manner. In effect, the same argument is made by Habermas [1984; 1987] in his theory of communicative action and his argument of the need to synthesise "system" and "lifeworld," and by Giddens [1979; 1984] in his argument that an unsatisfactory "dualism" of structure and action can be converted into a satisfactory "duality."

Archer's argument [1988; 1995] may appear to be different in so far as she explicitly embraces dualism and criticises others for denying it. However, her position is much the same once we recognise that she criticises Parsons and Giddens for a reductionism (or "conflation") [Alexander 1982] that each explicitly repudiates, at the same time as requiring that there are dualistic features in their arguments precisely because such "inconsistencies" are necessary for reductionism not to be possible as a coherent project. Similarly, Habermas is explicitly committed to "dualism" in so far as he wishes to avoid the reductionism intrinsic to a one-sided emphasis on the system paradigm or the lifeworld paradigm. For each writer, then, the issue is to defend an adequately expressed dualism against what they see as its inadequate expression in other writers. Indeed, Stones [2001] explicitly sets out a convergence between Giddens and Archer in these terms, arguing

> "both theorists' conception of structure incorporates a sense of 'dualism' in Archer's terms, which is based upon a temporal division between structural preconditions and the moment of agency. There is no necessary antagonism here. [...] Giddens does reject a second, different, notion of dualism – one that refrains from acknowledging the close, hermeneutically informed, interlinking of structure and agency – that is also implicitly rejected by Archer." [Stones 2001, 178].

Indeed, despite any emphatic mutual repudiations, it is striking that each writer comes to endorse the same set of distinctions that are argued to be the necessary elaboration of the dualisms they advocate. Thus, all argue for distinct levels of culture/society/personality, and for the operation of structural, or functional, principles of the organisation of society or social system. They seem to believe that crucial differences between approaches can remain in how these levels and distinctions are represented, although each agrees that the task of social theory is the formal presentation of their differentiation and modes of articulation. Thus, Giddens outlines four structural

principles – signification, legitimation, authorization, and allocation [Giddens 1981, 47] operating at the level of society. They prescribe two forms of articulation, where,

> "one is how far a society contains distinct spheres of 'specialism' in respect of institutional orders: differentiated forms of symbolic order [...]; a differentiated 'polity', 'economy' and 'legal/repressive' apparatus'. The second is how modes of institutional articulation are organized in terms of overall properties of societal reproduction: that is to say, 'structural principles'." [Giddens 1981, 47-48].

Although these statements are taken from Giddens, they can be found in the other writers. For example, processes of "social integration" and "system integration," are accepted by Habermas [1984] and Archer [1985] as crucial concerns for sociological theory, and they are defined in relation to different structural principles – authorisation and allocation for system integration and legitimation and signification for social integration [Holmwood 2009]. Of course, Parsons offered the first such formulation of functional imperatives of the social system and its sub-systems [Holmwood 1996].

3. A "Double Hermeneutic?"

Before I begin to set out an alternative to this dominant approach, I want to identify further features of the general scheme. The first is that it is also argued to be *realist* – that is, necessary to an objective, scientific account of the social world – at the same time as that realism is qualified by virtue of special features that distinguish the social world from the natural world. The categories of the general scheme are not, however, "real" in the sense that they are established, revised and redefined in the course of practical engagement with the world – for example, via the practices of empirical investigation. The categories are held to be real in the sense of being necessary to the way in which we think about the world as a *presupposition* of any empirical inquiry. In other words, the form of realism is *analytical realism* as Parsons [1937] termed it. Were they to be established through empirical investigation their "reality" would be *demonstrable as a construct of scientific practices*. It is precisely this idea of the scientific construction and reconstruction of the world that is characteristic of pragmatist understandings of science and thought more generally [Mead 1938], but is denied by analytical realists.

Of course, the advocates of general theory are not hostile to empirical inquiry. They believe their ontology to be necessary precisely in order to secure it in the social sciences. However, given that empirical inquiry is fallible, while the analytical categories are held to be immune from revision in the light of empirical inquiries,

it follows that inadequate empirical accounts have no bearing upon the analytical "truths" with which they are associated. Indeed, the assumption is that while past inadequacies in empirical accounts may involve a failure properly to recognise the underlying ontological requirements of empirical inquiry, but future empirical failures will not call into question those ontological requirements.[4]

A second general feature is that proponents of general theory distinguish natural science from social science precisely in so far as agency arises as a special issue for the latter. Of course, it is allowed that each set of sciences is carried out by human agents. Indeed, this is Bhaskar's [1978] key argument against positivism, that it cannot account for agency in science in terms of the implications of experiments for the ontological ordering of the natural world in terms of naturally occurring "open" systems and their "closure" by human design aimed at revealing the mechanisms that otherwise operate in "open systems" where their effects may be disguised by other mechanisms.[5] Crucially, however, the social sciences are concerned with processes and events that are themselves produced and sustained via human agency. Where the natural sciences seek to create closed system in order to understand the mechanisms that obtain in the natural sciences, the social sciences engage with open systems that are the product of human action and are reproduced through the negotiation of their open character by everyday actors. For Giddens [1976, 162; Habermas 1984, 110], this difference is captured in the argument that while the natural sciences have a hermeneutic aspect, there it is but a "single hermeneutic," whereas the social sciences confront a "double hermeneutic."

The relevance of the "double hermeneutic" for each author promoting a general framework, is that it brings two aspects of reflexivity together. The first is the social inquirer as a "reflexive agent," while the second is the social actor as a "reflexive agent." Given that the aim of general theory is to provide a formal scheme of categories, this is represented in the form of the distinction between what Habermas

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[4] Alexander [1995] confronts a paradox where he concedes that post-positivism in the natural sciences serves to "delegitimate" foundationalism, while in the social sciences this is not the case, because "discourse becomes as important a disciplinary activity as explanation" [*Ibidem,* 123] and "discourse is general and foundational" [Ibidem, 123]. In the absence of a disciplinary consensus produced through empirical agreement, "theoretical discourse aims to gain provisional acceptance on the basis of universal agreement" [*Ibidem*, 123]. However, in the social sciences, it is precisely the "perspectival" nature of theory that makes agreement difficult and we are left finally with the muddle that, "it is therefore the very impossibility of establishing permanent foundations that makes foundationalism in the social sciences so critical. This is the post-positivist case for general theory" [*Ibidem*, 123].

[5] A similar argument is made by Mead (following Dewey), arguing that science is animated by its engagement with problems. He writes, "it is a search for what has disappeared in the conflicts of conduct, that is for objects which will remove the antagonism – it is a search for the solution of a problem" [Mead 1938, 45]. In this context, "experimental science implies a real world uninfected by the problem, which can be used to test the discoveries which science makes" [*Ibidem*, 45].

calls the "system" and the "lifeworld," where the former represents the point of view of the observer. Thus, Habermas writes that the former, "ties social scientific analysis to the external perspective of an observer", while the other, "begins' with the members' intuitive knowledge" [Habermas 1987, 151] and that the "fundamental problem of social theory is how to connect [them] in a satisfactory way" [*Ibidem*, 151]. In a similar way, Parsons had commented that what he terms the "objective" and the "subjective" need to be connected, but only after due recognition of what each separately contributes, writing that,

> "the results of analysis of human behaviour from the objective point of view (that is, of an outside observer) and the subjective (that of the person thought of as acting himself) should correspond, but that fact is no reason why the two points of view should not be kept clearly distinct. Only on this basis is there any hope of arriving at a satisfactory solution of their relations to each other" [Parsons 1935, 283].

Archer [2007] has recently expressed these arguments in terms of a critique of a "two-stage model" of structure and agency and the advocacy of a, supposedly superior, "three-stage model." In the first, structural (and cultural) properties constrain and facilitate actors, whose subjective dispositions are (variously) presented in terms of "interests" (whether vested, or instrumentally-rational), or "routines" (of the habitus). In her preferred "three-stage model," actors' subjectively define their own concerns and through "reflexive deliberation," "subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances" [*Ibidem*, 17]. However, it should be evident that the two-stage and the three-stage models, alike, involve the "deliberations" of actors; at best, the three-stage model merely extends the "repertoire" of those deliberations. In this regard, then, it is similar to the accounts offered by other advocates of general theory, where other approaches are argued to be restrictive; that is, overly concerned with "situational constraints," where a more expanded version would better account for creativity on the part of actors. In this way, Archer repeats the analysis offered by Parsons [1937] concerning the deficiencies of pre-existing utilitarian accounts of action. At the same time, she implicitly retains the same construction of the "objective" and the "subjective" as indicating points of view of the sociologist and the actor respectively (for example, the "objective" circumstances of the actor are something that must be accommodated by the actor and, at the same time, may be subjected to scrutiny and explication by the sociological observer).

The idea both that the two perspectives – those of observers and those of actors – "should correspond," and, as Parsons put it, that, at the same time, they need to be kept distinct, is significant. Of course, the general frame of reference is intended as the means of specifying their correspondence, but, as such, it also provides a guarantee

for the sociological inquirer. His or her perspective is described as "objective," in contrast to the "subjective" perspective of the actor (and as having the possibility of "going beyond" that of the actor). The statement that they "should correspond" contains an idea of symmetry, but where they do not correspond, the implication is asymmetrical with regard to the question of which should be assigned the status of being "objective." This follows from the assumptions intrinsic to the idea of a "double hermeneutic." On the one hand, the social inquirer has competences that are shared with those of actors precisely because the social inquirer is also an actor. However, this everyday "symbolically pre-structured reality," as Habermas [1984, 10] puts it, is "pre-theoretical." All action is guided by "aims," but those of the social inquirer are different from those of actors, directed, as they are, at understanding for the sake of a full explication of conduct.

In this construction, actors can learn from sociological inquirers, but the possibility that, where their understandings do not correspond, those inquirers might learn from actors, is attenuated.[6] This is evident in the idea that *actors* may exhibit "false consciousness," and be subject to the operation of "ideology."[7] The apparently decisive argument offered by Archer [2007] is that not all actors in the "same" situation act in the "same" way, which, in turn, implies that some actors can escape ideological constructions, while others do not. However, for all the emphasis upon the importance of actors' own subjectivities, what should be apparent is that the indicator of "escape" from "false consciousness" is an actor's greater congruence with the "observer's" point of view. In addition, the idea that the sociologist might be in error is not entertained.

The argument, apparently, is that actors in the "same situation" have the capacity to act differently (with social inquirers cast in the role of a special kind of actor putting themselves in the "same situation" as those they study, at a minimum, as the judges of the sameness of situations). The further implication of the idea of "false consciousness" is that some, seemingly different, ways of acting are sub-optimal for the actors concerned, as a consequence of the fact that, "social factors affect agents' outlooks without people's awareness" [*Ibidem*, 15]. Again, it is evident that some

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[6] By "learn" in this context, I mean that they might understand the meanings they attribute to actors to be problematic and, thus, might reconstruct their understandings and expectations about actors' behaviours – "dialogue" is with a presumed interlocutor on the basis of how sociological categories and observations might be reconstructed, rather than by a device that seeks to establish that each can be rational in its own terms, even when they diverge.

[7] Habermas does allow that if actors are allowed the capacity of criticism then, "we thereby expose our interpretation in principle to the same critique to which communicative agents must mutually expose their interpretation" [Habermas 1984, 119], but he does not consider that any attribution of false consciousness (or "forced consensus" in his terminology must contain this possibility).

people – namely sociologists – are aware of those factors, and that greater awareness would give rise to different actions on the part of the actors concerned. In other words, there is an implicit idea of an appropriate account of the relation of structure and action achieved by the sociological inquirer, which would facilitate more optimal actions on the part of actors.

However, any circumstance where the "same" structural situation gives rise to systematic differences among actors in the nature of their responses must also be one in which those "structural situations" may have been mis-described in their "sameness." If this is so, then the differences in response may be systematically related to differences in structural situation, when the latter are properly understood and reconstructed using those responses as an indication of potential problems in the sociologist's understanding of their "sameness." Such a reconstruction will also lead to a further re-interpretation of the "responses", since, when argued to be "different responses to the same situation," the "mis-described situation" helps form the interpretation of the meanings integral to the responses as the substance of their supposed differences. Archer's position, which is no different to that of any other general theorist, requires there to be some means of "fixing" the adequacy of the account of structural positions independently of the response of actors. Ironically, she charges Bourdieu with a position that "valorises the investigator over the subject" [*Ibidem*, 43], but I suggest that such a valorisation is a property of all general schemes. I will return to this issue when I will look at the operation of this argument in the context of the construction of a typology of "modes of reflexivity" and its use empirically in the context of accounting for social mobility (and immobility).

The issue, to be clear, is not that "false consciousness" is necessarily a problematic category, only that it is problematic when "false consciousness" on the part of inquirers is not also entertained as a possibility, which I suggest is the case with any foundational approach. For the present, I just want to observe that we have already begun to open up the issue of reflexivity and to consider it as a (imputed) "conversation" between inquirer and actor – after all, the "double hermeneutic," in contrast to the "single hermeneutic" is represented as dialogic. However, it is a dialogue in which one of the parties is insistent on his or her own perspective and, indeed, makes acceptance of the categories of that perspective the terms on which the dialogue that is held to be intrinsic to social inquiry is to be understood.

4. Problem-Solving and the Social Self

The idea of "different" responses to the "same" situation is intended by Archer to preserve the idea of the difference that can be attributed to the self and its causal powers when contrasted with the causal powers of structures. The standard criticism that is made of sociological pragmatism is that it is guilty of conceiving the self as socially determined, or "over-socialised,"[8] with no independent powers. Thus, Giddens comments about Mead that his philosophy was,

> "built around reflexivity: the reciprocity of the 'I' and the 'me'. But even in Mead's own writings, the constituting activity of the 'I' is not stressed, rather, it is the 'social self' with which Mead was preoccupied [...] [and] the 'social self' can easily be interpreted as the 'socially determined self' [...]" [Giddens 1976, 26-27].

Archer makes a similar argument [Archer 2003, 78ff]. I shall show that the reverse is the case. The "constituting activity of the 'I'" is lost within the general theoretical approach to action. This is because the real problem lies not with a concept of the *self as social*, but with the concept of *the social* within the general approach and the features attributed to it which derive from the specific character of general theory, including its commitment to the idea of a general problem of order.[9]

From the perspective of the form of sociological pragmatism that I am proposing, reflexivity is to be understood via the idea of "problem-solving." This is used both to characterise the relation between sociologists and actors in the constitution of social inquiry and also to characterise "reflexivity" as a "moment" within interaction, where actors step outside their immersion in the flow of events occasioned by some problem that prevents them from simply "going on". In this context, meanings are brought into question and problematic meanings appear "abstracted" from their context of interpretation, precisely in so far as they do not provide the means to "go

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[8] The term "over-socialised" conception of "man" is first used by Wrong [1961] in critique of Parsons. The object of his criticism was Parsons's absorption of Freud to a general account of the "integration" of personality and his counter argument was to point to biological (instinctual) aspects of the individual organism that resist integration. Archer, for her part, is trying to identify "reflexivity" as an aspect of actor's self-understanding that resists social definition. See also Gronow [2008] for a discussion of Archer's "under-socialised" conception of the agent.

[9] Habermas's [1992] account of Mead is more sympathetic to the idea of the social self and does not see it as hostile to individual autonomy, as does Archer. However, at least in part, this is because he is arguing for a conception of individual autonomy which would allow "conformity with norms" to express individual autonomy and that "socialization" replaces a "common instinctual repertoire", where, "normatively generalized behavioural expectations [...] take the place of instinctual regulation [...] [and] these norms need to be anchored within the acting subject through more or less internalized social controls" [*Ibidem*, 179]. Whereas this captures key aspects of Mead's thought, Habermas goes on to connect these norms to a general problem of order, which is the antithesis of what Mead argued.

on." As Cook argues, Mead develops Dewey's [1972] account of the "reflex arc" to suggest that,

> "the task of subjectivity [...] is to take conduct beyond this stage of abstraction to a stage of synthesis in which the abstracted meanings find their places in a reconstructed world of objects" [Cook 1993, 52]. The point is that this new synthesis or 're-integration' requires reconstruction of meanings, where a "problem is solved to the extent that these tendencies find a harmonious expression in terms of new objective meanings. When a solution is found, the subjective phase of conduct has done its work, and attention is once again focused on a realm of unproblematic objects" [*Ibidem*, 52].

Archer objects to the pragmatic idea of a social self because she regards the social self as variously, "too overburdened with social normativity" [Archer 2000, 229], and as entailing a conversation that is, "*not* a dialogue with *oneself*; it is a conversation with society" [2003, [Archer 2003, 79]. Thus for her, Mead's "Me" is really the "We" of the "generalised other" and, "his 'I' does not speak *for itself,* but for another 'We', that of a different community" [Ibidem, 79]. However, none of these characteristics has the necessary corollary that an actor would not develop a strong sense of agency, creativity, or of moral purpose; indeed, it is precisely the point of pragmatism that the agent has a sense of the self precisely because it is a social self [Gronow 2008].[10]

As I have already observed, the focus of pragmatism is continuous across a number of issues, with problem-solving regarded as intrinsic both to the development of knowledge and to the formation of the self. In conceiving science as problem-solving, Mead argues that scientific (and other) knowledge is necessarily transformative:

> "it is not surprising that in our reflective experience the world should present itself as an object of knowledge, for it is there primarily as the locus of a problem; and, when the problem is solved, if it is solved, it will be a different world from that which preceded the appearance of the problem" [Mead 1938, 63].

The same is true of subjectivity, which also arises in the context of problems confronting conduct, where old meanings must give way to the new. In this context, some anomaly in the situation must be resolved between competing possibilities.

> "The growth of the self", Mead argues, "arises out of a partial disintegration – the appearance of the different interests in the forum of reflection, the reconstruction of the social worlds, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object." [Mead 1964, 149].

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[10] On this, Habermas [1992] concurs albeit, while problematically attributing to pragmatism the same idea of "normatively generalized behaviour expectations" as he embraces.

In this way, the natural world, the social world and the self are all subject to reconstruction. The "social self" is most emphatically not defined by stasis, but only arises as a consequence of necessary engagement with problems in a world of other selves. In this way, the "I" that speaks for another "we", speaks for a "new community" as the product of a transformed social world and transformed self, alike. It is difficult to see that this could be represented as a "conformist" self, except that the social self is engaged in the creation of the new meanings to which social relations are made to conform.

Where sociological pragmatism understands much action to be habituated [Gronow 2008], within a general theoretical framework action is understood in terms of "discursively available" meanings that underlie day-to-day activities [Giddens 1984, xxiii]. The approaches do not differ in the idea that *typically* actions are habituated and routinely reproduced. The difference lies in the idea that there are "structural meanings" that secure "routines" and, thus, that any breach of routines can be repaired by resort to meanings already available.

It is precisely this characteristic that emerges from the foundational nature of the scheme. So long as issues of order are given a generalised status, there must always be a general solution, and the real issue is the essential contingency of action, not specific problems that may emerge in the course of action and which must be lived in the absence of their creative solution. Thus, Giddens writes,

> "what *from a structural point of view* – where strategic conduct is bracketed – appears as a *normatively coordinated legitimate order*, in which rights and obligations are merely two aspects of norms, *from the point of view of strategic conduct* represents claims whose realization is contingent upon the successful mobilization of obligations through the medium of the responses of other actors" [Giddens 1979, 86].

The "structural" resources mobilised in strategic action are defined in relation to normative integration, but they depend upon the agency of actors and that agency can be sub-optimal from the point of view of the resources available.

Somewhat oddly, in the light of this argument by Giddens, Joas distinguishes the "constitution theory" of Giddens from that of Parsons, writing that whereas the latter,

> "claimed that the normative integration of a society was the functional precondition for its continued existence. The constitution theorists share a sceptical attitude to this idea of normative integration" [Joas 1996, 234].

In fact, the arguments of Giddens and Parsons are precisely convergent on this matter as is indicated by the emphasis on normative integration, which is common

to each (and also found within Habermas). At the (structural) macro-level, the idea that meanings secure routines is expressed as the possibility of structural integration. This is evident in Giddens's idea that, as a matter of necessary theoretical expression, structures exist as "normatively co-ordinated legitimate orders," and in Parsons's idea of "perfect integration."

The steps by which these assumptions are reached are complex in detail, but simple in their origins. The generalised approach begins with a general "problem of order," rather than with specific problems of order. This is familiar in Parsons, but is evident in other writers. Habermas provides a succinct expression,

> "naturally even the simplest action systems cannot function without a certain amount of *generalized* action assumptions. Every society has to face the basic problem of coordinating action: how does ego get alter to continue action in the desired way? How does he avoid conflicts that interrupt the sequence of action?" [Habermas 1987, 179].

Normative co-ordination – secured by the operation of personality dispositions, sanctioning mechanisms and legitimating norms – is the proffered solution, as we have seen in Giddens.[11]

This necessarily provides a teleological form to accounts of action and social development offered in terms of "structural differentiation." Joas, for example, points to the "possibilities" contained within structures, but beyond the current meanings of actors. This is an idea he takes from Habermas, who he cites as expressing this idea "brilliantly," when saying,

> "Reason should not be regarded as something finished, as an objective teleology that manifests itself in nature or in history, nor as a merely subjective faculty. Rather, the structural patterns found in historical developments give enciphered pointers to the paths of unconcluded, interrupted, misled processes of formation going beyond the subjective consciousness of the individual" [Habermas 1985, 70, also cited in Joas 1993, 185].

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[11] Archer is one general theorist who explicitly repudiates the idea of cultural integration [Archer 1985]. However, her repudiation is based upon a distinction between "cultural system integration" and "socio-cultural integration", that functions in a manner similar to that of social and system integration. See Holmwood [2009] for a discussion of the latter distinction. Notwithstanding, Archer's understanding of the "social self" is strongly informed by that problematic, such that she attributes to the pragmatist conception the characteristics she associates with Parsons's actor and that of any one else, such as Habermas, who, she believes, has an "oversocialised" concept. Once more, it should be stressed, the problem lies not in the concept of the self, but in the idea of the social entertained within foundational, general theory.

In other words, solutions are available within structures, and await not *creative problem-solving*, but *decipherment* by actors whose "misled processes of formation" potentially obscures them to the possibilities already inherent to their actions.

In contrast, the version of sociological pragmatism I am advocating here understands breaches of routine to constitute a *problem* of meaning and that a "solution" is not available in existing "meanings," but must be creatively produced. There is no necessary assumption that routines were previously constituted by shared understandings. However, just in so far as problem-solving reconstructs categories, creativity produces new arrangements, which take their force from the problems they leave behind, rather than from the "truths" (whether of science or human development) to which they "approach."[12]One of the consequences of any argument from the perspective of a generalised "problem of order" is that the "self" expressed within the theoretical construction of "normative coordination" is necessarily an "over-socialised" conception; that is, it is a self adequate to the reproduction of normative coordination, at the same time as social structures are argued to have expression in meanings adequate to their reproduction.

What is at issue, then, is not a failure to recognise the contingencies of interaction and that, in practice, the operation of structural processes occurs in circumstances of non-integration, but that theorists present a formal solution where integration is always-already a "possibility."[13] Indeed, this is a feature of the approach precisely because of the argument that issues of the relation between structure and agency are to be resolved theoretically, as a matter of a foundational, presuppositional scheme, and independently of any particular empirical instances associated with the separation of categories of "structure" and "agency" (the instances, as Mead puts it, that give rise to "abstracted meanings"). Because the problem of order must, apparently, have a general solution, integration is always a possibility within the terms that have been set. There is no idea that there might be problems that are integral within specific social relations and must be lived until they are solved, and, if solved,

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[12] Kuhn [2000], for example, writes of progress in scientific knowledge in these terms, not as an approach to "truth"; "scientific development must be seen as a process driven from behind, not pulled from ahead – as evolution from, rather than evolution toward" [Ibidem, 296]. In these terms, general theorists are concerned with evolution "toward" (greater structural differentiation) rather than "from," and each derives the substance of "toward" from the categories of a presuppositional general theory

[13] This is well expressed in Alexander's defence of a "neo-functionalist" paradigm, where he states, "functionalism is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts. Equilibrium is taken as a reference point for functionalist systems analysis, though not for participants in actual social systems as such" [Alexander 1985, 9].

are only solved because meanings (and social relations and selves) are reconstructed and transformed.

The distinctive feature of sociological pragmatism that I am seeking to draw out is that it is anti-foundational precisely because problems resist expression in a formal framework. Problems do not occur as *external contingencies*, but as integral to the practices and meanings in which they arise. While failure may have a common form (the form of "abstracted meanings" as Mead argues), problems and their solutions are always specific. Solutions may have wider implications, but those implications are not provided in terms of their location within a general framework that has a presuppositional form. Any general statement begs the question of a general solution, for it sets "order" not against particular problems, as do sociological pragmatists, but against a general threat of chaos, where, according to Habermas, "the fundamental function of world-maintaining interpretive systems is the avoidance of chaos, that is, overcoming of contingency" [Habermas 1976, 118].[14] For sociological pragmatists, problems do not represent an ever-present potential *loss* of meaning, but a specific issue of meaning that requires to be resolved by addressing the terms in which it has arisen.

For sociological pragmatists, selves are social and problems are social, while those committed to general theory have resort to some aspect of the self that resists social constitution. For Giddens and Archer, as I have argued, pragmatist arguments suggest a form of "sociological reductionism", but this misrepresents what Dewey and Mead are proposing. For them, "sociability" does precede "conscious rationality," but this is far from proposing an "over-socialised" concept of the subject, or, if it is, it is a form of socialised self that can engage in individual and collective activities of problem-solving. The fact that those who are most anxious to secure a creative conception of agency against the perceived consequences of a "socially determined self" should end up with the problems they are seeking to avoid suggests that the supposed problem of the "social self" is really a problem in their concept of the social. Indeed, as I have suggested, it is just in so far as general theory presupposes a general problem of order that the consequences usually attributed to the "over-socialised" conception arise, since they derive from an "over-integrated" conception of the "social" and not an "over-socialised" concept of the self.[15]

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[14] Habermas writes further that, "the legitimation of orders of authority and basic norms can be understood as a specialization of this 'meaning-giving' function" [Habermas 1976, 118]. See also Giddens's comment that, "I have no dispute with the assertion that "the" problem of social theory is "the problem of order." But rather than understanding "order" in opposition to "disintegration," I oppose the term to chaos or formlessness" [Giddens 1981, 30].

[15] Archer may appear to be different from other writers in so far as she explicitly rejects the

From the perspective of social pragmatism, there is no general problem of order, only specific issues of order. By that token, there is no need to postulate a *general* coordination problem of action. Problems also bind practices together, at the same time as they raise the possibility of solutions that will transform them. Given that problems arise within and across different networks of practices, any solutions will create opportunities for creative appropriation within other networks as well as new problems as their implications become apparent.

5. Modes of Reflexivity?

The divide that separates sociological pragmatism from the general, presuppositional, or foundational, approach can be illustrated further by a detailed consideration of Margaret Archer's account of the "internal conversation." The purpose of her account is to identify the nature of agency (or subjectivity) as a potential causal power independent of structural and cultural properties and their causal powers. At the same time, she argues that,

> "for an objective structural or cultural property to exercise its causal powers, such powers have to be activated by agents" [Archer 2007, 12].

As should be evident, this poses something of a dilemma for her "morphogenetic" approach concerned with structural change, as it does for other accounts committed to providing general theories of structure and agency, because both "stasis" and "change", apparently, must be represented as agentially produced, where the implication also must be that stasis is, potentially, sub-optimal.

Archer discusses the "internal conversation" both in general terms and in the context of a discussion of social mobility. In the first, she argues that, despite the emphasis upon reflexivity in recent sociological theory, there is little detailed discussion of what this might mean for individual agents and how their subjectivity might be represented as both a property and power irreducible to structure.[16] Archer offers a typology of three modes of reflexivity characterising subjectivity: "communicative

idea of "normative integration" [Archer 1985]. However, her critique of "oversocialisation", which is directed at sociological pragmatists is, more properly, directed at the conception of the social typical of general theory. I shall go on to discuss the problems of her attempt to identify the "independence" of the "inner conversation". In this context, it is worth remarking that Wrong's [1961] critique of the "oversocialised conception of man" was directed at recovering a Freudian conception of unintegrable biological drives.

[16] Vandenberghe [2005] also criticises Archer's account of Mead. However, he endorses her account of the different modes of reflexivity, which I suggest is contrary to a sociological pragmatist account of the sort intimated by Mead.

reflexives," "autonomous reflexives" and "meta-reflexives." There is a fourth mode – associated with "fractured reflexives" – but this is defined, in effect, as a limit upon the other three, referring to individuals who, for reasons of specific traumatic events, find self-reflection too stressful and painful. Given that reflexivity is the condition of agency, all actors must show some degree of reflexivity and so even fracture reflexives must exhibit aspects of at least one of the other three modes (in the terms of how these are defined, it will usually tend toward the "autonomous reflexive" mode).

The three core modes of reflexivity have something in common with Weber's types of rational action. Thus, "meta-reflexives" are oriented to the realisation of a value, while "autonomous reflexives" are "self-reliant" and "task-oriented," resonating with Weber's distinction between *zweck-* and *wert- rationalität*, respectively; thus, Archer argues that, "for autonomous reflexives internal conversation is *task-oriented* whilst for meta-reflexives it is value-oriented" [Archer 2007, 300]. "Communicative reflexives" resonate with Weber's traditional type of action, where orientation is to a value, albeit one that is particularistic rather than universalisable. In the case of communicative reflexives, the orientation is to the opinion of "familiars" (for example, kin and friends). Given that these types are developed in the context of understanding processes of social mobility, the risks of reification are considerable. For example, why should we assume that the modes are 'dispositional' and causally connected to the production of "life fates", rather than reflecting particular stages in career or life cycle?

The thrust of the argument is that social mobility and immobility are equally agentially produced, although, at least in part, the demonstration depends upon an idiosyncratic definition of social mobility. Thus, job mobility is included alongside the normal definition of mobility across designated class, or socio-economic, positions (even here the treatment is not consistent; for example, a manual worker who has moved between a number of different manual jobs is described as mobile, although a professional from a middle-class background with little job mobility will not be described as immobile; at the same time, someone making a lateral move in terms of occupation between employment in the private sector to employment in the voluntary sector will also be described as mobile).

Archer makes strong claims about the consequences of the modes of reflexivity. Thus, "communicative reflexives" actively produce their own immobility and are socially reinforced to do so:

> "if the outcome of practising communicative reflexivity is social immobility, then none of society's emergent properties or powers is activated to resist the personal election of *stasis*. Nevertheless, it is indeed a matter of subjective and deliberative election, meaning the exertions of personal properties and powers. Social immobility

is not something that just happens by default; [...] 'staying put' requires a good deal of work on the part of active and reflexive agents" [*Ibidem*, 191].

It might be noted, however, that "staying put" may require different degrees of effort depending on prior location within the social structure, at the same time as those who stay put in middle class positions tend to have their efforts in maintaining immobility more positively evaluated than those who stay put in lower positions.

"Autonomous reflexives," for their part, transform their own situations because that form of reflexivity fosters mobility. They are "unconcealed individualists" with a "personalised ethics" that is "radically discontinuous with social normativity" [Archer 2003, 228]. In contrast, "meta-reflexives" stress living up to an "ideal" and make lateral shifts in jobs until that ideal is met. On this basis, Archer suggests that, "meta-reflexives are subversive because of the steady source of social criticism they direct towards the institutions employing them or that have employed them. However, the effects of their subversion go beyond these "patchwork" critiques. By retaining their value commitments, at the cost of periodic contextual unsettlement, these subjects serve to keep alive not only their personal cultural ideals but alternative values for society as a whole" [Archer 2007, 308].

From a Meadian perspective, it might be observed that two of the modes of reflexivity are explicitly conducted as "social selves"[17] namely those of communicative and meta-reflexivity. As we have seen, communicative reflexives are explicitly described in terms of the commensurability of subjectivity and social sanction. However, meta-reflexives would seem to speaking for another "We," precisely that of a "new community" as the product of a transformed social world and transformed (created) self, alike.[18] This leaves the "autonomous reflexive," perhaps, as not possessing a social self, but, even in the terms presented by Archer, how is the individual pursuing an "individualist agenda" at odds with "social normativity?"

While it may be the case that social immobility receives no negative social sanction (although that is doubtful, given the way in which the rhetoric of public policy frequently criticises the low aspirations of the poor, rather than the constraints of poverty on expectations and opportunities), it could hardly be argued that mobility is not positively endorsed socially. Indeed, Archer [2013] also refers of the emergence of "morphogenic society", characterised by a high degree of change. It is difficult to see that this could make sense except that it involved the valuation of change and

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[17] See also Vandenberghe [2005].
[18] It should be noted that, with one or two exceptions, the values espoused by meta-reflexives are derived from religious traditions; the exceptions are individuals formed within a strong socialist ethic.

the supposed personal characteristics – reflexivity, for example – peculiarly suited to it.

What seems to make the difference for Archer is that a self with "properties and powers" should be, at least, a self relatively autonomous from structural constraint. Yet there is nothing about the study that could establish that the selves so described are free in the way she describes (nor from a pragmatist perspective any reason to believe that anything significant inheres in that idea of "freedom," in that such "freedom" is not a condition of creativity). In any case, her study could not demonstrate that the forms of subjectivity are not, in fact, "adaptive" and "functional" of problem situations and problem-solving in the way outlined by a pragmatist approach. Thus, her study is a cross-sectional analysis where respondents provide their job histories from a particular moment in time. Their selves in the past, then, are constructions of the present [Mead 2002]. In this context, selves could not be regarded as "achievements," which then guide the individual through life and contribute to the explanation of that trajectory.

For example, attitudes to unemployment are likely to be formed in terms of current situation and perceived opportunities. Unemployed individuals may be "fatalistic," where those who are employed may express views that indicate that they believe they have personal attributes that explain the difference rather than that they have experienced good fortune. But the fact that one attributes the matter to absent opportunities and the other to motivational factors does not make the latter any less "situational" than the former. Indeed, Archer suggests that the fractured state is not irreversible [Archer 2007, 242], but, by that token, the same would be the case with the other modes. Personal expressions would seem to depend upon a subject's "present" and its relation to "past" and "future" at the time of interview.

Precisely because issues of subjectivity and reflexivity are situational, a sociological pragmatism would necessarily eschew the construction of reflexivity in terms of a typology attributed to persons, which, by virtue of its abstraction from context would reify attributes of situations as attributes of individuals. Indeed, from the perspective of reflexivity as situational, the interview itself constitutes a way of making situations "problematic," or, at least, a way of calling upon individuals to provide justifications, which they would not ordinarily do.[19]

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[19] Given that social mobility is positively endorsed, and that "communicative reflexives" are, in Archer's terms, socially immobile, it is surprising that she does not consider that the responses elicited in the interactions of an interview that warrant them being judged to be oriented to particularistic concerns are themselves potentially provided in the context of a perceived need to justify what Archer herself clearly presents negatively as a preference for stasis.

Of course, there is no avoiding the nature of the interview as a form of reflexive communication, but the methodological decisions taken do not unproblematically guarantee "objectivity." Archer's strategy is to affirm the different roles of observer and subject. The former provides the entitlement to rule on matters of structure (its "objective" status), while subjects are the judges of the validity of their own responses. Thus, she embraces the injunction to, "never substitute a third-person interpretation for a first-person meaning, on pain of getting it completely wrong" [*Ibidem*, 81]. However, it is not simply that the injunction is breached, but it couldn't not be breached; research is necessarily a process of just such a substitution and the core issue is the process of reflection on the manner in which it is done, including recognition both that the third person substitution is not subjectivity as it is understood in the first person, and that the interviewee participates in that third-person substitution).

At this point Archer cites Norbert Wiley in support of her argument, but he is making the opposite claim, namely that,

> "by their nature [...] first person qualia's [...] cannot be understood by another, cannot become inter-subjective and cannot be transformed into the third person" [Wiley 2004, 25, cited in Archer 2007, 81].

The point is that the person being interviewed is communicating inter-subjectively an *account* of their "inner conversation," not their inner conversation as such, and, in that sense is not providing a first person account for translation, but participating in the construction of a third person account, in a situation in which they are called to account.

Significantly, Archer describes methodological protocols that are designed to "clean" the process of "third person substitution" and reveal the supposedly underlying "modes" with greater clarity. Thus, the modes of reflexivity are presented by Archer as generated by interview responses to questions organised to identify each of the four modes of inner conversation. However, it is clear that most of the responses are mixed and individuals are assigned to one or other category by a preponderance of one type of response. The nature of the items used to generate the "Internal Conversation Indicator" are not provided, although the instrument that elicits the responses is described as going through various modifications at pre-pilot and pilot stages in order to elicit greater variance in the responses. This includes the deletion of any item that produces agreement among more than 70% of the respondents. Finally, the respondents who had scored the highest values in each of the four sets of items (intended to elicit the four modes of reflexivity being addressed) were asked to rank the six items corresponding to their "reflexive mode" in order to eliminate the lowest scoring two items. In other words, the final responses were "mixed" despite steps

taken to reduce the possibility of generating "mixed" responses, where the items were organised in a third-person substitution based upon the observer's typology.

The purpose of Archer's research is also to show how each mode is associated with a particular kind of job history. Here it is necessary for her to demonstrate that actors in the "same," "objective" situations differ in terms of their modes of reflexivity, in order to demonstrate the relative autonomy of the properties and powers of those different modes. If individuals in the "same" situation did not manifest different modes of reflexivity then the responses could be attributable to their situations.

Given that the focus of the study is social mobility, it is somewhat odd that there is no systematic address to the classification of jobs and socio-economic positions of the respondents and their families of origin. In other words, although the book is designed to account for social mobility in terms of characteristics of persons, no statements about social mobility in the book could be accepted as warranted on the information provided. Although a non-random sample of 178 interviews was conducted, this was reduced to 128 cases for the analysis. The aim was to have no more than 4 cases in each of 32 cells established on the basis of gender (male or female), 4 age groups (16-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55+) and 4 class groupings (managerial and professional, intermediate, routine and manual, and not working or unemployed longer than two years). On the basis of initial interviews, respondents were distributed to each of the four reflexive types and the top 12 "scorers" in each type were selected for in-depth interviews. The book finally reports the further interviews for 10 communicative reflexives, 12 autonomous reflexives and 12 meta-reflexives, that is 34 of the original 178 respondents.

By this time, however, there can be no confidence in the claim that the distribution of the different reflexive modes across all "objective," "structural" categories, establishes that the different job histories derive from the different reflexive modes operating in the "same" situations.[20] The argument that an agential self is both a property and power relatively autonomous from structure is neither established empirically, nor established theoretically as necessary to account for creativity. Indeed, since the dominant tendency in studies of class and mobility is to argue that orientations and class situations are closely aligned,[21] the problem of the empirical claim

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[20] Indeed, in so far as it is possible to "reconstruct" class position from the data provided, only 2 of the 10 communicative reflexives are in class positions 1 or 2, while 10 of 12 "meta-reflexives" are in class 1 or 2.

[21] Savage [2010], for example, shows strong patterning between social mobility and orientations to place, where those who are mobile tend to have an "elective view of belonging", while those who are not tend to have an "embedded" view of place. In the context of the critique of Archer offered

suggests the connection to the deeper-lying problem outlined earlier in the paper. Ultimately, the modes of reflexivity are presented as hierarchically ordered with the mode corresponding with that attributable to social inquirers – "meta-reflexivity" – as the one endorsed by Archer. This is not a matter of allowing actors the capacity of criticism of social inquirers, but of endorsing only those actors with whom the social inquirer has an affinity.

6. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that sociological pragmatism offers a more satisfactory resolution of classical sociological issues of structure and agency than is found within seemingly related approaches that seek to establish a general framework that embodies these categories. This conclusion is based on two core claims. The first is that there can be no general representation of the relation between structure and agency. Most of the instantiations of "structure" and "agency" as seemingly separable categories arise in the form of problems in social life and interaction. In this context, the representation of the abstracted categories as necessary and presuppositional is to reify the problem that gives rise to their abstraction, and to turn away from the reconstruction of meanings.

If the intention in laying claim to the importance of agency is to establish the significance of creativity, then problem-solving offers a more substantial candidate. However, the consequence of problem-solving is that the very instantiations are dissolved in the transformation of meaning and circumstance that are brought into being. This is the core argument of sociological pragmatism. The second claim is that conceiving the relationship between sociological inquirer and those whose behaviours are under scrutiny as a "dialogic" one is important, but there are no methodological or theoretical guarantees. Sociological claims are fallible and actors' meanings are interpreted within the situated practices of making sociological claims. The division of structure and agency in the way in which it is proposed in general theory encourages sociological inquirers to turn away from an examination of the validity of their own claims to have adequately interpreted meanings just at the moment that their potential fallibility is available for scrutiny.

The reification of "modes of reflexivity" examined in the latter part of this paper, then, is an expression of the reification of structure and agency discussed in the earlier part of the paper and involves the assertion of the supposed "truths" of

here, it is also significant that Savage also shows the affinity between the "enchanted" view of place and the views of the social researchers.

the inquirer over the different "truths" that are made available by closer attention to the nature of the process by which actors' meanings are being translated into sociological accounts. Once again, sociological pragmatism cautions us that attention to this process has the greatest significance for the validity of our enterprise.

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Reflexivity as Situated Problem-Solving

A Pragmatist Alternative to General Theory

Abstract: Recent developments in sociological theory have addressed the linkage between structure and agency via a conception of reflexivity and the agent's internal conversation as a means of understanding the (variable) contribution that the self and its powers contribute to social outcomes. In this paper, I present a sociological realism utilising the approach of American pragmatism (Dewey and Mead) to argue for a different way of conceptualising reflexivity, namely as an occasioned feature of interaction. On this view, reflexivity arises in relation to problems in interaction and is oriented to their resolution. It is argued that the self has a social structure and that reflexivity inheres in interactions and not in different types of individual self-identity. The paper discusses general issues of reflexivity in terms of conceptions of sociology's "dialogic." Archer's relation to actors whose behaviours are under scrutiny, before going on to discuss Margaret Archer's typology of the "inner dialogues" of actors and its use to understand social mobility.

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