

Social Structure and Individual Agency

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Social Structures Limit Human Agency

Human beings are conditioned by society to be who they are. Through social conditioning, one is strained by the social structures to behave in a manner that is only approved by the community. Though human beings exist as a single entity, the social norms that are constructed and dictated by the community restrain so many ways that people behave, think, and act. Social structure refers to the organized patterns that fundamentally influence choices that are made by human beings in society (Bhaskar, 2008).

There are many factors in society that limit the way that people think and behave in different situations. Moreover, when making decisions, there are several factors that one must take into consideration. The critical element of every choice entails what other people say about the conclusion that one made or a step one takes. Similarly, one must take into account the consequences of such decisions to others. Furthermore, society constitutes shared attitudes, perceptions, ideas, knowledge, and beliefs. Emile Durkheim, using the theory of collective consciousness, sheds more light on how society is bound and limited by social structures. Durkheim (1897) postulates that an organization can hold and work together because there is a preexisting sense of solidarity that unites all the members of the community.

Durkheim's theory is premised in the context of the division of labour, where those working have different tasks, yet they have one common factor, which is collective consciousness (Trnka, 2016). All other groups in the society are somewhat united by a certain sense of togetherness stemming from shared beliefs and knowledge on every aspect of life within the community. Moreover, the existing external forces from social institutions condition human beings to continue to practice and produce the same expectations of the structures that are set by society. Social institutions are most responsible for the collective consciousness.

Since social structure limits human agency, there are many instances in life where social structures have defined individuals. Gender is one of the social structures that have been set by society since time immemorial. Men and women have been made to behave in specific ways that are in tandem with the total expectations of the community. Whenever there is a deviation from the norms, then elements of stigmatization and criticism are set forth on those who have defied the same patterns. The concept of transgender was deemed not a standard in most parts of the world. Most of the people who are transgender had their rights violated based on the fact that most of the societies in the world made it hard for their existence in communities where social constructs on gender were very rigid to allow such concepts. In the case of *Hopkins V. Price Waterhouse* (1989), the court ruled in favour of

Hopkins, citing the illegality of the discrimination. Employment discrimination premising on sexual stereotypes amounts to unlawful acts. Hopkins had been denied promotion because of her dress code, which was not feminine. Discrimination of the kind that Hopkins faced in her work is representative of the social structures that have continued to act as a limitation to human agency.

One of the most fundamental factors that are pertinent to burgeoning over the limitation of social patterns that are set by society is to learn more about the restriction of social structures. With the knowledge of social structures, an individual can become more understanding of the structures that bar them from exercising in full who they are. Most of the people who have suffered discrimination and stigmatization are going through a lot of trauma because of the collective consciousness. There are many instances where society has made the lives of people hard and regrettable because they view such people as having the problem of not conforming to what it models them to be. It is a result of such stances that most people who are out of the conformity of society become discriminated against.

Though, to some extent, social structures have worked out to help maintain social order, most of the time, individuals have been limited, not being who they are. For instance, in the case of *Ann Hopkins v Price Waters*, she became a victim of the social structures where fellow workers are informed by stereotypes that are not validated enough to discriminate against a fellow worker (Hopkins v. PriceWater, 1989). Even though there have been many cases of discrimination, laws have been put in place to protect the rights of such employees who are reeling and working under very harsh conditions that stem from the misconception that is fostered by society. There is a need to be aware of the need to have individuals in the community exercise their rights and find who they are beyond what the community limits them to be.

In conclusion, human beings are a product of the social structures that not only limit their exercise of agency but make them become who they are not. Most of the people who have become victims of social limitations feel dejected and excluded from society. The power to overcome the constraints set by the community is to understand that such limits should not turn into barricades for people who are in need of realizing their identity and powers (Tsoukalas, 2007).

References

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