The Consequences of Flexibility for Structure

Flexibility Stream

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Ideas from Bourdieu, Giddens and Archer which elaborate the relationship between structure and agency are brought together to form a framework for investigating the realities of flexibility and structure. Archer has attacked Giddens' analysis of structuration, but has developed the essential principle that social life is constructed upon relationships between structure and agency. Unlike Giddens, she separates agency and structure in a way which allows them to be considered separately. However, her focus is still on the examination of the social whole; her theory incites us to take as our primary unit of analysis movements in the relations between agency and structure.

This paper argues that Archer's conception provides a bridge between the macro level interest in understanding society at large and the micro level interest in studying social interactions in smaller groups. We can now apply these sociological ideas to organisations, because relations between structure and agency characterise organisations. It is movements in these relations that track the evolutionary mutation of organisations.

After mapping conceptual developments between the theorists, the paper will make an assessment of recent moves to apply the theory to understanding organisations and their behaviour.

Flexibility provides a particularly fertile ground for emergent structures. Two organisations that are struggling with flexibility will be used to examine the structure/agency relationship. One of the organisations (a meat processing company) was assessed by management as being rigid and action had been taken to free up structure. The other (an emergency services organisation) had been seen as chaotic and lacking the required level of coordination. In each case, antecedent conditions and consequences of managerial action provide the points of interest.