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Questioning Contingency in Social Life: Roles, Agreement and Agency

By Stephen Kemp and John Holmwood

Abstract: Structure/agency theories presuppose that there is a unity to structure that distinguishes it from the (potential) diversity of agents' responses. In doing so they formally divide the robust social processes shaping the social world (structure) from contingent agential variation (agency). In this article we question this division by critically evaluating its application to the concept of role in critical realism and structural functionalism. We argue that Archer, Elder-Vass and Parsons all mistakenly understand a role to have a singular structural definition which agents may then diverge from. Drawing on the work of Gross, Mason and McEachern we argue instead that if agents diverge in their conceptions of what role incumbents should do, there is no single role definition, but rather a range of diverse role-expectations. Acknowledging this can help us to understand variation in role behaviour, with different incumbents potentially being more exposed to some expectations than others. We argue that considering roles in this way can extend the ability of social scientists to identify robust social processes shaping role behaviour and decrease the extent to which they need to call on contingent factors in such explanations.

1. Introduction

One way in which theories in the social sciences can be divided is in their attitude to contingency. At one extreme we have the view that social life is so contingent in character that there are no social influences or processes that span across locales – rather, each situation is fundamentally different from the next. At the other extreme, we have the view that there is no contingency in social life, that all aspects of it are deeply shaped by social processes and influences that produce outcomes in the social world. Over the last 30 or 40 years, there has been a drift in social science away from a belief in the existence of robust social processes and towards an emphasis on contingency. This is apparent in a range of positions that otherwise have different commitments, including complexity and chaos theory, post-structuralism and ethnomethodology. For example, complexity and chaos theorists argue that many, perhaps all, outcomes in the social world are the product of contingent causal interplays, and are so sensitive to subtle changes that social scientific accounts cannot plausibly move beyond particular, local accounts (cf Cilliers, 1998; Radford, 2008).

One of the most common ways to challenge approaches based entirely on contingency is to accept that it has *some* part to play in the social world but attempt to formally delimit that role. The key move here is the attempt to identify the scope and contribution of systematic features on the one hand, and contingent particularities on the other, prior to inquiry. This kind of move is present in structural-functionalism and, more, recently, in critical realism. For exponents of structural functionalism, such as Parsons, there are system processes which shape what actors do in important ways; but these robust processes are not the only factors that produce social outcomes. Rather, contingencies such as deviant behaviour also play a role (Parsons, 1952). For critical realists, there are structures which have an influence upon the social world and

shape the outcomes that can occur at any given time; but there is also agency, which is a key contributor to the contingency of occurrences in the social world (Bhaskar, 1979; Archer, 1995). In both approaches, robust social processes (system processes or structures) are conceptually separated from contingent features (deviance or agency) prior to inquiry.

Although we are critical of a fully contingency-based picture of the social world (see Holmwood, 1996; Kemp, 2009), we want to argue that attempts to formally divide the systematic from the contingent are problematic as an alternative. Specifically, by identifying certain features of the social world as contingent *a priori* this theoretical architecture encourages inquirers to give up too swiftly on the possibility of explaining diversity with reference to robust social influences. Instead of starting from an assumption that certain aspects of the social world must be accounted for by reference to contingent factors, we want to encourage investigators to start by attempting a systematic explanation of the aspects of the social world that they are concerned with, although a satisfactory account may not always be produced. Positioning this argument, it might be said that we share with critical realists an interest in promoting empirical social scientific research into social processes, but are concerned to avoid theoretical divisions which inadvertently limit such inquiry. For the purposes of this article a systematic social explanation is a theory which argues for the existence of robust social processes and/or influences that, when they operate, promote a certain (kind of) outcome, other things being equal.¹ By contrast, a social scientific account based on *ad hoc* contingencies, argues that there are no robust social processes bringing about the outcome – rather it is the result of factors that are particular in character, and may not be attributable to the realm of ‘the social’ at all.²

Clearly, there exists a huge range of areas in which questions of contingency and systematicity in social life can be analysed, and not all can be considered within one article. In order to narrow the field to create a manageable discussion, we are going to focus particularly on these issues in relation to roles and role behaviour. Of particular interest here is how to account for the apparent fact that actors who seem to be engaged in the same role – whether it be that of teacher, police officer or garbage collector – sometimes behave in diverse ways. Is the explanation to do with contingent features such as deviance or agency, or might it reside in systematic features of roles themselves? We have chosen to focus on the concept of roles for a number of reasons. For one thing, it has historically been an important area in which the explanation of social actions has been analysed, with accounts trying to identify the character of role behaviour and the place of contingency in it. For another thing, the concept of role has re-emerged in some contemporary social theories, particularly in the work of critical realist thinkers concerned with the structure and agency debate, such as Margaret Archer (1995, 2000b) and Dave Elder-Vass (2010). Although it would be incorrect to say that the concept of role is central to critical realism, conceptualizations of roles have featured in debates between defenders of different theoretical positions as a basis on which their positions can be differentiated (King, 2004; Archer, 2000a; Elder-Vass, REF, 2007a). Furthermore, the way in which critical realists analyse roles is consistent with their more general approach to social explanation and contingency and is illuminating in that respect. Third, looking at the concept of role allows us to connect contemporary debates with earlier theoretical discussions and recover insights that have been to some extent ignored. Although Archer and Elder-Vass employ the concept of role, neither of them discusses critiques

of the concept of role in functionalism, previously the major sociological position concerned with roles. Making this connection allows us to see both the continuities and discontinuities between past and present social theorizing, and also to revive an important line of argument from past debates. In reconsidering and developing the ideas of Gross, Mason and McEachern, put forward in their *Explorations in Role Analysis* (1958), we believe that we can also contribute to contemporary research that employs the concept of role.

To summarise the argument that follows, our specific engagement with role theories exemplifies our wider commitment to systematic explanation. The specific argument is that prominent existing analyses of roles have a problematic theoretical structure. Both structural-functionalism and critical realism make a division between the social expectations surrounding a role, which they see as singular in character, and the performance of a role, which they see as potentially diverse in character. We will argue that analysts see the systematic processes influencing role behaviour as oriented towards promoting behaviour in line with a singular set of expectations. By doing so, these analysts lock themselves into accounting for role variation by reference to contingency. Following Gross, Mason and McEachern (1958) we argue for the alternative view that role expectations should be seen as plural in character, reflecting the way in which a role may be defined differently by different groups of social actors. We suggest that this alternative approach encourages systematic social explanation of variations in role behaviour rather than ruling it out. Our argument about roles thus exemplifies our wider concern to both promote an orientation to systematic explanation and to question approaches that attempt to fix the scope of contingency in social life *a priori*.

2. Delimiting Social Explanation: Diverse Role Behaviour as Contingent

In this section we will be suggesting that despite certain differences, there is an important degree of overlap between structural-functionalist and critical realist accounts of roles and role-behaviours. Key representatives of both approaches argue that each role has a singular definition, and that processes of coordination and/or sanctioning shape actors' behaviour towards this definition. However proponents of both approaches also accept that the behaviour of actors within each role can be diverse. Problematically, from our perspective, this variation of behaviours is not treated as potentially explicable by reference to robust social influences, but is typically accounted for by reference to contingent deviance or agency. As such, structural-functionalists and critical realists make a conceptual division within their analyses that formally delimits the scope of systematic social analysis and identifies certain phenomena as intrinsically contingent in character.

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying what we mean when we say that theorists see role definitions as singular. This is not to say that such theorists see all agents as content with existing role definitions. Rather it is that they *understand a role to be defined by a single set of expectations which all participants take to define the role at the present time*. We will refer to this assumption as the idea that roles are characterised by 'definitional agreement' or by a 'singular' set of expectations.³

Structural-Functionalism

We will begin by considering structural-functionalism and then move on to critical realism. The classic structural-functionalist work dealing with roles is Talcott Parsons' *The Social System* (1952). Simplifying Parsons' analysis somewhat for the sake of the reader, we can say that he sees a role as part of a system of social relationships, in which a role defines what an actor 'does in his relations with others seen in the context of its functional significance for the social system' (Parsons, 1952: 25). In a functional system, a role will be based on an institutionalized common standard, in other words, it will have a single shared definition given from the point of view of the system (Parsons, 1952: 249). Because roles involve relations with others, the issue for Parsons is how interactions can be well-coordinated (orderly), and he contends that this can only be achieved by actors interacting with one another in a way which is constrained towards a common standard (Parsons, 1952: 37; 249). On the side of the role incumbent, s/he needs to grasp role expectations which set the standard for his/her behaviour. But the other who is related to must also have these expectations, and also has the ability to sanction through positive or negative response depending on whether the expectations are upheld (Parsons, 1952: 38). It is correct to say that for Parsons, concrete (actual) action systems may not be fully integrated, that is fully coordinated (a point not often grasped by critics, as Holmwood [1996] points out). Nevertheless, the robust social processes that Parsons identifies are ones which push towards coordination – towards orderly behaviour, and thus towards a singular definition for each role. Common role standards are promoted by the need for the actions of individuals to be coordinated with one another, and behaviour consistent with these is reinforced by sanctioning.

Although he focuses on social processes which shape behaviour towards consistency with role definitions, Parsons does allow that there may be some diversity of behaviour by those who are incumbents in roles, but that this diversity is attributed to contingency rather than to systematic social processes (for discussion see Holmwood, 1996). Parsons' most analytically developed account of diverse behaviour in roles focuses on the way in which role incumbents with deviant motivations may not conform to role expectations (Parsons, 1952: 249-280).⁴ Indeed, the need for negative sanctions alongside positive ones is, for Parsons, a recognition of motivations towards deviance. Deviant actors may display an indifference to expectations or an 'incurable' inclination to go against these expectations (Parsons, 1952: 260). However, Parsons offers little by way of a systematic social explanation of diverse/deviant behaviour. In *The Social System*, Parsons treats deviant motivations as resulting from certain kinds of strains that may be developed or accentuated in interaction, but his discussion of the 'genesis' of these motivations does not account for the initial basis of those strains (Parsons, 1952: 251-6). Given that the main social processes that Parsons identifies are those oriented to coordination, this is hardly surprising, as with such commitments it becomes very difficult to explain diverse/deviant behaviour socially. Rather, Parsons accounts for deviance/diversity by attributing it to the contingent failure of processes that should tend towards integration. The on-going task of making socialization effective implies the possibility of contingent failure (Parsons, 1952: 201-7). But this general possibility does not allow us to socially explain any particular instance of deviance/diversity, but merely presents it as a contingent failure that might have developed at any point.

Parsons' account is problematic because it rules out the possibility of giving a systematic social account of diverse role behaviour – socially intelligible processes

are understood to promote singularity rather than diversity. Indeed, even when speaking most directly about deviance, Parsons still sees the deviant actor as relating to common expectations:

‘A tendency to deviance in this sense is a process of motivated action, on the part of an actor who has unquestionably had a full opportunity to learn the requisite orientations, tending to deviate from the complementary expectations of conformity with common standards so far as these are relevant to the definitions of his [sic] role.’ (Parsons, 1952: 206)

A further problem is that, for Parsons, socially meaningful action is based on the sharing of values and expectations with others, with the result that deviant actions must always tend towards social meaninglessness in his analysis. Might it not be better to argue that there may be multiple socially intelligible standards of meaning and expectation, and account for diverse actions by reference to these diverse standards (including emergent new standards)? We will return to this point later.

Critical Realism

What we want to suggest now is that critical realist treatments of diversity of role behaviour share certain important features with functionalist approaches. This is, of course, not to suggest that critical realism, as a theoretical approach, is identical to structural-functionalism. But it is to suggest that two somewhat different critical realist approaches, those of Archer and Elder-Vass, analyse diversity in a similar manner to functionalism. That is to say, they identify a robust social process which is understood to influence the behaviour of role incumbents towards consistency with a single set of role definitions; they then acknowledge diversity within role enactment but attribute this to contingency rather than to systematic social processes. The difference with functionalism is not in the form of the analysis, but that the contingent element is assigned a positive normative value, and is described as ‘agency’.

It is important to be clear that when we characterize an approach as arguing that roles have a single set of definitions we are not saying that it will exclude ‘structural’ differentiation within any role. Our argument is that what such an approach excludes is the possibility that there will be no single set of expectations for a role, however differentiated it is. So, for example, theoretical frameworks like critical realism and functionalism can accept that within the role of ‘parent’ there are further differentiations into ‘father’ and ‘mother’, seeing each of these as having different expectations. What they do not accept is that for a role like ‘father’ there may be no single set of expectations because different actors/groups within society have different, although potentially partially overlapping, conceptions of what being a ‘father’ involves. We see this as not merely a chance absence but as built into the structure of the meta-theory. In the case of critical realism, it derives, as we shall see, from the separation of structure and agency. In relation to roles this separation is based on an implicit assumption that there is something shared by all (roles/norms with a singular definition) which agents may then diverge from. The difficulty, we will suggest, is in retaining the notion of a ‘structural’ shared definition of role expectations in cases where agents do diverge in their role expectations.

To understand Archer's analysis of roles, we need to consider her commitment to 'analytical dualism'. This is the idea that social scientists should separate out the 'parts' of society – structures – from the 'people' – agents – and analyse the interplay of these elements (Archer, 1995). According to Archer this is necessary because although structure and agency do interact with one another over time, the only way this interaction can be comprehended is by treating each element as separable at any particular point in time. This separation is underwritten by Archer's argument that 'structure necessarily predates the actions which transform it' (Archer, 1995: 90). And this emphasis on dualism is borne out by Archer's statement that emergent structures:

'...are defined and identified independently of their occupants or incumbents and of the social interaction taking place between the latter.' (Archer, 1995: 176).

Thus the dominant thrust of Archer's approach is to argue that structure is, at any given time, not dependent for its character on the activities or understandings of synchronic agents. Archer also subdivides structures into two categories, separating those which are social in character, which are based on 'material relations', and those which are cultural in character, which are based on relations between propositions (Archer, 1995: 175-179). Archer's emphasis on the relative independence of structure from agents does not mean that she believes structure determines what happens in society at any moment in time, and nor does it mean that she believes that agents cannot transform structures. Instead, Archer argues that although structures have their own conditioning *influence* on events, they do not *determine* what occurs, because agents are capable of exercising their reflexivity and responding in ways that reflect their distinctive personalities and commitments (Archer, 1995, 2003). Likewise, these responses may lead to transformations in structures over time, agents' activities leading in such cases to 'structural elaboration'.

Archer's analysis of roles is consistent with analytical dualism, insofar as she divides the structural features of roles from agential response to them (Archer, 1995: 186-7). What we want to suggest is that this is an instance of a formal division in which phenomena that *may* be able to be systematically explained, diverse enactments of a role, are excluded from this prospect by fiat. We will also be suggesting that this same division enshrines the questionable idea that the expectations for any role are singular in character. We can begin to see this by considering the aspect of roles which Archer links to a robust social process: what she refers to as their 'structural' character. Archer argues that a role structure is characterised by a set of obligations, including the tasks the incumbent has to do to satisfy the role specifications, and definitions of what is and is not a reasonable way to go about these tasks. Archer's next claim strongly echoes functionalism in arguing that there are 'penalties and promotions' which may be invoked, such that serious divergence from stated obligations will incur penalties, and successful compliance will lead to rewards. As such, at any particular time, the set obligations of a role structure tend to shape actors' behaviour insofar as they are motivated to gain 'promotions' and avoid 'penalties'

As with functionalism, there is a strong implication in Archer's analysis that any role has a singular set of definitions associated with it. To take one example, Archer refers to 'the role itself' as a 'prior definition of obligations, sanctions and interests'

(Archer, 1995: 187). Another quote from Archer also suggests that a role has a singular character:

‘Only by examining the interplay between a role and its occupants is it possible to account for why some roles are personified in routine ways whilst others can be cumulatively transformed in the hands of their incumbents.’
(Archer, 1995: 187)

In this quote, Archer differentiates between routine and non-routine personifications of roles and it is hard to see how there could be routine personifications of roles without these deriving from a single structural definition of that role. Further, Archer’s wish to treat each structure as an ‘emergent property’ that has its own causal power (Archer, 1995: 172-7) appears to be incompatible with the idea that a role structure could be multiple in character.

Although Archer’s general approach is to treat roles as having a single set of expectations, she also argues that role performances may have a degree of diversity. This diversity does not, for Archer, arise from the social constitution of the role itself, but from the performance of the role by an agent (Archer, 1995: 186-7). Indeed, Archer places a strong emphasis on the ‘personification’ of roles and on the way in which agents can perform roles ‘in a singular manner’ (Archer, 2000b: 11; see also 1995: 186-8). These personifications are sometimes understood to ‘fill out’ aspects of the role that have not been specified (Archer, 1995: 187). Likewise, for Archer, personifications are one way in which roles can come to be transformed over time (Archer, 2000b: 304).

Does Archer’s attribution of diverse role behaviour to agency assign this diversity to contingent factors that are not subject to systematic social explanation? Archer gives agency a lengthy treatment in her work (see for example Archer, 2000b), and we do not have the space for an in-depth engagement with it here. Nevertheless, when Archer discusses the personification of roles in some detail, the factors she identifies have importantly contingent features (Archer, 2000b: 288-295). For Archer, the personal identity of the incumbent is a crucial contributor to the extent to which a role is personified, and the direction which this personification takes. Although Archer allows that aspects of personal identity are shaped by society, she also contends that contingent factors in a child’s upbringing play a major role in shaping this identity (see Archer, 2000b: 288-291, 193-221). Furthermore, ongoing decisions about how an incumbent should enact a role are part of a continuing dialectic between agent and society which is, for Archer, underdetermined by society. This is because the outcome is importantly shaped by the ‘internal conversation’ of the individual which is understood to be relatively independent from society (Archer, 2000b: 293-5; see also Archer, 2003). Thus it seems accurate to say that diversity in role behaviour, which Archer attributes to personification, is importantly contingent for her and not subject to systematic social explanation.

Archer undoubtedly gives a more normatively positive view of diversity and contingency in role performance than Parsons does, given his use of the concept of deviance. Nevertheless, the similarity that we have identified here is that in relation to any role, both see role expectations as singular and backed up by systematic social processes, and both see variation in role behaviour as contingent in character. The

consequence of this is that the range of behaviour that is acknowledged to exist in relation to any particular role is defined as beyond the scope of systematic social explanation. Systematic social explanation is rooted for these writers in the idea of *shared* expectations.

It is relevant to see that Archer's division of 'structural' role expectations from 'agential' personifications starts to break down within her own analysis. One of Archer's examples of role personification points beyond individual variation to a socially-structured diversity of expectations without Archer having the theoretical mechanism to deal with this. In this example, Archer discusses what she sees as the transformation of the expectations for the role of 'University Professor' (Archer, 2000b: 296-7). Initially, she suggests that individual personifications of this role have transformed role expectations about the character of interactions with students over time, these moving from the austere to the personable. This could be interpreted consistently with Archer's general approach as a process that involves a shift from one singular set of expectations to another singular set. When discussing the changing role of academics over thirty years, however, Archer states that:

...very different personifications of this role...have led to a much more approachable and pastorally involved occupant of the 'same' role – to the point where students, at least, now consider those remaining as distant Professors to be 'no-good academics'. (Archer, 2000b: 297)

Archer clearly suggests here that the expectations of students about the role of a Professor may be different to those of unspecified others. We can imagine those on University promotions committees, for example, may not consider pastoral involvement to be a key part of the role. But Archer has no theoretical mechanism for dealing with this diversity of expectations. Indeed the very idea of 'student expectations' cuts across Archer's theoretical divisions. For Archer, role expectations are on the 'structure' side of her analytical dualism, and are not associated with what any group of actors understands to be the case, whereas students clearly are a particular group of actors.

Of course, when a theorist's example does not cohere with their general framework, it may be that it is the account of the example that is problematic, rather than the general theory. With regards to Archer's example we would certainly not wish to defend her view that the explanation of changing academic roles is straightforwardly the outcome of certain personifications being selected by students. However, the implication that different groups can have different expectations of role incumbents, which can be derived from Archer's example, is one that we want to uphold. Importantly, the idea that expectations can be plural does pose difficulties for Archer's general theory, which attempts to give role expectations a singular character at the 'structural' level. Archer wishes to separate the 'structural' expectations of a role from the 'agential' expectations of any particular social group. But once we see that groups can have divergent expectations of role incumbents, what basis is there for claiming that there is also a 'structural' set of expectations? Whose expectations are these, and how can they causally influence what agents do? We shall return to these points later.

Elder-Vass is a recent contributor to critical realist debates, and his approach to structure and roles is different enough to that of Archer to warrant independent

consideration. To understand Elder-Vass's analysis of roles we need to consider his analysis of norm circles, and this in turn needs to be contextualized by his analysis of emergence. This is because, for Elder-Vass, roles have normative content which is backed up by the sanctioning power of a norm circle, itself understood to be an emergent phenomenon.

Elder-Vass's conception of emergence focuses on the ways in which a power can emerge because certain elements are related in a specific way which is necessary to generate that power. In Elder-Vass's terminology, there are *parts* that are related to one another in a particular way, which produces a *whole* that has its own causal powers/emergent properties (Elder-Vass, 2010: 16-7). As Elder-Vass puts it:

'Emergence is the idea that a whole can have properties (or powers) that are not possessed by its parts – or, to put it more rigorously, properties that would not be possessed by its parts if they were not organised as a group into the form of this particular kind of whole.' (Elder-Vass, 2007a: 28)

For Elder-Vass, social structures should always be understood as the '*causal powers of specific social groups*' and these powers are an emergent product of groups organized in a particular way (Elder-Vass, 2010: 86. His emphasis). For Elder-Vass, a norm is a rule that specifies appropriate ways of behaving, and he argues that regularised practices exist which are shaped by norms (Elder-Vass, 2010: 116-7). What he wants to do is to go beyond this observation to identify the 'whole' which has the emergent property/power to influence practices. According to Elder-Vass, this whole is the 'norm circle', a group of people who share a normative belief and share a disposition to endorse and enforce that normative belief (Elder-Vass, 2010: 122-7). Because the group members have these properties and relate to each other by endorsing and enforcing, the group has the causal power to 'tend to produce the corresponding practice' (Elder-Vass, 2010: 123). Elder-Vass refers to this power as a 'normative social institution', and he argues that in the absence of other influences, practices are regularised through this causal power of sanctioning.

The contrast between the views of Archer and Elder-Vass starts to become clear when we see that for the latter it is people who are the 'essential parts' of a social structure (Elder-Vass, 2010: 86). As such, Elder-Vass argues that the 'causal powers of the whole remain dependent on the presence of the properties of the parts' (Elder-Vass, 2007a: 40). Putting these points together, it becomes apparent that, for Elder-Vass, the power of social structure is synchronically *dependent* on agents with certain properties – in the case of norm circles, agents having normative beliefs and dispositions to act in certain ways. And this means that, contrary to Archer's dominant approach, Elder-Vass's analysis suggests that structure is not synchronically independent of 'social interaction' and from what agents think and believe.⁵

This brings us to Elder-Vass's analysis of roles, which is also different to Archer's in certain respects. Unlike Archer, Elder-Vass does not see roles as structures in themselves, but as 'normative constructions' that are backed up by the emergent power of a norm circle (see Elder-Vass, 2010: 164, 122-7). Roles are normative constructions which specify the relationships between members of an organization, allowing work to be divided up and coordinated (Elder-Vass, 2010: 145, 153).⁶ According to Elder-Vass, role descriptions:

‘...implicitly or explicitly specify norms that define how an incumbent of the position concerned must relate to other members of the organisation and also how they must relate to outsiders when acting on behalf of the organisation’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 153)

The norms that characterise a role might be formalized but they may also be informal expectations that members of an organization have (Elder-Vass, 2010: 153).

As mentioned above, Elder-Vass argues that roles as normative constructions come to influence people because of their backing by norm circles. Roles as ‘normative constructions’ have an influence because members of the organization constitute a norm circle who respond positively to role conformity and negatively to deviation from the role. The reinforcing power of a norm circle is, in Elder-Vass’s view, crucial because ‘it has a causal tendency to produce role-implementing behaviour by the members of the organisation’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 155). This is important to an organization because, for Elder-Vass, the ability of an organization to act successfully is a product of a combination of appropriate role specification/differentiation by management and the ability of organizations to get incumbents to follow through these roles. This leads to successfully coordinated interaction which can have spectacular results, as in Adam Smith’s example of the division of labour in the pin factory (Elder-Vass, 2010: 163, 165).

From this discussion we can see that Elder-Vass analyses roles in a somewhat different way to Archer, insofar as he does not treat the character and influences of roles as independent from the understandings of present-day agents, but as dependent on those understandings. Nevertheless, we would suggest that his approach has overlaps with those of Archer and indeed Parsons in important respects. In relation to the issue of singularity, Elder-Vass seems to assume that each role has a single definition and set of expectations. This assumption of the singular character of role definition is apparent in a range of places (Elder-Vass, 2010: 158-161), but it is perhaps most clearly expressed in an approving quotation of March and Simon:

‘Not only is the role defined for the individual who occupies it, but it is known in considerable detail to others in the organization who have occasion to deal with him’ (March and Simon, 1993 [1958]: 22; cited in Elder-Vass, 2010: 165).

Although there is an acknowledgement here that a range of members of the organization deal with an individual occupying a role, there is a strong implication that there is nevertheless a single set of expectations for each role.⁷ Once again, let us emphasize that the issue is not whether Elder-Vass understands roles in a way which does not permit him to see that a more general role (say ‘manager’) can be divided into sub-roles (say ‘regional manager’, ‘human resources manager’ etc). This is not the question. Rather, the question is whether Elder-Vass conceptualizes roles, however ‘structurally’ differentiated, as having a single set of expectations which all relevant actors agree is the definition of the role.

Having emphasized that shared-definition is the issue, it is worth considering whether, contrary to our argument so far, Elder-Vass’s treatment of norm circles and conflict

allows for competing role definitions from different actors. After all, on the issue of conflict Elder-Vass allows that there may be conflicting norm circles operating on an individual, stating:

‘My family, for example, may expect one thing of me and my class or workmates something quite different.’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 133)

Thus Elder-Vass argues that normative intersectionality is possible, in which an individual is a member of more than one norm circle and may have conflicting pressures applied to them. However, we would argue that this point cannot straightforwardly be applied to divergent expectations of how a role should be conducted for two reasons. Firstly, the level of the analysis appears to be different. Elder-Vass is arguing that *an individual* can be subject to competing normative demands, as a member of more than one normative circle. By contrast, the question about roles is the extent to which *the role itself* is subject to competing definitions.

This relates to the second point which is that Elder-Vass’s analysis of competing demands on the individual still implies the singularity of the norms promoted in each demand. Elder-Vass argues that individuals who are subject to competing normative demands are in that situation because of their membership of a range of norm circles. On Elder-Vass’s account of the above example, an individual may be subject to one set of expectations as a family member and another as a workmate, and these may clash. But this implies that each set of expectations is self-consistent such that there is not disagreement about what it is to be a good family member or a good work-mate. And this assumption about normative agreement within a norm circle is borne out by Elder-Vass’s remark that:

‘...institutions depend on the members of the norm circle sharing a similar understanding of the norm concerned...’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 123)

As roles are sets of norms for Elder-Vass, we can see that his analysis suggests that members will have a similar understanding of the roles. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Elder-Vass’s account is based on an assumption of the singularity of role definitions.⁸

The other key issue is how diversity of behaviour within any role is therefore explained. As with Parsons and Archer, because role definitions are treated as singular, the sanctioning processes that Elder-Vass sees as influencing role behaviour are identified as promoting one type of performance. As such, variation in role behaviour is attributed not to systematically explicable features of a role but to contingencies. Those contingencies that attributed to individuals⁹ are analysed under the rubric of agency rather than that of deviance. As we saw, Archer attributes the diversity of role behaviours to role-personification. Likewise, Elder-Vass is keen to stress that those who uphold a role are not fully determined in their action by the role specification, as their own powers as individuals can be called on to co-produce the outcomes of their action (Elder-Vass, 2010: 159). Elder-Vass states:

‘Individuals choose to occupy the role, and can choose to leave it, and they also make decisions about how to perform it...’ (Elder-Vass, 2010: 159)

One point at which Elder-Vass emphasizes the need for *individual* decision-making is when such an individual is put under pressure from different normative circles, e.g. where family expect one thing of an individual and workmates expect another (Elder-Vass, 2010: 133). At such a point social influences are insufficient to produce an outcome, leaving the role behaviour to the individual decision-making of an agent.

3. The Alternative: Diverse Role Behaviour as Systematically Explicable

In this section we want to consider whether there is way to account for diverse behaviours in a role that offers a possibility of systematic explanation excluded by the approaches considered above. As such, we will turn to the work of Gross, Mason and McEachern (1958) whose critical analysis of the concept of roles seems to have been under-explored. This may well be because ethnomethodological critiques of structural-functionalism seized the imagination of sociologists to a greater extent, perhaps due to their apparently more radical orientation. Despite the interest at the time, however, later ‘mainstream’ sociology seems to have largely set ethnomethodological ideas aside. In fact, pre- and post-ethnomethodological approaches like structural functionalism and critical realism have more overlap with each other than they do with ethnomethodology. In relation to our own argument, a standard interpretation of ethnomethodological ideas (see for example Heritage, 1984) is pushing in the opposite direction to our analysis as they place a great emphasis on contingency of behaviour and question the very notion of robust social processes that spread beyond any particular context. In this respect the analyses of Gross *et al* in *Explorations in Role Analysis* (1958) are preferable from our perspective because they offer an alternative analysis of roles to structural-functionalism (and critical realism) which opens up the potential for systematic explanation of diverse role behaviour.

The initial critical work of Gross *et al* is directed at the assumption found in a range of anthropological, sociological and social psychological theories that the roles in any particular society, such as ‘mother’ or ‘teacher’, each have a standard, single set of definitions associated with them (Gross *et al*, 1958: 4). As Gross *et al* point out, this assumption of definitional agreement on role expectations may be explicitly defended or simply be implicit within a theory. Having identified that many theories of roles assume definitional agreement, Gross *et al* go on to make a case for an alternative view. They argue that complete agreement on current role definition amongst all relevant definers is best understood as a limiting case. In the view of Gross *et al*, although there must be some degree of commensurability of expectations, the extent of variation is significant for sociology to understand (Gross *et al*, 1958: 43, 74). To empirically illustrate the importance of variation Gross *et al* engaged in an extensive study of the role¹⁰ of ‘superintendent’ in schools in the USA, and particularly in the state of Massachusetts. The superintendent was¹¹ a role in a formal organization – a school system. The role had a formally specified relationship to various other roles – school board member, teacher – and relations with other constituencies like professional educators and the community around the school. There was a professional literature on the appropriate role behaviour for a superintendent such that role definition could not be considered to be under-developed (Gross *et al*, 1958: 79-80). To understand what the superintendent did we need to consider the relation of the role to that of school board member. In Massachusetts the school board was elected from the local community who also made a large contribution to the finances for running the local school system (Gross *et al*, 1958: 100). The superintendent was

employed by the board to be its 'executive officer', and the board was thus 'superordinate' to the superintendent. As to what the superintendent was supposed to do, Gross *et al* state that:

'...the tasks of the superintendent are to administer and supervise the physical and human resources involved in the internal functioning of the school system...' (Gross *et al*, 1958: 123)

These tasks included hiring personnel, being responsible for promotions, recommending levels for teacher salaries, overseeing budgets, and making recommendations about what is appropriate and inappropriate expenditure (Gross *et al*, 1958: 258-60).

Although there was apparently general agreement about the broad parameters of what a superintendent was supposed to do, these general characterisations were hardly sufficient to specify the role. And what Gross *et al* argue is that once we get into the realm of more detailed specification, there were, in some cases, conflicting expectations about what the role incumbent was supposed to do. They derived this conclusion on the basis of interviews with a large number of superintendents and school board members which attempted to elicit their definitions of various aspects of the superintendent role (Gross *et al*, 1958: 79-94).

A wide range of aspects of the superintendent role were analysed, but let us try to pick out some salient examples here. One issue investigated was the extent to which a variety of tasks were understood to be the dominant responsibility of the superintendent or the school board (Gross *et al*, 1958: 123-5). These tasks included hiring a new teacher, deciding when a new textbook was needed and making recommendations for increases to salaries. Gross *et al* found that superintendents tended to assign more responsibility to themselves for undertaking these tasks than school board members did. Putting this another way, there was a tendency for superintendents and school board members to disagree in their expectations about the superintendent role. The disagreement was over the extent to which superintendents had the dominant responsibility for hiring teachers, deciding when new textbooks were needed, and so on.

Another example was of expectations of the superintendent's role with respect to salary recommendations (Gross *et al*, 1958: 267-272). Here the data was based on superintendents' own views of the expectations of others and such data is likely to be less reliable than that provided by the others themselves. Nevertheless, there is no particular reason to doubt, for example, the claim that teachers expect the superintendent to fight for as large a salary as possible for them, and that parents and labour unions tend to share this expectation. It also seems reasonable to accept superintendents' reports that tax-payers associations tend to have the expectation that superintendents will fight to keep salary costs down, as do town finance committees. As such, we can say that there were clashing expectations of the role of superintendent in relation to salary recommendations. As with the division of labour between superintendents and school boards, this was not a matter of differing expectations about some small, unimportant part of the role, but about the responsibilities of the superintendent in relation to key tasks. This is not to say that differing role definitions are necessarily completely incompatible with one another.

After all, divergent role definitions may well overlap to some extent, such that differences may emerge only in some areas and not others. Furthermore, there may be agreement in some expectations even though different role-definers may promote those expectations for different reasons.¹²

Let us sum up what we take to be important about these arguments for assessing the return to role in recent social theory. Theoretically speaking, Gross *et al* point out that if we treat roles as characterised by expectations or definitions, then it is possible that there can be different expectations and definitions in relation to a role at a particular time, and this possibility should not be foreclosed by a theoretical assumption of definitional agreement. By contrast, Archer, Elder-Vass and Parsons do seem to foreclose on the possibility of variation by assuming that roles are defined in unitary ways. Empirically speaking, Gross *et al* give an illustration of variation in role definition by showing that in relation to one important position within a formal organization, the superintendent in the school system, there are variant definitions. And, of course, the school system also contains within it a number of other roles and what is true for superintendents is likely to be true for the other roles as well. By contrast, it seems distinctly possible that research conducted within the framework of Archer, Elder-Vass or Parsons would not have been sensitive to variations in role definitions of this kind.¹³

What we want to do now is consider further the potential impact of the assumption of definitional agreement on empirical research. One issue is what researchers who are primed to look for definitional agreement will do to secure a single role account. A possibility discussed by Gross *et al* is that researchers will try to smooth out differences in expectations and construct a role account out of something like the average expectations for a position (Gross *et al*, 1958: 21-5). The problem with such a move is that if there are systematically different expectations in different groups these will be obscured in the smoothing out process. For example, using this averaging procedure would smooth out the different expectations of school board members and superintendents, the ‘average’ expectations representing neither position.

Another possibility when attempting to construct a single role account is to accept the definition of the role that is supplied by senior management. Out of the thinkers that we have considered Elder-Vass, in particular, sometimes seems to be treating role definition in this way (Elder-Vass, 2010: 163-4). Although senior managers often have resources to back up their role definition, it would, in our view, be a mistake to accept their definition as definitive. After all, it is very likely that any role incumbent does not have to merely deal with senior management but with a range of other incumbents of different positions, each of whom has some expectations regarding the role in question. For example, whereas senior managers may have the expectation that construction workers should wear harnesses when working at height, co-workers who are relying on construction tasks being done quickly and effectively to secure bonuses may believe that harnesses are an unnecessary obstruction and expect them to not be worn where they impede the speed of the task. If social scientists focused only on the role definitions of senior managers, they would fail to grasp definitions that were relevant to understanding the expectations conveyed to role incumbents by all parties.

Following on from the arguments of Gross *et al* we would argue that the presumption of unity in role definition mistakenly closes off various possibilities for systematic social explanation. For one example of this, let us return to the first case of divergent role definitions identified by Gross *et al* that was discussed above. Recall that this was a disagreement between superintendents and school board members over who had the dominant responsibility for tasks such as hiring teachers, recommending new textbooks, and recommending salary increases. It is only if social scientists identify this disagreement, rather than smoothing it out, that they will see that there is an interesting explanatory task here – the task of trying to explain why these expectations differ. Gross *et al* put forward their own hypothesis in this case, arguing that because both school board members and superintendents *can* be held responsible for these key tasks, incumbents of each position are pushed towards attempting to assume as much control as possible over the decisions, which leads to the divergent attributions of responsibility (Gross *et al*, 1958: 122-3). Whether or not we accept this particular explanation, the important point is that the task of explaining divergence is opened up by allowing that roles may not be characterised by definitional agreement.

Given the focus of this article, another important explanatory task is that of accounting for variation in role performance sociologically. As we have seen Elder-Vass, Archer and Parsons agree that there is variation in role performance, such that there are different enactments of ‘the same’ role. For Parsons this is because individuals may not be properly socialized into role-expectations; for Elder-Vass and Archer it is because variety in role performance can be positively attributed to agency, to the characteristics and powers of the individual. Explanations of role variation with reference to the individuality of role-incumbents have been long-standing enough that Gross *et al* were able to comment on it in their volume. They state:

‘One model, which is often followed, posits, either implicitly or explicitly, consensus on expectations and tries to account for the differential behavior of position incumbents by the variability in their attitudes, values, personality characteristics, or some other phenomenon which can be said to intervene between the positional expectation and the role behavior’ (Gross *et al*, 1958: 4)

In the view of Gross *et al*, many role theorists assume that roles are characterised by definitional agreement and, if this were the case, a plausible account of variation in role performance would be the individuality of the incumbent. However, if a role is in fact subject to multiple definitions, then variation in role performance may actually be importantly due to variation in role definition. Gross *et al* thus state:

‘If individuals hold variant orientations this should be expressed in variant definitions of a role as well as in different behavior.’ (Gross *et al*, 1958: 30)

In other words, where there appear to be ‘individual’ variations in performance, social scientists are encouraged to look for variations in expectations that account for these. For example, if it is found that some construction workers who operate at height wear a harness, and others do not, a possible angle to explore is whether there are indeed conflicting expectations about this, say from senior management focusing on safety and from co-workers with requirements for jobs to be done speedily.¹⁴ If variant

expectations are discovered, this permits a systematic social explanation of variant behaviours rather than by recourse to the contingencies of individual dispositions.

This suggests that there are interesting explanatory tasks in accounting for role behaviour in cases where holders of a position are placed under pressure by the differing and potentially contradictory expectations from incumbents of other positions, with differentially distributed resources to make their definitions count. Enthusiasts for ideas of agency see this as a point at which agential choices make an important contribution to these outcomes. Such choices might be understood to have occurred in childhood with the result that the agent 'chose', after deliberation, certain values which guided later actions, including deciding which of the conflicting sets of explanations to follow (for a version of this kind of argument see Archer, 2000b; 2003). Or the choice might be understood to be something that took place in the conflict situation itself, with agents being seen as able to take conscious choices about which course of action to follow particularly when there are competing pressures on the agent (for a version of this argument see Elder-Vass, 2010: 133).

The question of the place of agency and/or individuality in social life is a complex one and there is little space to address it here (for some thoughts on the matter see Holmwood and Stewart, 1991; Holmwood, 1996). However, we would argue that it is crucial for sociologists to recognize that immediately attributing variations in actors' behaviours to 'choice' can short-circuit the possibilities for systematic explanation. That is to say, sociologists should seriously explore possible explanations which focus on intelligible social processes and influences before resorting to attributions of choice. If these social explanations come to be justified, then the rationale for invoking agency is diminished. Recall that we are here considering cases where incumbents are exposed to contradictory pressures about what they should do in their position. If the result is that each incumbent tends to vary in their behaviour, sometimes following one set of expectations and sometimes following another, it may be possible to explain why this is. In the case of construction workers, it may be that they systematically tend to wear safety harnesses when they know visits from senior management or inspections are likely, and they tend not to wear safety harnesses when this is not the case.

Another sort of challenge would be to explain cases where each individual incumbent of a position tends to behave in a stable manner, but there are differences between the ways in which incumbents behave, some consistent with one set of expectations and some consistent with another. If, for example, some workers regularly tend to engage in cautious, safety-first behaviour in the workplace, and others do not, it may be possible to explain why this is. One study of the safety consciousness of workers in agricultural work suggests that this is promoted by workers participating in 'safety activities' which contribute to what the authors see as 'cognitive change' but what we might also characterise as the reinforcement of management safety expectations (Westaby and Lee, 2003). If this is the case, whether or not role incumbents have participated in safety activities may contribute to an explanation of why they do or do not engage in safety-first behaviour in the workplace.

It is, of course, hardly possible to prove that a systematic social explanation will always be found to account for who takes up which variant role definition. But it seems to us a more promising commitment to pursue than assigning variation to

agency and abandoning the hope of systematic social explanation at that point. To say this is not to deny that some degree of personification of roles is a possibility. Even on this subject, though, there may be room for a less individual-centred perspective than the approaches put forward by some proponents of the structure-agency division. One possibility, inspired by a thought of Merton's, is that the way in which a role is personified is at least partly a result of the other roles that the incumbent holds (Merton, 1957). For example, a lecturer who is also a parent might have more sympathy than other lecturers for students whose caring responsibilities interfere with their ability to submit work on time. As such, an acknowledgement of personification might still be incorporated within an approach which emphasizes social processes rather than contingent agential decisions.

4. Conclusion

As we emphasised in the Introduction, there are two intertwined lines of argument within this article: a more specific one about the nature of roles and role behaviour, and a more general argument about the social scientific analysis of contingency in social life. In relation to roles, we have argued that it is a mistake to assume that the expectations for any role are singular in character. In our view, there are plausible sociological reasons to think that role expectations may vary across different groups. Likewise, we have argued that it is a mistake to assume that variation in role performance is due to contingent factors like deviance or individual agency. Rather, locating divergent expectations may help to explain cases such as those where incumbents act differently in different situations.

In relation to our wider argument, we noted early on that approaches such as functionalism and critical realism put forward 'compromise' positions insofar as they attempt to avoid an over-commitment to the contingency of social life whilst not removing it altogether. Our issue with the form that this compromise takes is that the theoretical structure it relies on sets an *a priori* limit upon systematic explanation. Starting out from a belief that contingency must be what accounts for certain kinds of diversity deflects investigators from considering possible systematic explanations of the variety of behaviour. Although it is not feasible to insist that contingency has no place in social life, what we are questioning is the attempt to prejudge the extent and location of this contingency. It is important to challenge such pre-judgements, as claims about contingency are always potentially defeasible on the basis of robust influences that are located by ongoing systematic social scientific investigation (see Holmwood, 1996; Kemp, 2009). In other words, investigation can show that a phenomenon that was previously understood to be contingent is actually part of a robust social process that can be systematically explained. To emphasize again, we believe that there is an overlap between aspects of critical realism and our own approach in terms of an interest in empirically identifying social processes. What we are arguing is for ways of thinking about the social world which do not unintentionally exclude certain phenomena from systematic explanation *a priori* on the presumption that they are contingent in character.

Finally, our approach does not entirely rule out the role of contingency in social life. But it does contend that the boundary between that which can be systematically explained, and that which is attributed to contingency, cannot be fixed by theoretical fiat but is the subject of ongoing exploration through substantive investigation.

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Endnotes

¹ In this piece references to the *robustness* of a social process denote that the process, *if it existed*, would contribute to shaping outcomes in a certain way. By identifying a process as robust we are not making a judgement about its frequency.

² It is perhaps useful to clarify that by 'contingent' we do not mean 'possible but not necessary' (cf Sayer, 2000). A better approximation for our usage would be 'not predetermined by causal relations'.

³ The definition may be 'singular' despite there being a 'set' of expectations if this set of expectations is understood to be the same for all relevant actors.

⁴ Parsons does also refer to two more factors that could generate diversity but tends to read these as particularly important insofar as they may contribute to reinforcing deviance. These are the potential for highly-abstract norms to be difficult to apply to concrete situations and the potential for role-conflict in which different roles the incumbent occupies may produce competing expectations on incumbents (Parsons, 1952: 268-272). In relation to role conflict, the paradox is that because Parsons' analytical backdrop is the notion of a perfectly-coordinated system, role conflict must, for him, be contingent. It may appear that Parsons' analysis of role-conflict is 'structural' insofar as it appears to be identifying two (or more) role structures as clashing with one another. However, within his own theoretical system 'structures' are always related to processes that promote 'functioning' and, in Parsons' terms, role conflict cannot be functional. Therefore it has to be attributed to the realm of contingency. Alexander takes up a similar position to Parsons when he states that 'functionalism is concerned with integration as a possibility and with deviance and processes of social control as facts.' (1985: 9)

⁵ It is worth noting that some remarks made by Elder-Vass might be taken to be promoting a clearer separation of structure and agency. One instance of this is Elder-Vass's discussion of the 'actual norm circle', that is, the group of people who share, endorse and enforce a norm. Elder-Vass states: 'The extent of the actual norm circle, it should be clear, is independent of the beliefs about it held by any given individual. The two are ontologically distinct. One important corollary of this ontological separation is that the individual can be wrong about the normative environment that they face.' (Elder-Vass, 2010: 129). It is important to be clear that although Elder-Vass's analysis may be consistent in arguing that the extent of a normative circle is

independent of an individual's beliefs about it, it would be inconsistent for him to argue that it is independent of individuals' beliefs. If Elder-Vass's general approach is correct, it is only because some people have normative beliefs and a commitment to sanctioning others that norm circles as social structures exist at all.

⁶ Elder-Vass distinguishes between the roles and the people who hold them in a way that has close parallels with Lockwood's system/social distinction, also employed by Archer. Lockwood states 'Whereas the problem of social integration focuses attention upon the orderly or conflictual relationships between the *actors*, the problem of social integration focuses on the orderly or conflictual relationships between the *parts* of a social system.' (Lockwood, 1992: 400)

⁷ Elder-Vass does argue that norms drawn from culture outside of an organizations control may impact 'performance in the role', as in when cultural values of honesty and punctuality are norms supported by norm circles that stretch outside the organization (Elder-Vass, 2010: 166). But the statement that such norms may impact on *performance* suggests that these cultural elements are not seen as offering a conflicting *definition* of the role.

⁸ Let us just emphasize a point made earlier: when noting that theorists treat the definition of any particular role as having a singular set of expectations, we are not saying that these theorists assume that all actors have a personal normative commitment to these expectations. Elder-Vass explicitly denies holding such a view (Elder-Vass, 2010: 125-6) and it seems doubtful whether Parsons or Archer accept it either. But they do all accept that there is nevertheless a single set of (system or structural) expectations for each role.

⁹ As we saw above, Elder-Vass does allow that roles may clash and this may generate diverse behaviours. Archer (1995) and Parsons (1952) make similar claims. Insofar as agency or unmotivated choice is understood to account for the resolution of such clashes, however, the account of the behaviour in such cases retains a strongly contingent element.

¹⁰ Gross et al use the term 'position' to distinguish a post from its associated expectations (Gross *et al*, 1958: 48). Although we can see some point in this terminological stipulation it is easier when debating with other approaches to retain the term 'role' and refer to divergent expectations for that role.

¹¹ This description is in the past tense given that Gross *et al* are describing the schooling system in Massachusetts over 50 years ago.

¹² For example, labour unions may expect superintendents to promote high salaries for teachers in order to generally drive workers' wages up, whereas teachers may expect this of superintendents for reasons more directly tied to their self-interest.

¹³ Archer did write at length about education systems in her *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (1979). However we do not discuss this work here because: (i) it does not analyse American systems of education which our example is drawn from; (ii) roles are not indicated to be a major theme of the work, with neither the term 'role' nor major theorists of roles such as Parsons appearing in the index.

¹⁴ We are not assuming the benevolence of management; insofar as there is a safety-oriented aspect to management policy this is likely to be related to the existence of wider safety regulations, inspections and penalties. In the absence of these, or perhaps alongside these, there is likely to be some imperative to get tasks done quickly in a way which may compromise employee safety.