


Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Causal Power of Social Structures

The problem of structure and agency has been the subject of intense debate in the social sciences for over 100 years. This book offers a new solution. Using a critical realist version of the theory of emergence, Dave Elder-Vass argues that, instead of ascribing causal significance to an abstract notion of social structure or a monolithic concept of society, we must recognise that it is specific groups of people that have social structural power. Some of these groups are entities with emergent causal powers, distinct from those of human individuals. Yet these powers also depend on the contributions of human individuals, and this book examines the mechanisms through which interactions between human individuals generate the causal powers of some types of social structures. *The Causal Power of Social Structures* makes particularly important contributions to the theory of human agency and to our understanding of normative institutions.

DAVE ELDER-VASS is a British Academy postdoctoral fellow at the University of Essex. His primary research interests are in sociological theory, particularly the questions of structure and agency, the relationship between realism and social construction, and the analysis and critique of social and political power.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Causal Power of Social Structures

Emergence, Structure and Agency

DAVE ELDER-VASS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521194457

© Dave Elder-Vass 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-19445-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Alisa, Hazel, Jasmine and Gerald

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
The problem of structure and agency	1
Emergence and social structure	4
How to read this book	9
Critical realism	11
2 Emergence	13
Relational emergence	14
Strong emergence	28
Morphogenesis and morphostasis	33
Conclusion	38
3 Cause	40
Covering law theories of causality	40
Realism and causal powers	43
Actual causation	47
Reductionism	53
Downward causation	58
Conclusion	62
4 Social ontology and social structure	64
The elements of emergence	66
A method for social ontology	68
Applying the method	71
Social structure	76
Three facets of social structure	77
What kind of structural element is social structure?	80

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

Four concepts of social structure	83
Conclusion	86
5 Agency	87
The emergence of the mental	89
An emergentist theory of action	93
Bourdieu's habitus	99
Archer versus Bourdieu	102
Synthesising Archer and Bourdieu	108
Conclusion	113
6 Normative institutions	115
Theories of social institutions	116
Norm circles	122
Norm circle boundaries	127
Intersectionality between normative circles	131
Change in social institutions	133
Institutions and structuration theory	138
Conclusion	142
7 Organisations	144
Interaction groups	146
Associations	149
The causal power of organisations	152
Individuals in organisations	158
Authority and organisations	161
Organisations and institutions	164
Conclusion	167
8 Social events	169
A micro-social interaction	170
Micro-social explanations	176
From micro to macro	179
Macro-actors and macro-consequences	182
Collective macro-events	185
Statistical macro-events: Durkheim and suicide	186
Conclusion	190

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>Contents</i>	ix
9 Conclusion	192
The causal power of social structures	192
For and against naturalism	196
The spatial disarticulation of social structures	199
An agenda for research	202
<i>References</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	218

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

3.1 Bhaskar's three domains: populating entities	<i>page</i> 45
3.2 Internal stratification	50

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

This book has been taking shape for over seven years, during which time I have incurred intellectual debts to a great many people. Perhaps the greatest of those debts is to Jason Edwards, who helped to shape an earlier version of these ideas in his role as my doctoral supervisor. I would like to express my gratitude to him for his constructive criticism, for his positive and supportive attitude, and not least for pointing me towards many key contributions to the debates. I would also like to offer my particular thanks to Margaret Archer, Andrew Sayer, John Scott and Rob Stones, each of whom has gone well beyond any possible call of duty in offering me their thinking and support despite the many other demands on their time.

I also thank Ismael Al-Amoudi, Filipo Artoni, Sam Ashenden, Ted Benton, Roy Bhaskar, Vinca Bigo, David Byrne, Bob Carter, Diana Coole, Phil Faulkner, Steve Fleetwood, David Gindis, Ruth Groff, Martyn Hammersley, Mervyn Hartwig, Stephen Kemp, Anthony King, Clive Lawson, Tony Lawson, Martin Lipscomb, Jamie Morgan, Nicos Mouzelis, Alistair Mutch, Tobin Nellhaus, Caroline New, Wendy Olsen, Andreas Pickel, Doug Porpora, Steve Pratten, Frederic Vandenberghe, Charles Varela, Sam Whimster, Malcolm Williams and Sami Zubaida for their many and various criticisms, comments and conversations both face-to-face and electronic. No doubt I have missed out many others, for which I apologise.

The completion of this book owes a great deal to the British Academy, which has funded my last two years of research as a post-doctoral fellow, and to the supportive environment I have enjoyed in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex and before that in the School of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College. But it has been possible above all because of the constant support of my wife Alisa.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19445-7 - The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency

Dave Elder-Vass

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

I must also thank a number of journals and their publishers for their permission to reprint material that has appeared previously, though most of these papers also contain additional material that is not used here:

- ‘Emergence and the realist account of cause’, *Journal of Critical Realism* 4: 315–38, © 2005 Equinox Publishing (used in chapters 2 and 3).
- ‘Re-examining Bhaskar’s three ontological domains: the lessons from emergence’, in C. Lawson, J. Latsis and N. Martins (eds.), *Contributions to Social Ontology* (2007), pp. 160–76, © 2007 Routledge (used in chapters 2 and 3).
- ‘For emergence: refining Archer’s account of social structure’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37 (2007): 25–44 (used in several chapters).
- ‘Reconciling Archer and Bourdieu in an emergentist theory of action’, *Sociological Theory* 25: 325–46, © 2007 American Sociological Association (used in chapter 5).
- ‘A method for social ontology’, *Journal of Critical Realism* 6: 226–49, © 2007 Equinox Publishing (used in chapter 4).
- ‘Social structure and social relations’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37 (2007): 463–77 (used in chapter 8).
- ‘Integrating institutional, relational, and embodied structure: an emergentist perspective’, *British Journal of Sociology* 59: 281–99 © 2008 London School of Economics and Political Science (used in chapters 4 and 6).