

Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation

The central problem of social theory is ‘structure and agency’. How do the objective features of society influence human agents? Determinism is not the answer, nor is conditioning – as currently conceptualised. In general, ‘conditioning’ only accentuates the way structure and culture shape the social context confronting the individual. What it completely neglects is our personal capacity to define what we care about most and to design courses of action to realise our concerns in society. Instead, the author maintains that through their ‘internal conversations’, individuals reflect upon their social situations in the light of their personal concerns – asking themselves ‘what should I do?’ and answering their own question.

On the basis of a series of unique, in-depth interviews, Margaret Archer identifies three distinctive forms of internal conversation. These govern agents’ responses to social conditioning, their individual patterns of social mobility and whether or not they contribute to social stability or change. Thus the internal conversation is seen as being the missing link between society and the individual, structure and agency.

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To the memory of
Ninian McNamara S. J.
For our years of good companionship

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‘To be human is to exist in the tension *between* solitude and society’
Vincent M. Colapietro

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