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The Everyday Life of Ulysses: Social Forms of Self-Binding

Abstract

In this article Jon Elster´s concept of self-binding is applied in an everyday context. Self-binding

is seen as a way for the individual to handle tensions between individualism and collectivism,

and between reflexivity and routines. Methodologically the articles point of departure is Richard

Swedberg´s approach of theorizing. The authors want to stress the process of theorizing in itself

as worthwhile as the focus of "finished" theories. The explicitly social in individual self-binding

is also discussed, and connections to Simmel´s concept of social forms are made.

Keywords: Elster, everyday life, self-binding, Simmel, social forms, Swedberg, theorizing

Introduction

One of the authors of this article came across a website that was about a new type of computer: Alphasmart Neo. It was praised on the website. What great features was this computer equipped with? The answer given was that the advantage of the computer had to do with its lack of features. Its only function is as a word processor. Simply the perfect computer for those who do not want the distraction of checking email or surfing the Internet. By providing such a computer the user can avoid any form of distractions and instead being forced to write. On one homepage a user tells how good the computer is for those who have difficulties concentrating:

> "Others might not have this problem, but given what I have learned about
> myself as a writer and as someone with a weaker -than - average attention span,
> this is the best electronic investment I have ever made for myself as an author"
> (Dickson, 2010 avaliable at http://www.allisonmdickson.com/2010/02/alphasmart-
> neo-and-me-faq-review.html)

A person who purchases and uses this computer is into the process of *self-binding*. They put themselves in a situation where they are forced, in order to achieve a desired goal. In this article we will argue that to analyze this and other examples of self-binding strategies can be very useful in research of everyday context and to get a deeper understanding of human behavior on a daily basis.

Self-binding

In this article we develop the concept of self-binding. It is in *Ulysses and the sirens* (1984) that

Elster presents and defines the concepts of self-binding and precommitment by using a classic

example. As a terminological note we want to clarify that in the following we use the term self-

binding, not precommitment. Elster seems to use the two words synonymously, but we think

self-binding is the most appropriate word. Precommitment seems to lead into a discussion about

commitment more generally (for a classic example see Becker, 1960). That is a complex

discussion which is not necessary in our context. Elster uses a well-known episode from Homer's

Ulysses to illustrate self-binding. Ulysses is, when he is on his way with his ship to Ithaca, lured

by the sirens' song. To avoid being tempted by the sirens, he asks his men to tie him to a mast so

that he would be prevented from the temptations by the sirens singing. He also says to his men

that if he, during the journey past the sirens, asks his men to loosen the straps, they should

instead tie him even more. Ulysses uses the strategy of binding himself to avoid being tempted

by the sirens' song. You could say that Ulysses use this strategy to handle things in his everyday

life. An obvious and thereby often neglected aspect is that Ulysses and everyone has to use self-

binding to cope with everyday problems and situations. Therefore it is important to develop the

concept of self-binding in an everyday context. Elster uses several mundane examples in his

discussion about self-binding but his focus is mainly self-binding in a political context, eg:

constitution-making. A clear everyday life application of the concept of self-binding is, to our

knowledge, lacking in previous research.

Theorizing – as a point of departure

We do not claim to give a comprehensive picture of all the varieties of self-binding, but we

develop a starting point for *theorizing* about self-binding in an everyday context. This theorizing approach we think is far too undeveloped and neglected hitherto.

For us *theorizing* is not just a superficial description of how we approach the concept of self-binding. We see theorizing as a method of it's own and as a significant part of scientific work. We have been influenced by Richard Swedberg (2012), which emphasizes theorizing, as an important approach and a relevant method and practice of sociology. A significant point of departure in this context is to test concepts in different contexts and to see this testing as an ongoing process, an activity and a creative path-seeking ambition. This is in contrast to a theory as a finished "product". Theorizing often means a certain sketchiness and playfulness concerning concepts. It is not, however, a sketchiness and playfulness of the ordinary postmodern kind. We have no doubts that "finished", highly elaborated theories could be made, or that they are needed. But other forms of studies are important also. One clear advantage of a theorizing oriented article is that it has an open and generous character towards the reader. In this form of articles it is clear from the beginning that concepts are developed in an ongoing conversation. In this article we will explore how the concept of self-binding, as Elster presents it, can be of use in everyday contexts. We want to – in Swedberg´s spirit – highlight theorizing as a method highly valuable in sociology. Therefore it must be written explicitly about as a research method among others.

Everyday life –individualism and collectivism; reflexivity and routines

We interpret "everyday life" in western contemporary society with the help of two central dimensions. One dimension concerns the role of other people and social groups – we call this dimension individualism-collectivism dimension. The other dimension is about "automaticity" versus choice and novelty in our life. Do we live our lives without thinking about different

choices or do we reflect upon different alternatives in our daily life? We call this dimension reflexivity-routines.

A nuanced treatment of reflexivity and routines is offered by Dave Elder-Vass (2010). He combines ideas about reflexivity (mainly from Margaret S. Archer) and ideas about the role of routines (from Bourdieu). Our society, and our individual lives, consists of a dialectic between newness and continuity which Elder-Vass grasps in a convincing way.

The idea that our society has become individualized is a famous idea within sociology. This idea has many prominent advocates – for example Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991). Individualization seems obvious, to some extent, when one looks around in today's society. The focus on careers, CVs and selfies – what could it be if not individualism? But the idea about individualization is still controversial. For example, research in work place culture, which one of the present authors has been involved in, shows that collective norms and cultures still are alive and vital in specific settings (Karlsson et al., forthcoming).

Our reasoning about collectivism takes inspiration from the brilliant, but internationally largely unknown, Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard (for an Anglosaxon introduction to his theory, see Karlsson et al., forthcoming). He discusses the collectivity among blue collar workers and demonstrates that a collective culture, which functions as a defence system against management, emerges when workers interpret the situation in a similar way, and when they can interact and identify with each other (Lysgaard, 2001 [1961]). This collectivity is characterized as an egalitarian and disciplinarian system which can foster an involuntary form of horizontal loyalty (Arvidson & Axelsson 2014).

Lysgaard´s collectivity concept is arguably open for a wider use, one relevant for the whole of society. Members of society can feel protected by the larger society when they are conforming

to common norms and live some sort of anonymous, ordinary life. With the play with Lysgaard´s collectivity concept we intend to analyze the collectivism which is in contrast to the individualism in our society.

We want to argue that individualism and collectivism both are vital forces which characterize our everyday life. It is up to the individual to live in, and handle, the tension between the mentioned forces.

One interesting middle position in the discussion about individualization stands Rasmus Willig (2013) for. He talks about the u-turn towards the individual. But one interesting aspect with this reasoning is that it is mainly interpersonal and collective phenomena which have turned towards the individual. It is not totally new individualistic phenomena *sui generis* which have emerged. Willigs example is criticism. During the 1960s and 1970s much criticism was directed towards society. Many problems were seen as mainly societal. In these decades it was natural to blame "society" for many different things. For example one´s unemployment. Today this has changed, Willig argues. Now problems more often are seen as individual. Today it has been a *U-turn*, the individual puts the critical gaze on himself instead of society and therefore trying to improve himself rather than get involved in social issues on a collective level. The former social criticism has now become a self-criticism. Therefore there has been an increased range of focus on the self. In private life it leads to a market for relational coaches and personal trainers. In work life it leads to individual dialogues with management concerning self-competence and self-development.

In order to understand the tension between individualism and collectivism we argue that self-binding can be a fruitful concept. The "self" in self-binding can easily be interpreted as individualistically loaded. But "binding" can be understood as more like a collectivistic

phenomenon. Traditionally, people have been "bounded" in hierarchical system. Other person´s roles in binding and restricting individual lives have been essential. But when the role of the collectivity is more contested – maybe the need for self-binding increases?

When it comes to the dimension reflexivity-routines it is possible to see similar connections to self-binding here. The "self" in self-binding can of course be related to the individualistic self who considers goals worth striving for; and "routines" is similar to "bindings". Is it more necessary for individuals, in everyday life today, to create their *own* routines, through self-binding?

According to Willig (2013) there has recently been an increased focus on personal performance and skills when it comes to critic of different societal phenomenon. In the light of this, there are also different types of self-binding, where individuals tries to master various situations by themselves rather than blaming society as in the 1960s and 1970s.

Handling the tensions – different types of self-binding

In order for the concept to be useful and relevant in everyday life, we want to argue for different types of self-binding. As a starting point, we use a model presented by Elster (2003), which we have simplified for clarity. The purpose is to highlight and demonstrate how different types of self-binding can be used to gain a greater understanding of actions in everyday life.

We present a fourfould table (see table 1) with different types of self-binding. The dimensions presented horizontally are the starting point (time 1) and the dimensions presented vertically are what the person wants the result to be with the help of self-binding (time 2). It is worth stressing that all self-bindings considered here, and also by Elster, are extended in time. A momentary "self-binding" which for example disciplines oneself in an outburst of fury, lies

besides the definition discussed here. The two dimensions consist – in both of the axes – of the human motivation of *interest* and *passion*. Interest is about different forms of power, control and status that the person has or wish to have. Passion is instead about the different types of emotions but also basic desires for example sexual desire, hunger and thirst (Elster, 2003).

In each of the four cells different types of self-binding is presented. In the original model by Elster (2003) he presents three human motivations: interest, emotion and reason and creates a nine-fold table with these dimensions both horizontally and vertically. However the contrast between interest and emotion is enough for us to show how self-binding could be relevant in everyday life and have therefore excluded reason in this analysis. In further analysis of self-binding the dimension of reason, and also others, can be taken in account. But in this article we think two dimensions are enough to explore the idea and pointing out a path.

Time 1

	Interest	Passion
Interest	Computer without internet to gain control over creativity	A fast decision to buy something on emotional basis (for example a house) in order to avoid doubtfulness.
Passion	Staying sober with the help of Instagram	Increase a passionate relationship to a football team by tattooing its name or symbol

(row header **Time 2**)

Table 1. Different social forms of self-binding

The example in the cell top left is the same as in this article´s introduction. It is about how an interest in terms of having control over a situation as a writer can be increase by using a computer without Internet to avoid distraction and be more effective. Both time 1 and time 2 are characterized by calculative interests and are rather un-emotional. In time 1 a person figures out that something had to be done to be more effective, and time 2 is an imagined state of higher efficiency.

In the cell top right the illustration of emotional behavior to achieve a rational goal is to quickly make a decision, based on intuition or "gut feeling" to avoid worrying and anxiety over decisions. In this example time 1 consists of a person having trust in the present emotions. The person knows in this case that more reflection leads to problems. It is here important to make far reaching action before the emotion has gone.

The third type in the cell bottom left is explained with a real case. Here there is also a goal, as in the first example, to gain control over a situation, in this case alcoholism. The strategy is to use the effects of emotions in a public way. A Swedish stand-up comedian had the goal to stay sober and started a project on the social media Instagram: "100 days without alcohol". The person published photos on a daily basis to show that he could stay sober and the Instagram-followers could be a part of his struggle against alcoholism. To fail with the project could have led to emotions like shame so the project can be seen as a self-binding project, in the same way as Elster gives an example of a smoker telling other peoples that he has quit smoking to get a feeling of social pressure. Time 1 consists of thoughts about a person's own interest in being sober. Time 2 is an imagined future where friends and followers have hopes and empathy which should not be betrayed.

In the cell bottom right there are emotions both in time 1 and time 2. This could be

demonstrated by a passionate relationship a person has with a partner or, as in the cell-example, a football team, and then wants to increase these passions with the help of self-binding. In this case a good example could be tattooing. To tattoo the partners name or a favorite team is to show that this is for real and permanent.

Theorizing – to be continued

The tensions between individualism and collectivism, and between reflexivity and routines, described earlier, have to be considered in cases of self-binding. Simmel´s (2009 [1902]) emphasize on *social forms* can be seen as a way to describe and analyze how even the most individual action are performed in a social context, even if other people are physically absent. Even in their absence other persons influence us in and through our reflexivity and routines.

The idea of self-binding as a thoroughly individual action can be criticized and questioned, and is so also by Elster. In an interesting part of the book *Ulysses Unbound* (2000) Elster discusses the difficulty for a person to bind himself enough hard. Elster can't find any magician trick or book about knots that describe a method for a person to bind himself so hard that it is impossible to tie up. Although a person may bind his feet, the problem is to bind his hands. Often, therefore other persons have to assist in the binding, just like in the case with Ulysses when he asks his men to tie him up. Self-binding can therefore be seen as a social form in Simmel´s sense: There is always a social aspect in the individual project of self-binding. This is something that needs to be explored and discussed more, especially in relation to everyday life.

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