# Book Review/Compte rendu

**Kemper, Theodore D.**, *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction: A Relational Reading of Durkheim, Goffman and Collins*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011, 305 pp. $104.95 hardcover (978-1-4094-2736-0)

The question of what influences our behaviours the most, individual factors, the social and structural conditions of the environment, or the interaction of both, is still a current sociological debate. Kemper proposes a theoretical model from a radical standpoint: our behaviours, choices, and motives are status-power relational products and the self is irrelevant for sociological analyses. This book has the potential to ignite passionate and constructive theoretical debates in the fields of social psychology and social inequality.

Kemper considers that ritual as conceptualized by Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins, is incomplete since status-power dynamics are neglected. Using an axiomatic theoretical model, he suggests that all our actions, including the altruistic and compassionate ones, aim to enhance status and/or power.

Our status and/or power motivated behavioural patterns are mediated through reference groups that determine our values, beliefs, and decisions. A reference group is defined as any individual or group with whom we have a real or imagined relationship (p. 34.). By abiding to the values, norms and expectations of a reference group, we aim 1) to claim, confer, or consume status and/or, 2) to acquire and manage power for others or ourselves while avoiding sanctions or negative consequences from this reference group. The reference group seeks to civilize what Kemper calls the organism: the locus of our drives, passions, and desires (p. 49), but this organism is not the self as defined by previous social scientists.

Indeed, Kemper suggests that the theoretical concept of self is superfluous to understand human behaviours sociologically. Our motives, beliefs, and thoughts result from our relationships, not the self. We do not mobilize in conflicts because of our ideas and we do not bind together because of our beliefs. Rather, we strive to remain loyal to the reference groups to which we identify. When we behave, the reference group to which we identify influences our behaviour, not the self with its thoughts, beliefs, emotions, or cognitive processes. To illustrate the accuracy of his model, Kemper revisits Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins' definitions of

ritual to demonstrate the shortcomings of their sociological theoretical appraisals and the versatility of his theory.

According to Kemper, Durkheim erred with the assumption that collective effervescence reinforced solidarity through collective consciousness; instead he contends that participants experience collective effervescence to enhance their status-power standing. Goffman reified situations and his understanding of ritual presented everyday interactions as sacred, whereas he should have recognized that rules and rituals confirm status and/or power. Collins described conversations as synchronized interactions when in fact they are geared towards status-power claims. In addition, Kemper contends that Collins failed to recognize that emotional entrainment is a consequence of status-power struggle and confused ritual success with status-power success. Kemper proposes that ritual should be defined as: "the enactment of a type of relationship" and wishes to convince us that analyzing ritual through status and power dimensions is more fruitful for the study of social interaction than the study of a conception of the self (p. 173).

Kemper navigates with great ability classical and contemporary theories showcasing his vast knowledge of a wide range of sociological oeuvres. By doing so, he offers a comprehensive understanding of concepts such as ritual, collective effervescence, and self-entrainment. Kemper contextualizes historically and sociopolitically the work and the lives of Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins and this informs the reader of how different theoretical concepts emerged and developed over time. This book's writing style is made accessible not only to academics who have a great interest in social theory, but also to a wider audience interested in what lies behind individuals' choices, emotions, and behaviours. In this respect, the author successfully and carefully guides the reader to discover the common theoretical thread between Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins in order to appreciate their contributions. In sum, this book provides an interesting theoretical model that incorporates hierarchical relations and power to the understanding of social behaviour, something that is not always emphasized in social psychology.

Despite his well-organized argument, Kemper's negation of the self or of the significance of the interaction between the self and the social environment is problematic. By assuming that individuals are power and status driven creatures acting solely based on the values and the norms of a reference group, Kemper fails to acknowledge the valuable input of social psychological theoretical concepts such as agency, cognitive-behavioural mechanisms, or identity development. Hence, this status-power relational theory provides an utmost deterministic and predictive portrayal of human beings with no explanation for irrational or sponta-

neous behaviours. Even if we accept that to know thyself is to know the governing reference group in a specific situation, Kemper's theory fails to explain how individuals with conflicting reference groups negotiate behavioural patterns. When two actors with exactly the same conflicting reference groups make different choices under the same circumstances, how does one account for this difference without a conception of the self? Since these actors do not necessarily perceive and define a situation the same way, even when they have been socialized within the same reference groups, if the self is irrelevant, status and power are also insufficient to understand variations. The attention devoted to the self in sociology results from, among many other factors, an understanding that identity can be fluid, circumstantial, and multidimensional and that cognitive-behavioural mechanisms may shape how we exercise agency in daily life.

Kemper aims to convince social scientists to adopt his theoretical model. Yet, perhaps status-power relational theory could benefit from empirical testing and confrontations with reality in order to verify its assumptions. This original provoking book, full of meaningful examples and illustrations, has the merit of challenging current ideas in social psychology while expanding the application of concepts such as status and power in social inequality. In this respect, this book could be relevant for undergraduate and graduate courses in social psychology, social inequality, and social theory. Although his critique of the self is unconvincing, Kemper contributes meaningfully to social scientific debate.

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