

The Nature of Sequences

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My thinking on this topic has benefited greatly from ongoing conversations with Andrew Abbott, Peter Bearman, and Steven Pfaff, among others. Please do not cite without permission. Direct all correspondence to stovel@u.washington.edu.

If there are no beginnings and endings, there are no stories.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

Typically, we conceptualize social facts and social structures as stable features of social life. That is, social structures are inherently conceptualized in the cross-section, and to the extent that they act as constraints they are treated as static. In contrast, norms or cultural meanings may be recognized as more fluid, and it is often from these forms of social phenomena that we trace change. And yet even the most cursory reading of empirical research in a variety of branches of sociology reveals a profusion of references to the sequential and temporal nature of social processes that produce both individual trajectories and macro-historical change.

For example, sequential thinking is invoked in analysis of the fall of the Bastille (Sewell 1996, Bearman, Faris and Moody 2000); in comparative studies of the French communes (Aminzade 1993); in a variety of diverse analyses of protest activity (Tarrow 1991; Minkoff 1997; Pfaff 1996); in models of careers systems (Abbott and Hrycak 1990; Stovel, Savage, and Bearman 1996; Spilerman 1977, Blair-Loy 1999); in micro-level models of the interactions associated with lynchings (Griffin 1993), strikes (Biggs 2000), and hierarchy formation (Chase 1980); in a narrative of state building in early modern Europe (Clark 1995); and in a study of Southern lynching (Stovel 2001). Sequences also play a crucial role in

the heralded methods known as ‘process-tracing’ (Goldstone 1997, Mahoney 2008).

Beyond empirics, recognition that social processes are often dynamic animates ongoing theoretical and methodological debates in historical sociology, comparative political economy, and life course studies—debates that have centered around the related roles of contingency, interdependence, narrative, and sequences in explanation (see, for example, Abbott 1997; Skocpol and Somers, 1980; Kiser and Hechter 1998, Mahoney 2000). In spite of all these references – and in spite of the wonderful explosion of technical innovation in sequence methods --- there is still little consensus among scholars about what a *sequence* refers to, let alone how we might best think about sequences theoretically.

In light of this persistent theoretical confusion and the associated empirical redirects, my aims in this paper are (1) to identify potentially important differences between types of empirically observed sequences, and (2) to consider what these differences reveal about sequences that reflect well- institutionalized processes and sequences that are evidence of social restructuring. My motivation for this work stems from a desire to revisit and reconsider two key questions Abbott posed in the 1990s, which I refer to as the pattern question (is there temporal regularity?); and the generating

question (what produces temporal regularity?). For empirical and philosophical reasons, Abbott has usually emphasized the first question over the latter, though many of us in social science are not yet ready to give up on the question of what forces and factors produce observed outcomes. More importantly, I do not think it is advisable to treat these as independent questions: as a formalist in the tradition of Simmel, I assert that a better understanding of the form of a sequence will reveal something of its genesis. Thus my approach is quite simple, and rests on distinguishing fundamentally different types of sequences, and then considering possible affinity between particular (generic) generating mechanisms and specific sequential traces. The goal is to discipline the burgeoning literature which refers to the sequential nature of social life by proposing a framework that specifies possible relationships between more familiar (though still poorly defined) concepts of interaction and institutions. The advantage of locating social sequences in these social structures is that it focuses attention on identifying mechanisms that generate specific sequences.

I begin by introducing several analytically constituent components of sequences. I then discuss how these constituent components may be combined in empirically observed sequences, and the relationship between each broad form and classes of generating mechanisms. Throughout, I

consider the extent to which certain types of sequences may be thought of as social facts, the products of individual action that act as external constraints on subsequent action. I conclude by arguing that careful attention to the nature of a sequential structure may help sociologists better attend to the underlying processes that produce patterned regularity over time.