

Can the Analysis of Micro-processes of Escalating Actions Bring Clarity to Some Macro-uncertainties of Cultural Evolution Theory?

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The article presents the results of a study that aimed to test some sociological assumptions at the macro level, via analysing micro-processes of social action. Namely, we have tested the predictions of Cultural Evolution Theory (CET) regarding the role of cultural and social capital in the materialisation of social behaviours.

CET postulates the impact of two factors on action: the level of development of these capitals and the prevailing source of their origin, which can be either environmental or social. These factors determine the way individuals act: either by adhering to established cultural standards that govern our behaviour or by creating a tailored personal strategy. These represent a social mechanism enabling a dialectic process of cultural conservation and evolution. Our Actions Escalation Structural Theory (EAST) provides theoretical and empirical instruments to differentiate between these forms of behaviour as “prescribed” vs. “deliberate” actions.

The research was conducted in the form of a mass poll and revealed a consistent correlation between the cultural and social characteristics of particular groups and the proportions of their “prescribed” and “deliberate” actions. We consider this to be a theoretical contribution to CET discussions. Some methodological output was demonstrated through the creation of a CET-EAST hybrid model, which has proven to be effective as an analytical instrument to test the assumptions of both theories. Certain specific observations regarding the operation of the EAST instruments were also recorded.

Keywords: social action theory; Cultural Evolution Theory; dual-system theory; dual-process framework; environmental learning; social learning; Escalating Actions Structural Theory.

The aim of this contribution, theoretical framework and hypotheses

The goal of this study is to test the principal ability of our micro-level “Escalating Actions Structural Theory” (EAST) to be productively integrated into sociological macro-level theoretical context. As an experimental field we take a particular issue of environmental vs. social learning impact on cultural dynamics, which some scholars consider as one of the great challenges for “Cultural Evolution Theory” (CET).

Technically, this contribution is an empirically-based response to some theoretical “grand challenges” proposed by Nichols and colleagues in their fundamental review of CET (Nichols et al., 2024). Just some core writings related to our subject include: (Vaisey, 2009; Martin, 2010; Lizardo et al., 2010; Leschziner, Green, 2013; Patterson, 2014; Vila-Henninger, 2015; Lizardo et al., 2016); a full-scale bibliography (Nichols et al., 2024: 19-25). These contributions constitute a general methodological framework, which we discuss hereafter in the context of its interaction with corresponding theories.

In particular, we focus on “...the need to overcome several problems facing the effort to model culture as a complex, adaptive system... which involves the need to develop an evidential bridge between modelling results and research on the psycho-social mechanisms instantiating cultural transmission...” (Nichols et al., 2024: 9).

As an experimental field we take one of the most controversial issues in CET: the relative scope of impact of cultural adoption via “environmental” vs. “social” learning on the behaviour. An influential model of cultural transmission suggests that environmental learning does not, while social learning does produce cumulative adoption curves in culture, which makes social learning far more influential as a regulator of behaviour (Henrich, 2001: 992).

We presume that EAST provides some opportunities to address this theoretical issue by elaborating the EAST-CET model, which represents an integrative approach to micro-macro sociology. Further details about EAST can be found in the following section. At a glance, it is a theoretical model supported by a special set of empirical tools that enable the splitting of all group behaviours into several streams, depending on the trajectory of the particular action escalation process. The first core stream is the trajectory of escalating action guided by a pre-existing program of action, and the second one is guided by situationally tailored response to the stimulus to act. The first one results in the so-called “prescribed”, the second – in “deliberate” action. EAST suggests that actions indistinguishable in form or even in their social meaning could be differentiated by their drivers, which may be very different in nature and impact. In other words, EAST proposes that no social action could be correctly explained and predicted without a clear understanding of these drivers’ role within action escalation process.

Methodologically, EAST is based on a “dual-process” framework for explaining and predicting social action, different from the conventional “reasoned action” approach, which has long been dominant in the field of social action studies (Janz, Becker, 1984; Bandura, 1986; Fishbein, Ajzen, 2011). However, there is now a growing body of evidence that the models of this approach are unable to provide a comprehensive explanation for all aspects of human behaviour (Baumeister, 2002; Goldstein D., Gigerenzer, 2002; Kahneman, Frederick, 2002; Shah, Oppenheimer, 2008; Lizardo, Strand, 2010; Hofmann et al., 2009; Kahneman, 2011; Wood, Bechara, 2014; Thaler, 2015). As a result, a wide range of alternative theories have emerged, incorporating a wider array of factors as determinants of social behaviour. In particular, the proven parallel existence of and controversial interaction between “explicit” (consciously controlled) and “implicit” (unconscious, uncontrolled) factors have resulted in the emergence of dual-process theories of cognition and

decision-making (Metcalf, Mischel, 1999; Smith, DeCoster, 2000; Strack, Deutsch, 2004; Collins, 1981; Perugini et al., 2010; Roccato, Zogmaister, 2010)¹.

In neuro- and cognitive sciences, this general dual-process approach suggests that the process of action escalation begins with the activation of an “implicit” cognitive system. This system stores mental associations between stimuli, behaviours and rewards and is ready to retrieve them as soon as a stimulus is presented. The system then produces an automatic response, prompting the individual to engage in a behaviour that is presumably rewarding. These associations are activated quickly and independently of conscious control (Fazio, 1990, 2007). The second system, the “reflective” system, uses self-awareness to try to control or alter the influence of the first system. It is governed by the rules of conceptual thinking. In this way, the second system is “explicit” in the actor’s introspection and relatively easy to observe externally.

In sociology, this approach has formed the basis of the “dual-process” framework (DPF) (Lizardo et al., 2016), which considers “prescribed” and “deliberate” types of action as projections of “implicit” and “explicit” factors within the escalation process of actions at the level of the social / cultural macro-process (Joas, 1996; Swidler, 2003).

The sociological application of the DPF is based on Bourdieu’s general concept of “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990). The “implicit system” is theorised as a vehicle for transferring the essence of an actor’s social experience to the process of behaviour. This mechanism allows actors to avoid reasoning about some actions, where they have enough experience. Experience itself is operationalised as prior attitudes towards the main aspects of an acting situation. Typically, these attitudes “prescribe” programs of action to their holders that, according to all prior experience, should turn out to be the most rewarding in that particular situation. If the escalation process leads to an action guided by these predispositions, the action is considered to be “prescribed”. “Prescribed” behaviour is supposedly the most common “structural type” of action (Collins, 1981), as it minimises the load on the actor’s reflective apparatus, which is extremely resource-intensive (Fazio, 2014). From a sociological perspective, this action can be conceptualised as being driven by general values and beliefs that represent the essence of an individual’s social experience. Within the context of Weberian models of action structures, this type is closely aligned with the concept of “value-based” action.

In contrast, “deliberate” action is dependent on the process of “reasoning”, which can be activated if a prospective actor detects signs that the ready-to-use “prescribed” dispositions are inadequate for their particular situation. Sociology interprets this as involvement in a different domain of social experience. The actor now addresses their competencies in situational analysis and their ability to “maximise the utility” of the diverse

1. While the nature of these two sets of factors is clear enough, the terms used to describe them are still far from being standardised. The formulations for the components of numerous DPF models vary from theory to theory and appear inconsistent (Evans, 2008). Here, we avoid discussing “correct” definitions and use the terms “implicit” and “explicit” factors of social behaviour, which compete for control over an action escalation process.

effects of potential actions. Weberian “aim-based” action seems to be the most consistent form of this structural type.

Thus, the sociological interpretation of the dual-process approach assumes the existence of two general types of action, each guided by different drivers. These actions should be studied using clearly distinct methodological approaches. Explanation and prediction of “prescribed” action should concentrate on revealing actors’ value systems and assessing the latter’s impact on behaviour. A range of well-established corresponding models have been developed (see Gould et al., 2023). In order to explain an action that is “deliberate”, it is necessary to focus on the actor’s utility preferences and to fit them into an equilibrium that maximises utility. The Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behaviour (TRA/TPB) models are probably the most prominent example in this area (Fishbein, Ajzen, 2011).

At the moment, Cultural Evolution Theory seems to be the most developed sociological field that uses DPF by studying not cognitive processes themselves, but rather the cultural content they process. Considering all of this, a general theoretical model for our study can be constructed as follows.

CET postulates some mandatory social (cultural) characteristics of “prescribed” and “deliberate” actions. The model suggests that the more sophisticated the cultural capital of a given social group, the more likely it is to automatically act in the “prescribed” mode. These actors are assumed to already have most of the necessary dispositions. In contrast, poor cultural capital forces its holders to engage in reflective processes and act in a “deliberative mode”. At the macro level, the first type of action represents the process of applying existing cultural norms, while the second type represents altering norms or developing new ones.

If these inferences are true, our general hypothesis is that social actions, as classified by EAST, should be generated differently: “prescribed” – predominately by holders of relatively developed, while “deliberate” – predominately by holders of a relatively poor cultural and social capital. Then, if environmental and social learning have unequal impacts on behaviour, our specific hypothesis about learning forms is that the components of cultural and social capitals originating from environmental vs. social learning affect the escalation of action in different ways, with environmental-learned capital being primarily associated with “deliberate” actions, and socially learn capital primarily associated with “prescribed” structural types of action.

These assumptions form the set of our substantive hypotheses. They clearly address macro-level processes of cultural development. However, the most appropriate method to test them is at the level of the micro-processes of personal actions. This is the innovation that EAST suggests to macro-sociology: revealing the mechanism of social/cultural specifics of groups through studying the actions of individuals and enhancing the ability to explain and predict their group behaviour.

Thus, interpretable associations between cultural and social capital status and the relative proportions between “prescribed” and “deliberate” actions are expected to be the methodological contributions of the study. If they are positive, they support the assumption that

there is an interdisciplinary integrity of social action between individual micro- and cultural macro-domains. It is assumed that potential support for one of the opposing views on the learning modes (whether social and environmental learning differ by their role in forming cultural capital and control of behaviour) will have some theoretical implications for CET. Finally, applying the empirical and analytical tools of EAST to a new class of problems enables us to test their functionality and may potentially result in instrumental improvements.

EAST: Classification of actions into structural types

EAST is a theoretical model supplemented with a specific set of metrics and measurement techniques for analysing social behaviour in a structural way. The model is based on the assumption that while being indistinguishable in their form, and even social meaning, actions could be enforced by totally distinct drivers. The most common of these drivers are “prescribed” programs of actions controlled by attitudes, as opposed to “deliberate” programs, controlled by the results of “reasoning”.

The first one is rooted in social attitudes and corresponding dispositions which exist prior to the situation of action. In contrast to that, “reasoning” is a here-and-now process of more or less correct calculations considered to be a “utility maximisation” of an actor’s resources. Depending on the driver, action escalation process results either in “prescribed” (materialisation of the pre-existing program) or “deliberate” (materialisation of the tailored-to-situation output of “reasoning”) behaviour. To our knowledge, this is the closest sociological application of DPF so far.

Empirically, these types of actions differ in their principal drivers and, in the framework of EAST – in the ways in which the impact of these drives is realised. In particular, “prescribed” behaviour can be better explained by models of social attitudes, while the “deliberate” one – by models of reasoned action. This is the central assumption of EAST. If we succeed in classifying prospective actions by their “structural types”, we will have better chances to accurately evaluate their specific drivers and then predict the outcome of the action escalation process as a natural outcome of these drivers’ interaction.

To empirically differentiate actions by “structural types”, EAST propose a matrix of the principal drivers (Figure 1). If an action materialises while the prescribed program prompts action, and reasoning suggests inaction, this action is surely guided by attitudes predispositions and belongs to the “prescribed” structural type. The opposite combination of operational driver statuses indicates an undoubtedly “deliberate” action. The space between these two contrasting poles of the matrix contains actions of various intermediate structural statuses, which we do not consider here to keep focused, but we had presented some more information on these in an earlier publication (Chernozub, 2025), where a slightly different approach to classification was used.

To construct the “Prescriptions” scale of the Matrix, EAST uses a model of structural theory of attitudes, which posits a complex structure of an attitude consisting of natu-

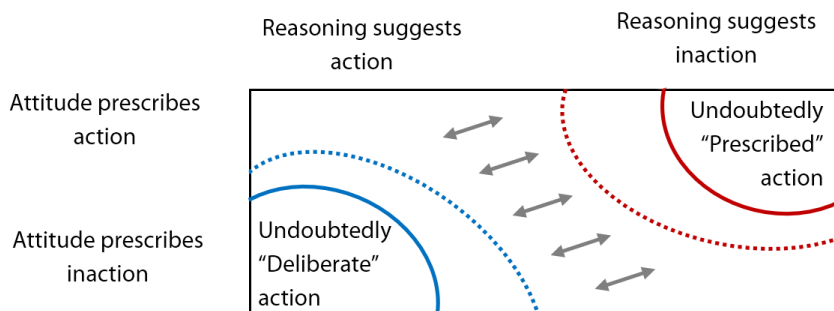


Fig. 1. EAST Matrix conceptual model.

rally different components. Due to their mismatched nature, these components can be and often are inconsistent (Rosenberg, 1956; Rosenberg et al., 1960). Consistent positive attitudes towards anticipated actions are associated with the maximum probability of the prescribed action materialisation. Consistent negative attitudes are associated with a maximum probability of inaction, while inconsistent attitudes typically result in intermediate levels of action probabilities. These regularities have been well-established empirically (Chernozub, 2025).

The D2 (two-dimensional) metric of attitude consistency we normally use is a cross-tab of attitude valence measures by “direct” vs. “indirect” instruments, which presumably indicate a valence of “explicit” and “implicit” factors of behaviour. The first one consists of conventional questions about attitude towards the object and the form of action. We use the Graphical Associative Test of Attitudes (GATA, refer for details Appendix A) as the second instrument, but any other convenient technique could be used as well (Appendix B). This kind of measurement results in scales of “Consistent+” (both instruments detect positive valence), “Consistent-“ (negative valence by both), and “Inconsistent” (reciprocal values) attitudes. Within the EAST Matrix, this D2 scale represents the potential impact of a priori “prescriptions”. D2 output is represented by Table 1 rows.

The “Deliberation” scale, reflecting the influence of “reasoning”, is formed using the common TRA/TPB toolkit. In most cases, we use basic questions about beliefs concerning: (a) anticipating the output value of an action, (b) expecting the reaction of the social environment, and (c) assuming the physical ability to fulfil the action’s program. TRA/TPB output is represented by Table 1 columns.

Crossing these two scales, contrasting by the nature of their underlying forces, results in an operationalised form of EAST Matrix of actions.

Table 1 illustrates the technique of empirical differentiation between actions based on their degree of dependency on the corresponding principal driver. The general pools of “prescribed” and “deliberate” actions can be formed by aggregating the structural subtypes in the upper-right and lower-left corners of the EAST Matrix. EAST operational

Table 1. EAST Matrix of actions “structural types”

Deliberation scale Prescription scale	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Consistent+		Mainly Prescribed	Entirely Prescribed
Inconsistent	Mainly Deliberate		Mainly Prescribed
Consistent-	Entirely Deliberate	Mainly Deliberate	

model in its general form is presented in Appendix C. For more details, please refer to (Chernozub, 2025).

Thus, the EAST methodological and technical apparatus appears to be potentially appropriate: (a) to identify “prescribed” and “deliberate” behaviours through empirical study, (b) to form corresponding subsamples, and finally, (c) to compare these groups based on any characteristic, e.g., cultural and social capital.

Method

To test our hypotheses, we designed a quantitative instrument, where three consecutive stages represented the normal escalation process of actions. As a data source, we planned to use a mass poll that simulated the situation of accepting an invitation to take part in a TV talk show. As a stimulus, we used the real opportunity to participate in a show on the highly debated issue of migration. Following the natural flow of the escalation process, we divided the interview into four consecutive parts.

1. **A priori attitude detection.** At the very beginning, we set out to reveal an existing (still unaffected by our experimental situation) attitude towards potential action. The “direct” measure was represented by the question “Do you agree or disagree with the statement that people like me should use the opportunity to publicly express their opinions on socially important issues?” (ordinal 6-point scale, reducible to “rather yes”/“rather no”). The “indirect” measure was represented by means of GATA, with the attitudinal object being “a participant in a TV talk show” (ordinal scale of 6 points, reducible into “relatively positive”/“relatively negative” valence of the attitude).
2. **Stimulus to act impact.** Invitation to take part in a national-scale TV talk show.
3. **Process of “reasoning” stimulation.** When the invitation was presented, respondents were asked to complete two tasks. The first task was an open-ended question asking them to write some arguments in favour of their participation in the TV talk show (the indicators of reasoning were the number of arguments submitted and the time spent on the task). The second task asked them to

evaluate: (a) how valuable it would be for them personally, (b) what would be the expected reaction of people whose opinion they respected, and (c) their ability to physically participate in the show. Three conventionally accepted TRA/TPB variables were used to form three separate ordinal 6-point scales that could be reduced to «relatively positive» or “relatively negative” for prospective action.

4. **Commitment action implementation:** respondents took a chance to submit their personal data to enrol in the audience of TV show². Alternatively, they could avoid this opportunity and proceed directly to completing the interview. Based on corresponding TRA/TPB findings, we consider this preliminary or “commitment”-class action as a reliable approximation of the “core” action. (Ajzen et al., 2009: 1369).

These four stages should provide sufficient data for the constitution of an EAST Matrix and differentiate the actions materialised as being of a “prescribed” or “deliberate” structural type. To additionally control the accuracy of respondents’ attribution to a corresponding group, we included several supplementary indicators, reflecting the intensity and output of “reasoning”:

Arguments: The quantity of arguments in favour of acting submitted by the respondent.

Time: Average time spent on formulating an argument.

Thus, we planned to form two subsamples, represented by those who acted in a “prescribed” or, alternatively, in a “deliberate» mode, which would form a dependent nominal variable. The potential factors – indicators of cultural and social capital – were operationalised as follows:

CCE. Cultural capital of predominantly environmental origin: “Please count all the cases when you were forced to change your opinion on important issues of human life” (Open-ended question, interval scale).

CCS. Cultural capital of predominantly social origin: “Please sum up all the years you have invested in education, excluding secondary school but including college, university, and all kinds of professional and vocational training courses, etc.” (Open-ended question, interval scale).

SCE. Social capital of predominantly environmental origin: “Please count all the important cases when other people have learned from your experience” (Open-ended question, interval scale).

SCS. Social capital of predominantly social origin: “Please count all the important cases when you addressed other people for their experience” (Open-ended question, interval scale).

Variables of social capital were incorporated into the model based on the assumption that both forms overlap. Namely, durable social networks may indicate partially acquired and partially prospective potential to develop cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural

2. The respondents confirmed their consent to submitting personal data via a questionnaire, with all appropriate warnings and disclaimers present. The pollster had all the necessary licenses to process personal data, and no additional approvals were required.

and social capital, then, were split into pairs of environmental and social learning indicators based on the scale of underlying social interaction, which was presumed to be relatively higher for indicators of formal educational intensity (CCS) and the breadth of a person's social network of advisers (SCS).

We assumed this set of independent variables to be sufficient to test our technical hypotheses:

Ho: (preliminary): "EAST Matrix method is able to reliably differentiate between "prescribed" and "deliberate" types of social behaviours.

Ho.1: "Both «prescribed" and "deliberate" types of behaviour, guided by the contradictory valences of principal factors (the upper-right and bottom-left "poles" of the EAST Matrix) will demonstrate an intermediate probability of action, in contrast to the structural types, which are guided by factors with consistent valences (the upper left and lower right poles of the EAST matrix)".

Ho.2: "Both types will differ significantly in terms of variables reflecting processes and outputs of «reasoning (Arguments and Time)".

H1: The groups of respondents who act in the "prescribed" and "deliberate" modes will significantly differ in terms of the levels of development of their cultural and social capital (CCE, CCS, SCE, SCS). These levels will be significantly higher in the group with "prescribed" behaviour.

At the macro-level of CET conceptualisation, social learning is considered to be a process in which individuals learn by observing, imitating or interacting with others. This role is crucial for the cumulative cultural evolution of complex behavioural programs. In contrast, environmental learning involves learning from interactions with natural and social environments. It allows cultures to adapt to specific situations that are unusual (still not covered by social experience). If this is true, then we could assume that social learning would be more strongly associated with "prescribed" behaviours, while environmental learning would demonstrate greater alignment with "deliberate" micro-processes. Therefore, our central hypothesis could be stated as follows:

H2: The proportion of "prescribed" and "deliberate" actors will be unequal for groups affected by environmental vs. social origin of their cultural and social capital. It is anticipated that this proportion will shift towards "prescribed" behaviour for more expressed social learning (CCS, SCS), and towards "deliberate" behaviour for environmental learning (CCE, CSE) as the capitals' origin.

Data collection and data validity control

Data were collected via an online poll conducted between 05-14.11.2024. The recruitment method was river sampling. A quota sample representing the Russian population aged 18 and over was selected by controlling quotas for gender, age, education, federal district, and type of settlement. The initial sample size was N=1400. Thirty-nine (39) observations (2.78%) were excluded due to signs of speed/algorithmic input. The effective sample size was thus N=1361.

Table 2. Actions structural types composition: basic model (N = 1361, 100% – Table total).

Deliberation scale Prescription scale	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Consistent+	7.56%	7.78%	4.99%
Inconsistent	11.7%	26.8%	11.3%
Consistent-	6.02%	15.93%	7.78%

To assess the overall usability of the collected data, we tested their ability to differentiate structural types of actions by their theoretically presumed fundamental characteristics. Firstly, the data should reliably differentiate structural types, revealing unequal probabilities of action materialisation for different structural types (Ho.1). Secondly, our data should reflect the cognitive process peculiarities theoretically assigned to the corresponding structural type of action (Ho.2).

In other words, should our data be valid, we anticipated some kind of action’s structural type dispersion across the sample, while the types themselves would be affected by unequal cognitive processes and generate an unequal impact on behaviour. The table below represents the composition of action types based on our data.

As the data demonstrate, our study detected all potential forms of escalation trajectories. All structural types are statistically significant. There are no indications of data inadequacies at this stage of analysis. Therefore, we can aggregate data to form sub-samples for “prescribed” and “deliberate” general structural types. The results of the procedure are presented in Table 3.

This way, we constitute two subsamples corresponding to the goals of our further substantive analysis:

“Prescribed” actions (24.1% of the general sample, N = 328).

“Deliberate” actions (33.7% of the general sample, N = 459).

In total, both groups account for almost 58% of the studied behaviours. To ensure the validity of this classification, we tested the probability of acting for the main structural

Table 3. Actions structural types composition: target structural types aggregated (N = 1361, 100% – Table total).

Deliberation scale Prescription scale	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Consistent+	7.56%		24.1%
Inconsistent		26.8%	
Consistent-	33.7%		7.78%

Table 4. Probability to act for aggregated structural types.

Deliberation scale Prescription scale	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Consistent+	94.2%		63.8%
Inconsistent		57.9%	
Consistent-	64.5%		33.0%

types. The theory suggests that the probability decreases as we move from the upper left corner (both principal factors are favourable) to the bottom right corner (both factors are unfavourable for acting) of the Matrix. The actual results are presented in Table 4. The probability of action is estimated as the share of actual actors within the corresponding subsample, which is considered to be 100%.

As Table 4 shows, the empirical data fit the predictions well. Almost 100% of the probability for the most motivated structural type gradually drops to 58%, and 33% for the least motivated group. Both “prescribed” and “deliberate” types demonstrate almost equal probabilities of about 64%, situated approximately in the middle of the range of probabilities empirically detected in this particular situation ($94.2\% - 33.0\% = 61.2\%$).

The general conclusion we draw from this is that the data classified by the EAST Matrix model maintain internal coherence and represent a strong association between the composition of drivers’ structure and practical actions. This data is valid for explaining factual behaviour in the study. This enables us to accept $H_0.1$: Both “prescribed” and “deliberate” types of behaviour, guided by the contradictory valences of principal factors (the upper-right and bottom-left “poles” of the EAST Matrix), will demonstrate an intermediate probability of action, in contrast to the structural types, which are guided by factors with consistent valences (the upper left and lower right poles of the EAST matrix).

After finishing the preliminary analysis, we tested our data against the hypothesis that target structural types are associated with specific cognitive aspects of the action escalation process. Table 5 represents the differences between the “prescribed” and “deliberate” groups in terms of submitting verbal arguments for action (Tasks 1 and 2 in Stage 2), as determined by the ANOVA procedure’s output.

Table 5. Cognitive characteristics of target structural types.

Structural types	Prescribed	Deliberate	Sample	F (DF=786)	ρ
Arguments submitted, N	1.349	1.209	1.268	4.049	0.045
Duration per argument, sec.	50.13	70.45	61.64	6.240	0.013

As per data from Table 5, there are statistically significant differences in both the number of arguments and the average time spent formulating one of them. Contrary to intuition, but in close correspondence with the theoretical model, the «prescribed» subsample is more confident in arguments supported by anticipated action. This group presents more arguments (on average 1.35 vs. 1.2) and does it much faster (50 vs. 70 seconds per argument). The interpretation of this phenomenon is quite clear: the “prescriptive” structural type includes those who have already developed and maintain a relatively consistent attitude toward the action. In the context of artificial stimulation for “reasoning”, as in our survey, they simply recall corresponding arguments. By contrast, potential actors with the “deliberate” type must construct arguments on the spot, which is less efficient and more time-consuming [12]. Ho.2 “Both types will differ significantly in terms of variables reflecting processes and outputs of «reasoning (Arguments and Time)» is to be accepted.

Thus, we have criticised our data in terms of its prospective (association with behaviour) and retrospective (association with specifics of the escalation process) criteria validity. Both types of analysis revealed no signs of validity problems. This allows us to carry out the main part of our research program: to test the dependence of “prescribed” and “deliberate” actions on their presumed fundamental drivers: cultural and social capital of different origins.

Do cultural and social capital affect behaviour in the predicted way?

EAST assumes that prior attitudes and situational reasoning compete for control over each social action. CET, in turn, supposes that the main driver of the influence of prior prescriptions is Bourdieu’s “habitus”, which can be presented as the essence of the person’s entire previous experience. In our study, we operationalised it as four variables: two representing “cultural” and two – “social” capital, taking into account both parts overlapping and reinforcing each other. Specifically, more social contacts available to a person mean more potential sources for cultural capital adoption. Both capitals were then represented by indicators adjusted to reveal the proportion between their environmental vs. social origin.

Table 6 shows the output of ANOVA tests for all four indicators and the general sample (combined samples of “prescribed” and “deliberate” subsamples). All input data were recalculated against “respondents’ age minus one”. In this way, both scales are normalised against the year of life after 18. The substantive meaning is now: “number of important events / years of education / people addresses / people to address per average year after 18”.

The summative scale represents the result of adding up the data from all four basic scales, which is intended to eliminate their reciprocal errors.

Table 6. Types of social behaviour vs. cultural and social capital indicators: total sample.

Capitals' indicators	Prescribed	Deliberate	Sample	F (DF=786)	P
CCE	0.463	0.273	0.352	22.54	0
CCS	0.440	0.338	0.381	8.132	0.004
SCE	0.423	0.223	0.306	24.75	0
SCS	0.886	0.593	0.715	9.965	0.002
Summative scale	2.060	1.337	1.639	27.226	0
N	328	459	787	NA	NA

The data in Table 6 show that the subsample attributed to EAST as “prescribed” structural type demonstrates significantly higher values for all the indicators we used. Actors of the “prescribed” type have almost twice as many events in the past that deeply influenced their lives (0.436 compared to 0.273), and twice as many people who have learned from the respondent’s experience (0.423 compared to 0, 223). The “prescribed” actions group does not have such a pronounced advantage, but it still has a considerable advantage in terms of the number of years spent on voluntary education (0.440 compared to 338), and in terms of how many people the respondent has learned from, based on their experience (0.886 compared to 0.593). The differentiation power of both individual and aggregated scales of cultural/social capital looks quite strong.

Thus, our H₁ – The groups of respondents who act in the “prescribed” and “deliberate” modes will significantly differ in terms of the level of development of their cultural and social capital (CCE, CCS, SCE, SCS). This level will be significantly higher in the group with “prescribed behaviour” – should be accepted.

Tables 7 and 8 represent the proportions of “prescribed” vs. “deliberate” behaviours in the groups with different capital origins. These groups were structured as follows:

Mutually strong: a group of respondents whose both capital fractions of environmental and social origin values are at the sample mean or above. This group represents individuals who demonstrate a considerable level of cultural or social capital, but there is no evidence that one of them takes a dominant position.

Social learning prevails: a group in which the fraction of social origin is at or above the sample mean, while the environmental fraction is below the mean. These individuals are characterised by behaviours that are influenced more intensely by social capital.

Environmental learning prevails: a group with the environmental origin fraction at or above the sample mean and the social origin fraction below the sample mean. Individuals in this group are more influenced by environmental factors.

Mutually weak: respondents whose both fractions are below the mean. The cultural or social capital of these actors looks relatively poor, and their behaviour is presumably affected at the lowest level by either. Neither fraction dominates.

Table 7. The relative predominance of “prescribed” behaviour depending on the composition of cultural capital.

Cultural capital	N	Prescribed	Deliberate	Total
Mutually strong	119	60.5%	39.5%	100%
Social learning prevails	101	52.5%	47.5%	100%
Environmental learning prevails	96	38.5%	61.5%	100%
Mutually weak	472	35.4%	64.6%	100%
Sample	788	41.8%	58.2%	100%

Table 8. The relative predominance of “prescribed” behaviour depending on the composition of social capital.

Social capital	N	Prescribed	Deliberate	Total
Mutually strong	74	56.8%	43.2%	100%
Social learning prevails	88	52.3%	47.7%	100%
Environmental learning prevails	168	45.8%	54.2%	100%
Mutually weak	459	35.7%	64.3%	100%
Sample	789	41.7%	58.3%	100%

If CET’s theoretical assumption is correct, we should anticipate the highest proportion of “prescribed” behaviour in the group of “mutually strong”, and the lowest one in the group of “mutually weak” capitals. The other two groups should occupy intermediate positions.

If our H2 is correct, then the share of “prescribed” behaviour will be relatively higher in the group of “social learning” in contrast to “environmental learning”.

As the data from Tables 7 and 8 show, there are two trends in the distribution of behavioural “structural types”. In fact, the “mutually strong” status of capital fractions generates a dramatically higher level of “prescribed” behaviours. Compared to the “mutually weak” status, these are 60.5% and 35.4% for cultural capital, and 56.8% and 37.7% for social capital.

While matching social vs. environmental learning effects, we see a tendency for the “social learning” group to demonstrate a relatively higher proportion of «prescribed» behaviour compared to the “environmental learning” group. These values are 52.5% and 38.5%, respectively, for cultural capital, and 52.3% and 45.8%, respectively, for social capital.

This enables us to accept our hypothesis H2: The proportion of “prescribed” and “deliberate” actors will be unequal for groups affected by environmental-origin vs. social-origin cultural and social capital. It is anticipated that this will shift towards “prescribed” behaviour for more expressed social-learning (CCS, SCS), and towards “deliberate” behaviour for environmental-learning (CCE, CSE) capitals’ origin.

Both of the tendencies, (a) high-grade capital shifting behaviour towards “prescribed,” while low-grade moving it towards “deliberate” mode, and (b) social learning’s tendency to be relatively more effective in generating «prescribed» behaviour compared to environmental learning, look stable. At least, they reveal themselves in almost the same form within both of the tested domains of cultural and social capital.

Conclusion

Summing up the observations presented in this paper, we can conclude that our study met all our basic expectations overall. First of all, EAST theoretical and instrumental apparatus proved its ability to differentiate between principal “structural types” of social actions (Tables 2 and 3). Both the “prescribed” and the “deliberate” streams of action, as identified by EAST, demonstrated a range of theoretically predicted specificities (Tables 4 and 5), which allowed us to verify our fundamental assumptions to a certain degree. Both of our substantive hypotheses were accepted.

Methodologically, that means (taking into account all the appropriate limitations of the particularity of the studied case) that we proved the fundamental integrity of micro- and macro-models of social action. Micro-processes are really associated with their macro-factors of cultural and social capital grades, which guide behaviour in the way predicted by the theory (Table 6). We consider this aspect of the study’s results as a contribution to Nichols and colleagues’ call “to develop an evidential bridge between modelling results and research on the psycho-social mechanisms instantiating cultural transmission...” (Nichols, 2024: 9).

In theoretical application, our observations seem useful for debates about the CET balance between environmental and social learning, and their overall impact on cultural evolution dynamics. Our study (Tables 7 and 8) demonstrates that both fundamental sources of social and cultural capital can affect behaviour. In reality, these theoretically postulated factors are orthogonal, as they are registered both consistently and inconsistently. Social learning has been shown to be far more influential than environmental learning, which is consistent with CET theory. This could be considered useful input for assessing cultural evolution mechanisms, according to J. Henrich (Henrich, 2001: 992).

At the instrumental level, we are once again faced with the well-known problem of EAST measurements, which is an excessive materialisation of actions due to artificial stimulation of “reasoning” processes (Table 4, see also: Chernozub, 2025). This compromises the ecological validity of the method on some scale and sets some barriers to accurate prediction of behaviour realisation. Fortunately, there is a fairly obvious remedy. Two sub-samples, with and without “reasoning stimulation”, should effectively deal with this imperfection.

Taking into account that our conclusions are based on a single study, we should be cautious with their generalisation. To use the terms of formal logic, one should avoid attributing to them a universal quantifier. We only diagnosed that some regularities could

be found in theoretically predicted forms and in theoretically predicted locations. Assessing the limits of our model's applicability is an issue for further exploration.

The perspective of further studies looks encouraging. One of the promising directions could be the analysis of interconnections between micro- and macro-levels of cultural shifts. EAST postulates that the accumulation of "deliberate" behaviours within a certain domain is an early warning signal for the displacement of current cultural norms by new ones. Will this be detected through the observation of related macro-processes?

We could imagine, then, some domains with stable and others with unstable sets of cultural norms, as they are detected at the macro-level. Will these domains differ in terms of the concentration of "prescribed" vs. "deliberate" behaviours? Any positive answer to these questions would mean an increase in our ability to explain and predict social actions, cultural evolution trends, and, lastly, our ability to diagnose early any emerging phenomena in cultural dynamics.

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Appendix A. GATA.

The Graphical Association Test of Attitudes (GATA) intentionally avoids respondents' direct assessment of their attitudes towards the objects under investigation and can therefore be classified as a fundamentally "indirect" instrument. GATA was introduced as a supplementary measurement technique to complement the common "direct" methods. Focusing on the well-known problems of the self-reporting, we hypothesise that the accuracy of behavioural prediction models based on it could be improved by incorporating the "indirect" measurement of attitudes. Incremental effects should result from a comprehensive consideration of "directly" and "indirectly" measured attitudes which will add up and correct each other.

To accomplish this task effectively, GATA uses the chain of two sequential associative procedures.

In the first step, a respondent is presented with a primary stimulus representing an evaluated object, followed by a set of target stimuli represented by a set of abstract graphical shapes (Figure A1.) To mask the object of the researcher's real interest, the primary stimulus is presented within a series of masking stimuli. The output of the first step is the graphical shape(s) that the respondent associates with the object under study.

Then we take the "diverting pause" of exposure to uncorrelated stimuli. Typically, these are common self-report questions from the non-GATA sections of the questionnaire.

In the second step, the phrase containing the verbal markers of the approach-avoidance tendency is presented as the primary stimulus. Typically, the phrase uses wording such as "would like to look at", "would be nice to have around", "would like to touch" and so on. The presentation of the stimulus phrase is followed by the same set of graphic shapes.

At both stages, the respondent's task is to select from the target stimuli the graphical shapes that are perceived by the respondent as "similar" or "close" to the primary stimulus. In this way GATA is supposed to be able to produce "indirect" measurement outcome.

Technically, the method's procedure is structured as follows:

- a. The respondent familiarises himself with the studied object, which is presented in the form of a verbal concept on the screen of a CAPI device. The set of graphic shapes is presented to a respondent on the screen of a CAPI device and the respondent associates the graphic shapes with the test object.
- b. The respondent's attention is diverted to other questions in the survey, preferably not related to the subject under study.
- c. The respondent reacts to the approach-avoidance phrase ranking graphic shapes from most to least preferable for longer contact.
- d. An "individual scale" of preferences for graphic shapes is created, based on the ranking from phase "c".
- e. The implicit preference score according to the "individual scale" is assigned to the studied object based on the association from phase "a".



Figure 1. An example of the GATA set of graphical shapes.

As a result, each tested object receives a score on an ordinal scale, regardless of which particular shape each individual respondent may prefer or dislike, due to their psychological, cultural, mental, physical or other similar factors.

The method has been comprehensively validated, including:

Test-retest reliability [9].

Internal consistency [10, 11].

Divergent (towards “direct” measurements) validity [1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7].

Criterion (prospective) validity [2, 4, 5, 9, 12].

Criterion (retrospective) validity [6, 7].

Construct validity [10, 11, 13].

Thus, methodologically, GATA claims to be an “indirect” measurement technique capable of producing some additional or even orthogonal results to “direct” measurements, enabling proven incremental accuracy in behaviour prediction.

Appendix B. Instruments of indirect measurements.

1. Name Letter Task (J. Nuttin).
2. Evaluative Priming Task (R.H. Fazio, J.R. Jackson, B.C. Dunton, C.J. Williams).
3. Linguistic Intergroup Bias (A. Maasset).
4. Implicit Association Test (A.G. Greenwald, D.E. McGhee, J.L.K. Schwartz).
5. Approach-Avoidance Tasks (M. Chen, J.A. Bargh).
6. Go/No-Go Association Task (B.A. Nosek).
7. Weapon Paradigm (B.K. Payne).
8. Extrinsic Affective Simon Task (J. De Houwer).
9. Personalised IAT (M.A. Olson, R.H. Fazio).
10. Affect Misattribution Procedure (B.K. Payne).
11. Evaluative Movement Assessment (C.M. Brendl, A.B. Markman, C. Messner).
12. Implicit Association Procedure (K. Schnabel, J.B. Asendorpf, A.G. Greenwald).
13. Single Category IAT (A. Karpinski, R.B. Steinman).
14. Identification Extrinsic Affective Simon Task (J. De Houwer, E. De Bruycker).
15. Single Block IAT (S. Teige-Mocigemba, K.C. Klauer, K. Rothermund).
16. Brief IAT (N. Sriram, F. Greenwald).
17. Recoding Free IAT (K. Rothermund, A. Gast).

18. Sorting Paired Features Task (Y. Bar-Anan, B.A. Nosek, M. Vianello).
19. Action Interference Paradigm (R. Banse, B. Gawronski, C. Rebetez, H.J. Gutt, B. Morton).
20. Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (D. Barnes-Holmes, Y. Barnes-Holmes, P. Power, E. Hayden, R. Milne, I. Stewart).

Appendix C. EAST operational model and the main provisions.

In its operationalised form, EAST analyses action escalation based on a comparison of the initial and resulting forms of the action program, assessed against the actual action.

Attitudes towards prospective action are operationalised as a spectrum of attitudinal states, ranging from “consistently positive” to “consistently negative”. An attitude is considered to be consistent if both the direct and indirect measures indicate the same valence, and inconsistent otherwise. Measured at the very beginning of the interview, this D2 (“two-dimensional”) scale provides data on the initial status of the attitudes towards expected action. According to EAST, these data indicate the state of the prescribed program of action.

We then stimulate the process of reasoning by asking direct questions, pushing the respondent to evaluate the prospective action in the reflective mode. These questions refer to factors, borrowed from the TRA/TPB model, that are subjectively anticipated: (a) the value of possible outcomes of the action, (b) the reaction of the social environment to the action, (c) barriers to the practical realisation of the action.

After the respondents’ reasoning step, we take a second measure of D2 status, which is assumed to reflect the action program revised according to the results of reasoning.

Finally, the two D2 models are compared to assess the intensity and location of possible shifts in the action program. As the first D2 measure is based on data collected *before* and the second on data collected *after* the reasoning process, we classify any actual action or inaction as being primarily guided by either the prescribed program, or the outcome of the reasoning.

The general EAST model in its graphical form is shown in *Figure A1*. The shapes refer to the indirect measure of Graphical Associative Test of Attitudes. The algorithm for the interpretation of the EAST Matrix is presented by its generalised output.

Thus, EAST focuses on the differentiation of social actions according to their origins, which are determined by the specifics of the escalation process and can be different even for identical social actions.

The **object** of EAST is the escalation of social action from the emergence of the stimulus to act to the materialisation of the action/inaction and the disappearance of the stimulus influence.

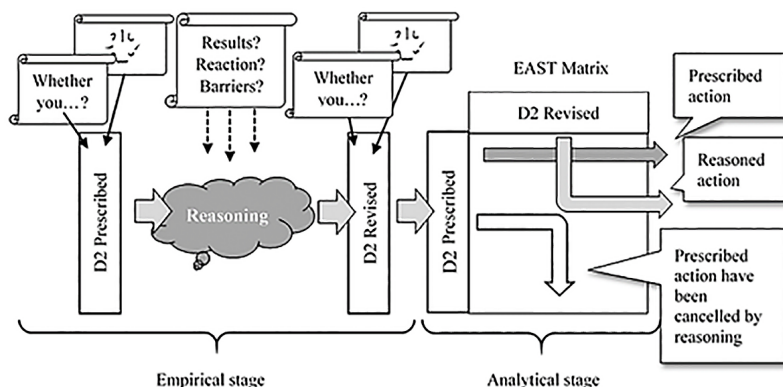


Fig. A1. EAST general model
(Source: Chernozub, 2025: 86)

The **subject** of the explanation is the adaptation of existing social experience to the requirements of a specific situation, the mechanism of which is considered as a complex of interrelated conflicts:

- between the demands of the situation and the existing set of programs (in the case of a mismatch, the process of reasoning may be activated, and as a result the original program may be cancelled);
- between the original and revised programs of action (the original program may still be better than the revised one, the process may return to the original program);
- between implicit (reflective) and explicit (impulsive) factors of evaluating the original and revised programs (in some cases the prioritisation of programs may be guided by implicit factors, and the explicitly preferred program may be changed in a seemingly unmotivated way).

The **method** encompasses a set of measuring and analytical instruments, as EAST's two general factors provide different requirements for explaining and predicting the actions they are guiding. For details, please refer to Chernozub, 2025.

Может ли анализ микропроцессов эскалации действия прояснить некоторые макро-неопределенности теории культурной эволюции?

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В статье представлены результаты исследования, целью которого было проверить некоторые социологические предположения на макроуровне посредством анализа микропроцессов социального действия. В частности, мы проверили предсказания теории культурной эволюции (ТКЭ) относительно роли культурного и социального капитала в процессе материализации социального поведения.

ТКЭ постулирует влияние на социальное действие двух факторов: уровня развития этих капиталов и преобладающего источника их происхождения, которым может быть, как среда, так и социальное взаимодействие. Эти факторы определяют то, как люди действуют: либо «слепо» придерживаясь установленных культурных стандартов, либо сознательно разрабатывая собственную стратегию поведения. Вместе, эти факторы представляют собой социальный механизм, обеспечивающий диалектический процесс сохранения и эволюции культуры. Структурная теория эскалации действий (СТЭД), которую мы использовали, предоставляет теоретические и эмпирические инструменты для дифференциации этих форм поведения, определяемых ею как «предписанные» и «обдуманые» действия.

Исследование проводилось в форме массового опроса и выявило устойчивую корреляцию между культурными и социальными характеристиками отдельных групп и соотношением их «предписанных» и «преднамеренных» действий. Мы рассматриваем это как теоретический вклад в дискуссии ТКЭ. Определенный методологический результат был продемонстрирован при создании гибридной модели ТЛЭ-СТЭД, которая доказала свою эффективность, поскольку подтвердила положения обеих моделей. Были также выявлены некоторые возможности методического улучшения инструментов СТЭД.

Ключевые слова: теория социального действия; теория культурной эволюции; теорий двойственной системы; рамка двойственного подхода; обучение средой; социальное обучение; структурная теория эскалации действия