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Positivism, Structurationism and the Differentiation–Polarisation Theory: a reconsideration of Shilling’s novelty and primacy thesis

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ABSTRACT This paper critically assesses Chris Shilling’s claims that structuration theory provides a new and important direction for sociology of education. That assessment is conducted with particular reference to the long-standing research programme in the sociology of education, known as the differentiation–polarisation theory (d–p). The plausibility of the claim that d–p is positivist is examined, and the extent to which d–p meets the supposed inadequacies of sociology of education allegedly exposed by structuration theory is investigated. It is concluded that the novelty and importance of structuration theory for sociology of education and a fortiori education policy remains unproven.

Introduction

In an interesting and refreshingly reflective paper Chris Shilling (1992) argues that structuration theory offers a new direction for sociology of education of prime importance. He develops that argument via a critique of theory-testing ethnographic research, amongst other research approaches in education, such as interpretivist sociologies and structuralist Marxism. The main thrust of this paper is to challenge Shilling’s characterisation of theory-testing ethnography, especially the differentiation–polarisation theory (d–p), and in the light of this to reconsider his novelty and primacy thesis regarding the implications of structuration theory for sociology of education. I believe that Shilling’s readings of Giddens’ (1979, 1984) structuration theory are generally reasonable and it is not my purpose here to quibble over his interpretation of Giddens per se.

This paper progresses through three parts. Whilst focusing on Shilling’s criticisms of the d–p, it is my intention also to raise broader questions about the direction of sociology of education. First, I examine the plausibility of Shilling’s claim that d–p is positivist. Second, I investigate the extent to which d–p meets the supposed inadequacies of sociology of education allegedly exposed by Shilling’s reading of structuration theory, thereby reconsidering the novelty claims of the latter. Finally, insofar as structurationism does offer a new direction for sociology of education, I reflect on how important it is.
Positivism, Theory-testing and d-p

Shilling takes the d-p research programme, which has been developed by Lacey (1966, 1970), Hargreaves (1967), Lambart (1976), Ball (1981) and Abraham (1989a), as a prime example of theory-testing ethnography. These researchers studied a boys' grammar school streamed by forms, a boys' secondary modern streamed by forms, an unstreamed girls' grammar school, a banded co-educational comprehensive and a setted co-educational comprehensive, respectively. In his discussion of d-p he draws heavily on the propositions of Martyn Hammersley, who believes that d-p is very valuable because it is "one of the few examples [in sociology] of a powerful theory which has survived systematic testing" (Hammersley, 1985, p. 244). It is important to note, however, that in order to reach his model of d-p Hammersley has to do some reconstruction:

Rationally reconstructed [d-p] begins from a concern to explain the increasing divergence in academic performance and behaviour between top and bottom stream/band pupils over the course of their school lives. And it focuses on a plausible explanation for this divergence which appeals to the effects of differentiation on pupils' attitudes to school values..... the second, deductive, stage of inquiry involves the clarification of the concepts of differentiation and polarisation and the derivation of hypotheses about what one would expect to occur under various conditions if the theory were correct. This provides the basis for the third stage of inquiry, the selection and investigation of cases in which these various hypotheses can be tested. (p. 252)

I do not disagree with the above reconstruction as far as it goes. Indeed, it provides a useful summary of certain aspects of the research programme. However, his reconstruction becomes problematic when he declares that d-p:

shows the feasibility of the positivist model of theory, the model which ... gives us the best hope of producing effective explanations for social phenomena.

(p. 250)

Shilling reproduces this positivist conception of d-p, implying that it presupposes "regularities as part of transhistorical or cross-cultural orders of uniformities", "overlooks the power of people to act differently", and is prone to neglect or distort "the complex cognitive rationalities and strategies that comprise fundamental aspects of social praxis" (Shilling, 1992, pp. 75-76).

In order to clarify discussions of 'postivism' in social science Keat (1981) provides a useful and fairly comprehensive typology of the term. He outlines the following four types of positivist thinking:

(i) 'scientific politics'—the view that all social and political matters are open to rational solution through the application of scientific knowledge;

(ii) 'scientism'—the conviction that science alone represents a genuine form of knowledge;

(iii) 'positivist conception of science'—which defines science as aiming at the explanation and prediction of observable phenomena by showing that these are instances of universal laws, whose truth is determined solely by their logical relationships to non-universal statements describing particular empirical observables; and

(iv) 'value-freedom'—the doctrine, which is entailed by (iii), that the criteria of validity for scientific theories may be entirely isolated from, and involve no reference to, moral or political values.
Types (i) and (ii) need not detain us long because I do not think that either Hammersley or Shilling believe d–p to be an example of ‘scientific politics’ or ‘scientism’. Suffice to say that all the ethnographic researchers of differentiation and polarisation treated the common sense and tacit perceptions of all the school students, teachers and other actors as legitimate claims to knowledge. At most sociological knowledge was seen by d–p researchers as informing, not determining, political decisions about education. For example, Lacey (1976, p. 83) states that one purpose of *Hightown Grammar* was:

> to provide teachers and students in general with an insight into their own world that would lead to further debate.

Similarly, in the conclusion to his study Abraham (1989a, p. 78) insists that changes in the internal organization of schools deriving from his findings “would undoubtedly have to interact closely with community interests”. The d–p research programme does not embrace the notion that the nature of education should be determined by the findings of social scientists, or that other ‘non-scientific’ groups have no legitimate claims to knowledge about education systems.

It is the idea that d–p is based solely on the value-free collection and testing of empirical data on observables that seems to underpin its positivist characterisation by Hammersley and Shilling. Yet this idea cannot withstand scrutiny. The whole research programme is influenced by a value-based concern about the inequality of educational achievement and experience between social classes and the possibility that the organization of schooling may contribute to that inequality. That values are involved becomes much more evident when we consider that over the last decade Government spokespersons have problematised schooling in terms of productivity rather than class inequality because the latter apparently does not fundamentally concern them.

It is clear from the following passage that Lacey’s *Hightown Grammar* was not unaffected by his values:

> it is possible to intervene into the dialectic relationship between personality and social structure…. My concern was to promote those sorts of intervention that would lead towards an egalitarian society. (Lacey, 1976, p. 64)

In drawing out the implications of his study Hargreaves (1967) states that ‘it is now time to make some of these implied judgements explicit’ and continues:

> The hostility and lack of communication which exists between the two subcultures [of pro-and anti-school students] is disturbing…. The most radical way in which the formation of the subcultures could be suppressed at Lumley is through the complete abolition of the streaming system…. If we are to educate all these children to develop and maintain co-operative and satisfying human relationships, to lead useful and constructive adult roles in society, to attain a degree of personal integrity and self-realization, many of the assumptions about education … must be urgently challenged and reformulated. (Hargreaves, 1967, pp. 186, 189, 192)

Moreover, Ball (1981, p. 283) concludes:

> it is apparent that while going some way towards solving the gross social problems and social inequalities which were characteristic of the bipartite system, the streamed comprehensive does produce an unstable, polarised social structure amongst its pupils.

But why are these gross problems? Why be concerned or disturbed about the personal integrity or human relationships of working class students? Could not class-based
subcultural polarisation also be reduced by ghettoising working class failures and ruling them with such an iron hand (analogous to the Stalinist work camps and the Nazi concentration camps) that subcultural opposition could not develop to any significant degree? The reason why d–p researchers have advocated de-streaming does not reside solely in data collection and theory testing. It is partly dependent on their egalitarian value-judgements. I think it is important not to sacrifice those egalitarian values at the positivist altar, not only because I share them, but also because values in general are a vital ingredient of the research process.

Hence, d–p is not value-free. Since the ‘positivist conception of science’ logically entails ‘value-freedom’ the value-laden nature of d–p implies that the theory cannot be derived from a ‘positivist conception of science’. Moreover, the allegation of type (iii) positivism can also be refuted by recourse to the research approaches within d–p. Ball (1981), for instance, describes his Beachside Comprehensive as methodologically interpretive, but is careful to avoid lapsing into an “ad hoc problem-solving orientation” (Shilling, 1993, p. 108):

The study seeks in part to understand the social system of the school in terms of the actors’ interpretations ... But analytically, the study addresses the task of placing the classroom perceptions and interactions of teachers and pupils within a wider social context and does not rest solely upon the interpretation of teachers’ and pupils’ utterances. (Ball, 1981, p. xvii)

This is entirely consistent with Lacey’s ambition to “develop views of the system from a number of points of view”, and to “immerse himself within the system in order to be able to feel, recognise and describe the constraints of the various roles within the school” (Lacey, 1976, pp. 67, 69). Hargreaves, too, employs such a methodology though perhaps less smoothly (Hargreaves, 1967, pp. 193–205). Surely such methods do not rely solely on observables and are ideally suited to discovering the rationalities and strategies comprising social praxis? Furthermore, the latter have been described meticulously by d–p researchers. The theory does identify regularities, but these are always contextu-alised. The generalisability of d–p is conditional and not necessarily transhistorical or cross-cultural, as is stressed consistently by the contributors to the research programme.

As for overlooking the ‘power of people to act differently’, this claim is repeatedly at odds with the substantive content of d–p. In fact, d–p researchers systematically identify and examine why individuals do not conform to the social processes described by theory. In this sense d–p is not socially deterministic, rather a sociological model which approximates a reality that is particularly indeterminate at the individual level. Thus, Lacey (1970, p. 95) summarises some of his findings as follows:

We have seen that the pattern of friendships within a year group is influenced by the social pressures affecting that group. The individual’s response to these social pressures is conditioned, but not determined, by a number of his own social characteristics. (Emphasis added)

He further explains that the boys in Hightown found it necessary to apply both pro- and anti-school norms in different situations to maintain their position (Lacey, 1970, pp. 85–94). The boys, therefore, needed to be flexible entailing a high degree of situational discretion. Like the other d–p researchers, Abraham (1989a, p. 47) cautions:

It is important to appreciate that pupils’ value orientations should not be viewed mechanically.... friendship groups do not necessarily have consistent
norms and pupils’ behaviour may be influenced as much by a particular situation as by group norms.

He also points out that not all individual school students can be readily placed within pro- or anti-school groups. The d–p theory provides little insight regarding such individuals. But none of this undermines the sociological model which applies to most of the school students most of the time.

Evidently, d–p is not characterised by any of the types of positivism used in philosophy and social science, and is not consistent with the implied positivist characterisation of Shilling. Rather d–p implies a realist ontology, which is not confined to observables, and is concerned to uncover underlying mechanisms that explain social events (Bhaskar, 1979, 1986). Part of the rationale of d–p is to examine the mechanisms by which working class students underachieve—the latter being observed at the level of correlation of events, such as the correlation between academic performance and social class. This project involves looking inside the ‘black box’ of the school institution. Again within the school d–p attempts to reveal the mechanisms of subcultural formation—the latter being observable at the level of correlation of events, such as regularities in social interactions between individuals and groups. This involves accounts of theoretical entities which are not directly observable, such as the twin and mutually reinforcing processes of differentiation and polarisation and dynamic friendship structures. There are many observable events, which lead d–p researchers to believe that differentiation, polarisation and changing friendship structures are real, but one does not observe a friendship structure just as one does not observe an electron or a magnetic field, whose real properties give rise to observable events (Bhaskar, 1975; Chalmers, 1982) [1].

That d–p researchers do not subscribe to positivism, including value-freedom, does not imply a collapse into self-defeating epistemological relativism (Lukes, 1982). On the contrary, they are committed not only to values, but also to truth and accuracy—hence the concerns about theory-testing and bias in their writings. There is no contradiction here. Sociologists do not need to be socially and/or politically indifferent/neutral in order to discover truths. On the contrary, it may be that certain truths, especially those that threaten the status quo are more effectively generated from a value-committed position. Equally, the commitment to truth and realism guards against merely attempting to make reality fit preconceived values [2]. In these ways the d–p research programme has much in common with Weberian prescriptions for social science (Weber, 1949). As Hammersley (1985, p. 250) has commented, such concern with theory-testing also produces “a sound basis for policy”. I contend that researchers of d–p have a much more subtle view of values, agency, causal mechanisms, structure and ontological realism than Shilling gives them credit for.

**Structurationism and d–p: new for old?**

According to Shilling (1992, pp. 77–78), within structuration theory “social structures are not seen as purely constraining, impersonal forces which stand above and apart from individuals, but instead are both implicated and reproduced by actors”. Human agents are placed “at the centre of social reproduction” (p. 79). Apparently this provides an escape from the dualism traditionally found in educational research, in which “society becomes a disembodied entity which stands apart from human action” (p. 78). In d–p social structures, such as class, streaming and subcultural norms are not considered to be purely constraining impersonal forces. Lacey, for example, investigates the development
of the class structure of the community of Hightown (Lacey, 1970, pp. 1–47). Like other
d–p researchers, he further identifies ways in which actors contribute to the reproduction
of class inequality:

The school is regarded as a competitive arena in which the flow of rewards is
limited. The competing units are presented as family units, competing on the
basis of nominal equality but in fact differing markedly in the resources
relevant to the process of education. The effects of these differences in
resources are seen most clearly when the ‘failure’ cases of Russell and Baker are
compared with Howells, Docker and Buttle. (p. 149)

This competitive arena is sustained partly by the competitive striving (agency) of the
family units. Furthermore, Abraham (1989a, p. 48) is careful to note that:

A consequence and cause of the school’s prestige was that parents pressed to get
their children enrolled there.

These are hardly perspectives that represent society as disembodied from human action.
On the contrary, competitive human action is seen to be crucial in maintaining
structures—in this case the hierarchical structures within and between schools.

D–p suggests that such competition is largely constraining for working class students,
but considerably enabling for middle class students, who gain advantages from it. It is also
clear from d–p that streaming is maintained through the (tacit) commitment of (senior)
teachers (human agents) (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1967, pp. 182–192), and that
differentiation is partly sustained through teachers’ interpretation of streamed students (see
e.g. Abraham, 1989a, p. 56). As for subcultural norms, the work of Ball (1981) and Lacey
(1970) are particularly impressive in documenting their production and reproduction
amongst the school students. For all d–p researchers human agents are at the centre of
such reproduction.

On Shilling’s own analysis the notion of ‘structural rules’, developed within structura-
tion theory to refer to actors’ knowledge of social conventions required for language and
the management of social interaction, is not new (Shilling, 1992, p. 78). These ideas are
not only evident in Goffman (1963, 1971), and the gender work of Mahoney (1985), Lees
(1986) and Abraham (1989b), but also within d–p, most profoundly in Lacey (1970).
Structuration theory, we are told, insists that structural rules do not determine behaviour
and attributes to individuals the capability to ‘make a difference’ and to exercise some
power in social relations (Shilling, 1992, pp. 78, 82). But there is nothing new here since,
as already mentioned, d–p is not deterministic and is predicated on the idea that
sociological research may be used by individual teachers in order to effect informed
social change. It does, however, recognise the importance of the imposition of rules on
relatively powerless individuals within institutions by the relatively powerful. Nor is there
much new (besides the terminology) in the idea that teachers’ strategies may become
routinised as a form of “practical consciousness” (Shilling, 1992, pp. 82–83). An import-
ant part of d–p research is the documentation of routinised teacher differentiation in
marking, classroom interaction and report-writing.

Given the theoretical importance and egalitarian significance of d–p, it is worth
considering why it received so little replication. One of the main reasons for this is
probably the considerable shift to an interest in the sociology of knowledge in the early
1970s, including the sociology of educational knowledge, which d–p was perceived as
having neglected (Young, 1971). Researchers became preoccupied with radical sociolog-
ical questions about the content of the curriculum and fundamentally what it meant to
be educated. Standard measures of academic performance, which d–p researchers used
as methodological devices came to be challenged, as did systematic procedures for collecting data, because they were viewed as promoting 'objectivity' at the expense of social intervention (Whitty, 1985). In fact, that was an oversimplification (Pring, 1972). Furthermore, because the first two published studies were of boys' schools the d–p research programme did not attach itself easily to the growing feminist sociological studies of education during the late 1970s.

The foregoing analysis indicates that many of the aspects of structuration theory, which Shilling (1992) argues offer a new direction for sociology of education, are, in fact, to be found within d–p, and therefore, within the existing subdiscipline as a whole. Turning now to the features of structuration theory that are not convergent with the d–p, Shilling attests:

Structuration theory presupposes the knowledgeability of human agents. This recognises that members of a society know a great deal (if not all) about society and the way it is constituted.... It also recognises that agents take into account the consequences of their actions. (p. 82)

That members of a society know something about it is not denied by d–p researchers. However, d–p is also sensitive to the incompleteness of this knowledge; actors may miscalculate, or be oblivious of, the workings of certain aspects of society, including their own interests. Criticisms of 'resistance theory' have been made extensively elsewhere (McRobbie, 1978; Hargreaves, 1982; Walker, 1985, 1986; Abraham, 1989b). Suffice to say here that a tension between 'resistance theory' and d–p is the extent to which the former reads into anti-school student subculture a conscious opposition to the schooling system.

D–p suggests that the competitive and differentiating school system produces unintended consequences, which are often not fully appreciated by teachers, parents or students. Specifically, working class parents and students are particularly prone to miscalculate the relative societal values of school education because of lack of academic and material resources (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981). Indeed, Shilling himself appears to allow for this kind of miscalculation, albeit on a much grander scale:

if I do not realise that the main features of a national education system are the result of global 'structures', I may believe that I understand that education system when in reality I will understand only the effects of international rules and resources. (p. 79)

Thus, there is an ambiguity and an unacknowledged tension in (Shilling's account of) structuration theory. The extent of agent's knowledgeability is unclear. Certainly if agents misunderstand their education system then that is likely to limit the extent to which they can take into account the consequences of their action. Since it is not obvious that structuration theory offers any resolution to this ambiguity the precise nature of the novel contribution that the theory makes to defining the knowledgeability of agents remains unclear.

Nevertheless, according to Shilling, structuration theory explains regularities of behaviour as:

the deep-seated need humans have for ontological security; the need to maintain a sense that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, and that the view of self and social identities that individuals have are stable and reliable.... instead of arguing that such individuals are necessarily intent on upholding existing societal norms, it may be more profitable to consider the
possibility that such beliefs and actions are prompted more from a familiarity with routine and a sense of what is ‘natural’. (p. 83)

These are interesting ideas; there is some empirical research to support the view that some teachers’ perceptions of proper sex roles partly depend on an appeal to what is ‘natural’ (e.g. Abraham, 1989c). The need for ‘ontological security’ may be a major explanation, but this needs to be empirically investigated rather than merely asserted. Thus, while this aspect of structurationism may be novel, it is overtheorised. Moreover, the need for ‘ontological security’ may be intricately linked with the intention to uphold existing norms. There come times in our lives when we are required to make major choices, perhaps in the face of values, relationships, evidence or material rewards which conflict with our beliefs. Choosing to change our beliefs may be risky, but it may be more palatable for those without heavily vested interests in subscribing to the status quo.

The Primacy of Structurationism

Even if the ideas embedded in structuration theory were as new as Shilling claims, how important would the development of structurationism be for education and/or sociology of education? Even though Shilling repeatedly asserts the importance of structurationism for sociology of education, education policy and comparative education, he provides no criteria by which we can answer this question. Unlike d-p, which is motivated by egalitarian goals for education, Shilling’s research programme in structurationism appears to have no goals regarding educational or social change. I am not suggesting that structurationism cannot be important, but precisely what is the nature of that importance, and to what end, remains unstated. There is one exception to this. By enormous extension of his arguments in support of structurationism Shilling proposes that it opens up avenues through which sexist stereotypes might be challenged. However, the connection here with structuration theory is extremely tenuous and I would suggest that those challenges could be mounted readily without recourse to structurationism.

Shilling (1992, p. 71) is clearly interested in the academically internalist project of “bringing together micro- and macro-approaches in the sociology of education” as follows:

My aim is to highlight the potential of this approach to facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the degree to which structures are reproduced in and through social interaction in schools and classrooms. This is an important task in its own right [emphasis added] as with few exceptions, the potential of structuration has hardly been touched in the sociology of education.

Not only is the way this aim is related to some substantive or practical goal for education omitted, but we are explicitly told that injecting structurationist theorising into sociology of education is important for its own sake. The main message seems to be that it is important because (allegedly) it is new. This is bizarre reasoning, which, as Weber (1949, p. 111) stressed, should not be followed by the social sciences. As Lacey (1986) has argued, the preoccupation with carving out newness in sociology of education can lead to a failure to build on ‘old’, but nonetheless socially important, non-internalist methodologies and findings.

Yet even on accepting Shilling’s project as important on his academically internalist terms we may still ask what prospect of progress obtains for the structurationist synthesis of agency and structure, and of the micro-and macro-levels of analysis. According to
Holmwood & Stewart (1993), Giddens' forging of a new synthesis through structuration theory does not greatly differ from Parsons' (1951, 1966) attempt to synthesise the 'objective' and the 'subjective'. In accounting for the characteristics of social relationships which are not reducible to aggregates of individuals' actions Parsons refers to "emergent properties"—what Giddens calls "structural properties". Giddens (1976, pp. 16–17; 1984, pp. 185–192) condemns Parsons for representing actors as performers propelled by role expectations rather than as "skilled and knowledgeable agents". However, as Holmwood & Stewart (1993) point out, knowledge is necessary for role expectation and skill a condition for role performance. Giddens (1981) also attacks the concept of "functional prerequisites", which, for Parsons, are necessary to the constitution and operation of any social system. Again Holmwood & Stewart (1993, p. 10) raise serious questions about whether Giddens' structurationist approach makes any substantive progress:

Giddens' hostility to Parsons' scheme of functional prerequisites is, apparently unequivocal. He writes that, "the term 'function' is of no use to the social sciences or history; indeed it would do no harm to ban it altogether as any sort of technical term". However, he proposes in its place the concept of "structural features" and they have the same substance as functional prerequisites in Parsons. He writes, "four structural features are implicated in the reproduction of all social systems, and simultaneously supply the basic logic of a classification of institutions". He writes further, "structure can be conceptualised abstractly as two aspects of rules—normative elements and codes of signification". It would seem to be that only as a term is function banned.

It may be that terminological reconstructions have been mistaken for theoretical progress to some, or even a large, extent. This would imply that synthesis is made apparent through the creation of fragmentation in the first place. Progress, therefore, might be illusory. Sociology of education should be alert to that possibility. Alternatively, Hammersley (1984) may be correct in not attempting to 'resolve' the micro-/macro-dimensions in sociology because no practical solution currently exists.

Summary and Conclusion

While committed to truth, accuracy and theory-testing, d–p research is neither value-free nor positivist in any other way that that term is usually understood to imply. It is, however, consistent with ontological realism and elements of Weberian methodology. When set against d–p, the novel contributions of structuration theory to sociology of education, claimed by Shilling, seem to be remarkably limited, and dependent on an unsatisfactory account of previous empirical research in the field. The importance of structuration theory for sociology of education and a fortiori education policy remains unproven. Novelty in sociology should not be mistaken for social importance. 'Old' paradigms may be far more important than new ones since rational criteria of social significance are not exhausted by appeals to novelty.

One such 'old' research programme is d–p. Yet it is of continuing relevance (see, for example, Gamoran, 1992). Of particular importance is the impact that current government policies for school budgetary control and parental 'market choice' are having on teacher differentiation and class polarisation (Bowe et al., 1992; Ball, 1993). There is also scope for d–p research to examine the impact of these policies on student subcultures within schools. Feminists and others have, of course, conducted a great deal of valuable
research on gender and race in education—some of which can be related to d–p (see e.g. Llewellyn, 1980; Wright, 1986; Mac an Ghaill, 1988). Nevertheless, the methodologies of d–p could be further extended to examine gender and racial differentiation in schools with a view to improving efforts to reduce sexual and racial inequalities.

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**NOTES**

[1] This analogy with natural science is limited to the ontological realm concerning realism versus positivism. It cannot be extended to epistemological issues concerning prediction because human agency makes students and anyone else quite different from electrons in terms of the deterministic nature of causality. People are not merely caused to behave in certain ways; they have reasons for behaviour, unlike electrons.

[2] Though Lacey (1976) uses rather different philosophical terms in his account of 'problems of bias', I think my reconstruction of it reflects its basic message. It should be noted that the view I am putting forward does not imply that values are immutable. On the contrary, values are interrogated by experience and research and are open to change, but cannot absent themselves.

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Reconsideration of Shilling’s Novelty and Primacy Thesis


