

Summary of S. Lindenberg's paper for the "Microfoundations of organizational capabilities and knowledge Conference" Copenhagen, December 1-2, 2005

Why the microfoundations of sociology should be based on goals rather than preferences

Rational choice theory had made a major contribution to bridging the micro/macro gap in the social sciences by pushing methodological individualism. i.e. by its insistence that the basic units of our theorizing should be *actors* confronted with constraints and endowed with ordered preferences. Coleman's work is a clear exponent of this approach. The central thesis of my paper is that a crucial step for bridging the gap between the studies of individuals and the study of social systems (on the meso and macro level) is to increase our handle on context effects and thereby improve our understanding of the macro-to micro link. This comes down to a change in our microfoundations. Concretely, I propose that we can do so by shifting from using the assumption of ordered preferences to using theories of goals, i.e. theories that specify what relevant goals people have, what effect these goals have on cognitive processes and behavior, and how these goals are triggered. A simple example is the homophily assumption in network research. Rather than assuming that individuals have a preference for associating with similar others, one should interpret similarity as a means to one or more goals. Once the goals are specified, it is possible to contextualize the preference for similarity by specifying under what conditions other means than similarity are likely to be used in close-tie-formation. It is also possible to find out in what situations completely different goals are triggered, i.e. goals for which similarity is not a relevant means. In the first case, similarity is substituted by another means, in the second, the goal itself changes and with it the relevant means. In both cases, our grip on the influence of the context has greatly increased. Preferences are thus completely instrumentalized by the explicit introduction of goals.

In the last ten to fifteen years, much research in cognitive social psychology has been done on goals that is directly relevant for this contextualization. For one, it is clear by now that goals affect selective attention and situational evaluations (situational preference formation). Thus, goals will heavily influence not just the stream of information (what is attended to, what is neglected) but also the utility functions. Second, much is known by now on what triggers goals. Both aspects are directly relevant for linking motivational and cognitive processes to factors in the actor's environment, which, in turn, also allows explicit links to the impact of institutions (both informal and formal). The effects of this approach for the micro-to-macro transition and the interpretation of macro outcomes will also be discussed.