Advances in social theory and methodology

Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel

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Toward an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies

Edited by

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Preface

In the last two decades, we have witnessed a widening gap between micro- and macro-social theory and methodology. This book is an attempt to begin bridging the gap. As argued in the Introduction, micro-sociological developments have challenged traditional macro-sociological approaches to social reality for quite some time. In addition, some authors have now begun to reconstruct macro-sociological phenomena based upon a micro-sociological foundation. On the other hand, new macro-social perspectives such as neo-functionalism or neo-Marxism prominently address and incorporate micro-level phenomena. In short we believe that the time is ripe for re-examining the problems that underlie the micro-macro question, based upon the advances in social theory and methodology that have been made since the 1950s.

We have invited a series of authors to present and discuss their theoretical and methodological version of the relation between micro- and macro-social phenomena, starting from the advances in theory and method to which they often have contributed. The book is a collection of original essays addressed to this topic, with the exception of the paper by Habermas which has appeared elsewhere in English. We count as our audience those working on (or interested in) social theory and methodology, and those who are advanced students of social science disciplines. The original idea for the book was born during an extended observation study which made it plain that if we want to give adequate accounts of the social reality observed, we need to integrate systematically notions of macro- and micro-research. The book seeks to provide conceptual models and observational dimensions for prospective researchers who recognize the

need for an integration of macro- and micro-levels of theory and research.

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Above all we would like to express our appreciation to the contributors to the book who responded with enthusiasm and with almost no delay in writing and reviewing their papers, and to the patience and support of our families.

Editors' note

Each contribution is prefaced with an introduction by the editors.

Contents

Introduction:
The micro-sociological challenge
of macro-sociology: towards a
reconstruction of social theory and
methodology

Karin D. Knorr-Cetina

In the last 20 years, we have witnessed an upsurge of social theories and methodologies which are characteristically concerned with micro-processes of social life, such as with face-to-face interaction, with everyday routines and classifications, with strips of conversation, or with definitions of the self and of situations. I have in mind specifically approaches such as symbolic interactionism, cognitive sociology, ethnomethodology, social phenomenology, ethogenics in sociology and the ethnography of speaking and ethnoscience in anthropology.[1] It goes almost without saying that these approaches differ markedly in theoretical background and substantive interest. For example, while today's symbolic interactionism appears to be an outgrowth of Herbert Blumer's reconception of the theories of Mead and Cooley, ethnomethodologists have linked their concerns to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and most recently Merleau-Ponty, and social phenomenology has obvious roots in the works of Schutz and Husserl.[2] While cognitive sociology has stressed the role of language and memory in the cognitive processing of information in everyday settings, ethnomethodology has focused on the organizational features of 'practical reasoning', and ethogenics and symbolic interactionism, though also concerned with symbolic communication, have described the rules and resources which underlie social accounts on the one hand and the negotiation and management of meaning in interaction on the other hand.

One result of these varying pursuits, which I will refer to as *micro-sociologies*, has been a challenge of established theories and methods in sociology, and particularly of macro-sociological orientations. Macro-sociology is commonly understood as the study of society, of social institutions and of socio-cultural change on an

aggregate level.[3] A macro-sociological approach can entail both the use of theoretical concepts on a system level and the use of aggregate data derived from individual micro-level responses to characterize social collectivities. The micro-sociological challenge of such endeavours can best be illustrated by two distinctive but interlocking developments: the move from a normative notion of social order to that of a *cognitive order*, and the rejection of both methodological collectivism *and* individualism in favour of *methodological situationalism*. Both developments have called into question the dimensions in terms of which the micro-macro problem has traditionally been posed, such as the juxtaposition of individual and collectivity or of individual action and social structure. And both developments point in the end towards a reconstruction of macro-social theory and methodology based upon a micro-sociological foundation, or at least based upon an integration of micro-sociological results. I will first present the *cognitive turn* which sociology (and other social sciences) have experienced since the 1950s, and then proceed to discuss methodological situationalism and the consequences of micro-social research for a renewed conception of the micro-macro problem and for a reconstruction of macro-social theory and methodology.

1   From the normative order to the cognitive order

According to Dahrendorf's prominent exposition of modern social thought, two conceptions of social order have ruled Western social philosophy since its beginnings. One is the *integration theory of society* which conceives of social structure as a functionally integrated system regulated by normative consensus. The other he calls the *coercion theory of society* which views social structure as a form of organization held together by force and constraint transcended in an unending process of change.[4] The source of the conflict model of social order is commonly sought in Marx, while the founders of the normative-functional integration model are of course seen to be Durkheim and Parsons.[5] Needless to say, in the American tradition of sociological thought in which most recent micro-sociological approaches have originated, the normative model of social order has dominated the scene. Hence the upsurge of recent micro-sociological orientations must be seen against the contrast of the normative model of order, and not against the contrast of a conflict model informed by Marx.

    Discussions of the merits and particularly of the shortcomings of normative functionalism have haunted sociological theorizing for so long that they need not be repeated here. Suffice it to recall the role played by moral obligations in these models and their treatment of human agents. Durkheim, as we know, tended to identify social facts primarily as moral obligations.[6] He recognized moral diversity as concomitant to the division of labour and organic solidarity which he held to characterize modern society. He also assumed that the social being of an individual depends upon internalized norms which are usually seen as a condition for the freedom of action. Yet his emphasis on the 'external' nature of social institutions which impose themselves upon the individual as facts that are 'independent of his individual will', and his crusade against methodological individualism (see below), left no room for conscious social action. With Parsons, on the other hand, individual conduct is explicitly integrated into society through internalized need dispositions, which establish the harmony between individual motivations and the social whole. Parsons took as his starting-point the 'Hobbesian problem of order' which he defined as the problem of how society can exist in a stable way in face of individual interests, the war of all against all.[7] He sought the answer in the notion of common values which, if properly internalized by individual actors as need-dispositions, guarantee that the individual wants what s/he should want, and acts as s/he should act.[8] Yet as critics have pointed out,[9] despite the elaborate 'action frame of reference' social action with Parsons remains a residual category: it is conceived as not more than the execution of a normatively pre-established harmony through individual agents who, in contrast to Durkheim, are seen as internally (rather than externally) controlled by society. The normative conception of order is at the same time a macro-level conception of order. Society is integrated by shared values and obligations. When mediated through an individual's ties to the occupational group (Durkheim) or through reciprocal sets of expectations structured as roles (Parsons), these values and obligations determine individual conduct.
    Compared with the normative conception of order, the cognitive turn which I have attributed to micro-sociological approaches is marked by a shift of interest towards language use and cognitive processes that represent and interpret the relevance of values and obligations. It is a move which gives primary consideration to the

agents' practical reasoning and which is unconcerned with the causes that allegedly operate behind one's back, a move which posits a *knowing, active* subject as the source of human conduct.[10] Depending on whether the emphasis is placed on 'knowing' or on 'active' in this compound, different research traditions result. In the first case, the knowledge attributed to agents is thought to account for their conduct: participants act in terms of tacit knowledge and rules which they know how to apply in specific situations, but which they may not be able to explicate. It is the task of the social scientist to identify the rules and tacit resources which underlie everyday activities (see Harré and Giddens, below).

The difference between the cognitive rules postulated by this model and the normative obligations invoked in the previous conceptions becomes clear when we spell out the analogy to linguistics drawn upon by many authors (see the summary of Lidz, below). Like the rules of syntax identified in transformational grammar, the rules of conduct sought after in some micro-sociologies are analogous to a level of deep structure of human behaviour, acquired by the individual through socialization. They are not socially codified in a public sense like legal rules or culturally entrenched value-orientations, and their disregard will result in questioning a person's competence or in his or her disqualification as a knowledgeable member of society rather than in legal or moral retaliation. The theory of social action relevant here is a *competence* theory. An explicit version is represented by anthropological ethnoscience.

Ethnoscience deals with what Goodenough once called the ideational order: it attempts to specify explicitly what native speakers have to know (implicitly) about their culture in order to function adequately as competent members of the respective society:[11]

> A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. . . . It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting them. . . . Ethnographic description, then, requires methods of processing observed phenomena such that we can inductively construct a theory of how our informants have organized the same phenomena.

Research in ethnoscience has mostly concentrated on native terminological systems, by which it hopes to discern 'how people construe their world of experience from the way they talk about it'.[12] Its ultimate goal has variably been described as a 'cultural grammar', an ethnology of knowledge or a descriptive epistemology.[13] While some micro-sociologists might agree with such a broadly defined goal, micro-sociological research practice has differed sharply from that of ethnoscience. Symbolic interactionism, for example, has been described as seeking the solution to the problem of social order in the assumption that society is possible because interacting selves share the same basic symbolic order of meanings, definitions and situations.[14] The analyst's task, similar to that proposed for ethogenics (see Harré, below), is to discover how members' conceptions are organized such as to produce the orderly patterns of behaviour that s/he observed. Yet research by symbolic interactionists has illustrated how meanings, situations, objects, selves and events are continually being defined and negotiated, presented in front of an audience and dramatically enacted.[15] In other words, it has shown the cognitive order to be an emergent order with a particular dynamics of its own. Thus, in practice it has *blurred* the distinction between the levels of competence and performance so prominent with Chomskyan theory of language, and made little progress towards a systematic description of the rules presumed to govern symbolic interaction.

Promising new steps towards a competence-based theory of social conduct have been taken in cognitive sociology (see the summary by Lidz, below) and in ethogenics (see Harré, below), and Lidz has proposed a normative functionalism reconstructed on the basis of the model of transformational grammar. However, the ambitious programme itself is not likely to meet with fewer difficulties in sociology or anthropology than it has met in linguistics.[16] By its own definition, most of micro-sociology deals with meaning rather than with formal (syntactical) structure, and the systems of knowledge said to generate social conduct appear to be far more variable, more rapidly changing, and less entrenched than the rules of grammars. It is clear that the search for relevant cognitive structures will continue in different directions with renewed appeal, best exemplified perhaps by Cicourel's exploration of memory mechanisms,[17] by Goffman's frame analysis,[18] or by Giddens's theory of structuration (see

below). On the other hand one might submit that not only in inter-
actionism, but also in other micro-sociological approaches research
has been most successful to date in pointing out the accomplished,
constructed and continually negotiated character of symbolic order.
Thus it is not only a knowing subject, but a knowing and *active* subject
which is posited in this research. Not only has order become a
cognitive (including linguistic) rather than a normative pheno-
menon, it has also become a man-made rather than a man-coercing
matter: it is produced, contested, repaired, organized and displayed
in concrete situations whose definition become the subject of con-
tinual accomplishment and interruption.

To a degree micro-sociological approaches can be seen as torn
between a predilection for a competence theory of action in which
conduct appears to be controlled by similar cognitive processes, and a
skilful display of human subjects as actively engaged in working out,
interfering with, and persuading others of the meanings, rules and
definitions which presumably they share. This conflict is perhaps
most apparent from the stance taken by ethnomethodology which has
renounced any interest in *explaining* social order as the product of
actors' cognitive orientation to and compliance with shared rules and
meanings. The orderliness and coherence of social activities is seen
not as a fact to be explained by sociology, but as an appearance
produced, for example, 'by and through such procedures as analyzing
an event as an instance of compliance (or noncompliance) with a
rule'.[19] It follows, then, that interaction must be analysed with respect
to the methods and procedures by which members make their daily
activities recognizable and accountable to themselves and to others,
thereby acquiring and conveying a *sense* of orderliness and structure.
For example, conversation analysis has found orderliness to derive
from the sequential organization of members' utterances through the
taking of turns.[20]

Cicourel has suggested that devices such as these may be regarded
as transformational procedures for sustaining a sense of social struc-
ture in face of the innumerable differences actors encounter in
concrete situations.[21] In general, however, ethnomethodologists have
not attempted to reconcile the apparently accomplished, negotiated
'orderliness' of everyday life with the assumption of an underlying
stability of social practice rooted in shared cognitive rules. Instead
they have suspended the assumption of stable social conduct alto-