

24.635: Topics in Critical Social Theory

19 March 2024

Structural Explanation

1. Methodological Individualism

Methodological individualism (MI) can be divided into two claims (Epstein 2009, 2014, 2015):

Ontological individualism (OI) is the view that the social world is exhaustively *constituted* by individuals (persons) and their relations and interactions. The slogan is: there is nothing in the social world over and above individuals and their interactions.

Explanatory individualism (EI) is the view that social phenomena should be *explained* in terms of individuals and their interactions.

Coleman's Boat

The search for “microfoundations” of the social assumes that macro factors can have a causal impact only through the disaggregated process at the micro level. But we must then account for how the micro-level is responsible for the macro-explanandum. This idea is typically represented by “Coleman's Boat” (Coleman 1990, 8 – see Coleman's image below). Weber argued (roughly) that “The religious ethic which characterized those societies that became Protestant in the Reformation (and particularly those that were Calvinistic) contained values that facilitated the growth of capitalist economic organization” (Coleman 1990, 6). Coleman points out that this claim requires evidence about the influence of Protestantism on the beliefs and actions of individuals (line 1), and moreover, evidence of the beliefs in question on capitalism (line 3). Coleman argues that although Weber gives the required evidence for line 1, and possibly line 2, he fails to address line 3. However, the problem of line 3 disappears if one is an ontological individualist: if capitalism is constituted by the economic behavior of individuals, then line 3 is established once we have evidence of the relevant economic behavior. This gives explanatory individualists a reason for accepting ontological individualism.

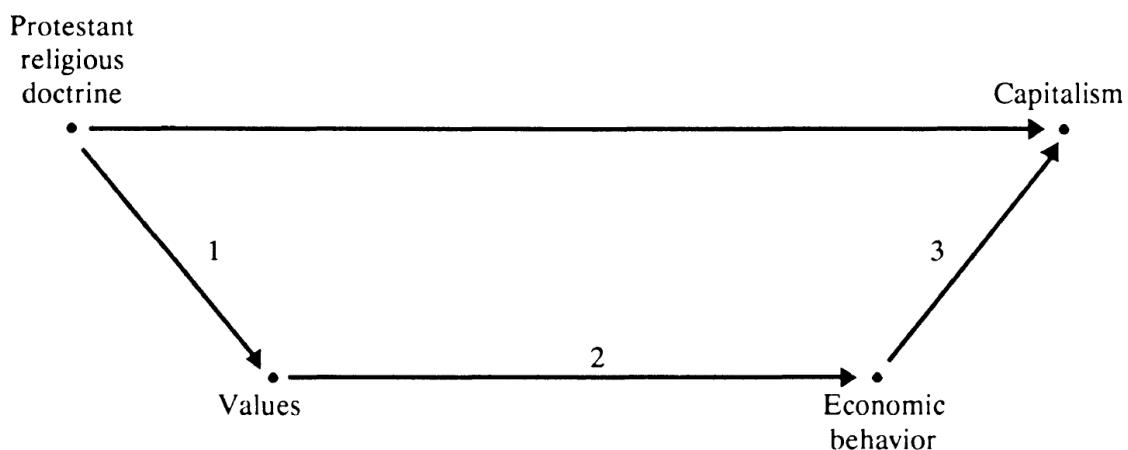


Figure 1.2 Macro- and micro-level propositions: effects of religious doctrine on economic organization.

2. Questions

- What is the question? Focus and foils
- What is the level of analysis?
- What is the role of structures in defining the choice architecture?

3. Structural Explanation

- How are structural explanations different from individualistic explanations?
- How are structural explanations different from biologicistic explanations?
- Is the role of structure different in Haslanger and Satz/Ferejohn? Are they discussing different kinds of explanation or the same kind?
- What is the role of psychology in structural explanation?

4. Practical Rationality:

Are there are rules for *practical reasoning*?

Just to get the hang of this, suppose that you are facing a decision “under conditions of uncertainty”: suppose the question is whether to take an umbrella or not, on a day when the chance of rain is one half. Since the value of taking as opposed to leaving the umbrella will be different depending on whether or not it rains, we might start out by listing all the possible scenarios, and how well things work out for us in all of them. There are four: taking and rain, taking and dry, leaving and rain, and leaving and dry. How should we decide? Here’s a proposal:

Practical Rationality Principle: The practically rational thing to do is the thing with the highest expected value, where the expected value (x) = the sum of the values of the various possible outcomes that x could give rise to, weighted according to their probabilities.

Should I take an umbrella along to class on a day when the chance of rain is 50%?

Probabilities →		.5	.5	Expected Value of option =
Possibilities		RAIN	DRY	
Options ↓	TAKE	+10	-4	+3
	LEAVE	-20	+2	-9

EV(TAKE)

= value of taking if rain \times chance of rain + value of taking if dry \times chance of dry

= $10 \times .50 + -4 \times .50 = +3$

EV(LEAVE)

$$= \text{value of leaving if rain} \times \text{chance of rain} + \text{value of leaving if dry} \times \text{chance of dry}$$

$$= -20 \times .50 + 2 \times .50 = -9.$$

This suggests you should take the umbrella. But if the probability of rain is different, (or the values you assign to the possible outcomes) you could reach a different result. E.g., if the probability of rain is only 10%:

$$\text{EV(TAKE)} = 1 + -3.6 = -2.6$$

$$\text{EV (LEAVE)} = -2 + 1.8 = -.2$$