
Review Essay

James S. Coleman as a Guide to Social Research

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Despite his outstanding empirical work and his exceptional clarity as a theorist of collective choice, James S. Coleman's program for social science would take it in the wrong direction. Whatever else it does, social science must explain social processes. Coleman: 1) neglected to specify causal mechanisms, 2) promoted an incomplete and therefore misleading psychological reductionism, and 3) advocated a form of general theory—rational choice analysis—that cannot, in principle or in practice, provide adequate explanations for the great bulk of social processes.

Overview

Precisely by producing superb work in a flawed vein, James S. Coleman set a bad example for us lesser social scientists. He neglected to specify causal mechanisms, promoted an incomplete and therefore misleading psychological reductionism, and advocated a form of general theory—rational choice analysis—that has for some time been enticing social scientists into blind alleys. All this he performed with panache, attracting attention to social science as a basis for public policy in a way that few of his predecessors had managed. His legacy: a generation of researchers who misconstrue the social sciences' explanatory mission because they have adopted a vivid but ultimately unsound view of how social processes operate.

This essay, inspired by Jon Clark's *James S. Coleman* (1996) but drawing especially on Coleman's own *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990), neither deals with the many thoughtful articles in Clark's compilation nor reviews the

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whole of Coleman's corpus. In order to make my argument sparely, and thereby clarify legitimate grounds of debate, I will ignore many admirable features of Coleman's work, including its boldness, its wide range, its strong empirical grounding, its clarity of exposition, and its incessant concern for human welfare. The essays in Clark's volume amply document these merits. Although I cheer Coleman's insistence that social science should concentrate on the explanation of collective phenomena rather than individual behavior, I will pass over the ingenious ways in which he derived sophisticated collective arrangements from simple combinations of individual decision-making. Because it characterizes his theoretical and programmatic writings less well than his many empirical analyses, I will save for another occasion my complaints that Coleman: 1) conducted analyses based on the assumption of a world arraying itself as a set of independently specifiable continuous variables, and 2) offered variance-reduction as a mode of explanation, although I think the two features seriously limit the value of his major empirical investigations as models for social research.

This critique will also neglect debatable ideas in the book under review, such as Martin Bulmer's surprising assertion that "sociology and social policy as academic fields are relatively uneasy bedfellows" (Clark 1996: 103). Surely of all social science disciplines, sociology most rapidly changes direction in response to current public-policy concerns, quickly taking up violence in times of violence, education in times of educational reform, and adolescent childbearing in times of public outcry over pregnant teenagers. While each of the book's thoughtful essays provides ample incitements to comment—affirmative or otherwise—in this review, it will suffice to challenge the endorsement of Coleman's explanatory program that pervades Jon Clark's semifestschrift. Taking for granted James Coleman's many virtues, let me concentrate on dangers in the theoretical program he advocated during his later years.

James Coleman codified and exemplified understandings of social processes and their explanation that have become sociological orthodoxies. To repeat, he:

1. neglected to specify causal mechanisms;
2. promoted an incomplete and therefore misleading psychological reductionism; and
3. advocated a form of general theory—rational choice analysis—that has for some time been enticing social scientists into blind alleys, where they have wandered aimlessly, falling victim to local thugs and confidence men selling various brands of individual reductionism.

To be sure, Coleman himself forewarned readers not to trust my judgment in these matters. Placing me in the excellent company of Arthur Stinchcombe, Neil Smelser, Harrison White, and Michael Hechter, Coleman identified me as a reviewer who "misunderstood" his *Foundations of Social Theory* (Clark 1996: 6-7). Coleman's indictment shields me from the suspicion of having held my tongue until he could not reply, but it also indicates that he would have dissented energetically from my three claims about his work. Caveat ergo lector. Let me draw my illustrations of these points from *Foundations*, which Coleman himself identified as his summary and synthesis of previous work.

1. Causal Mechanisms

Social science in general suffers from the poverty of its well-specified, plausible, verified causal mechanisms: recurrent cause-effect sequences of general scope. As compared to the constant invocation of mechanisms in, say, molecular biology or seismology, social science rarely points confidently to causal mechanisms that recur across a wide range of circumstances. Coleman's work provides little relief from that poverty. He takes a pragmatic view of explanation: "The explanation is satisfactory if it is useful for the particular kinds of intervention for which it is intended" (Coleman 1990: 5). Precisely because it varies from intervention to intervention, alas, a pragmatic criterion promises no means of discovering generally valid causal mechanisms.

Coleman does not, however, retreat into agnosticism or particularism. On the whole, he actually explains a social phenomenon by its service to the interests of its participants or to their perceptions of those interests. The trouble starts there: Coleman does not specify the mechanisms that translate a set of interests—or perceptions of interests—into their realization in operating social arrangements. While allowing that states ordinarily come into being and acquire their basic organizational forms (their "constitutions," in his terms) through one group's coercing another, for example, Coleman provides no account of the process by which state agents continue to receive compliance and resources from underdogs while underdogs somehow coexist with states that hurt their interests (Coleman 1990: 346-49).

Again, Coleman rightly points out three changes since World War II in the conditions affecting American high schools' authorities over their students: declining parental authority over a wide range of children's behavior; decreased consensus within the populations of districts from which high schools draw their students; increased use of litigation by those who challenge school authority (Coleman 1990: 350-51). But he offers no description of the causal chain by which these conditions actually weakened the positions of teachers and administrators, much less how they translated into changed relations among day-to-day participants in high school life. For a specialist in the organization and effects of schooling, the omission is remarkable. As Aage Sørensen comments more generally:

Coleman did not follow his own principles in his educational research. Instead, he went from some theory to no theory about school effects from 1962 to 1966, and then went back to some theory in 1982. The integration of theory and evidence was never completed. There is no explicit statement about how schools may influence learning in any of the studies; only suggestions about how private schools may be more effective than public schools. (Clark 1996: 209)

Throughout Coleman's work, in fact, we discover a strong preference for arguments about why a given array of actors might choose a given social arrangement over specifications of the causal processes resulting in such arrangements. Consequence: a decisive shift away from explanation.

2. *Psychological Reductionism*

Coleman began his magnum opus with dissent from prevalent social-scientific concentration on individual behavior. He clearly distinguished, furthermore, between two ways of explaining individual behavior: 1) examination of processes internal to individuals, and 2) statistical association of individual behaviors with "characteristics which are potential sources of explanation of that behavior"—before arguing correctly that neither gives analysts much purchase on social phenomena (Coleman 1990: 1-2). Even more decisively, he rejected the holisms ("Durkheimian," he called them in 1987; Swedberg 1990: 49-50) in which social systems either acted autonomously or shaped individual behavior. He failed to mention the other alternative: a relational approach in which interactions, transactions, or social ties constitute the starting points of social analysis. Those rejections, explicit and implicit, drove him to a peculiar variety of psychological reductionism.

How so? Social phenomena, in Coleman's most elementary account, emerge from the concatenation of interest-driven decisions by individual actors:

Actors are connected to resources (and thus indirectly to one another) through only two relations: their control over resources and their interest in resources. Actors have a single principle of action, that of acting so as to maximize their realization of interests. Such action can be simply consummatory, to realize the actor's interest; if it is not, the maximization principle leads most often to a single kind of action—exchange of control (or rights to control) over resources or events. (Coleman 1990: 37)

Here Coleman presents the explanatory foundation of his whole analysis. Later he offers nuances and elaborations, but never abandons the basic scheme; his mathematical formulations, in fact, cleave to it closely. Coleman applies different versions of the scenario to the explanation of feudal relations, of slavery, of revolutions, of hostile crowds, of corporate philanthropy, and of much, much more.

We can modify the scheme (as Coleman often does in pursuing these various cases) by introducing theories of how interests change, how information about interests and possible outcomes of action changes, how possible outcomes themselves change, how control over resources changes, and how all of these elements interact. No such modifications will alter its striking central feature: social action results from deliberate principle-following individual choices to act. Individual choices drive the entire system.

Those individual choices are mental events. They occur inside human brains. Although of course they respond to socially constructed incentives and opportunities, they belong inescapably to psychology, and more exactly to cognitive processes. Their centrality to Coleman's scheme raises three quite distinct questions: 1) Given what else we know about cognitive processes, how general and credible an explanation of action does this account provide? 2) What causes mental events of this sort when they occur? 3) Do such mental events plausibly produce the effects the scheme attributes to them—notably the realization of

interests—and, if so, how? Coleman addresses none of them directly. Thus he ends up in the same position as many neoclassical economists who employ similar explanatory schemes: asserting that people behave as if they were making deliberate interest-driven decisions. The argument offers its users frail justification for an ostensibly robust and general explanatory principle.

3. *Rational Choice*

Coleman developed an interest in rational choice, by his own report, as he listened to George Homans lecture on exchange theory and as he reflected on collective games that might help intellectual endeavor lose some of the individual-competition stigma his studies of schools indicated to be a major obstacle to achievement (Swedberg 1990: 49; see also Swedberg in Clark, 1996: 315-16). In *Foundations of Social Theory*, Coleman confronted some limits of conventional rational choice theory explicitly. Warily beginning to analyze the internalization of norms, he declared:

Despite the fact that everyone knows, if only through introspection, that interests change, theory based on purposive action must start with purpose, and the theoretical apparatus is applied to realization of that purpose, whatever it may be. A theory based on rational action thus has the same deficiency at the level of the individual (considered as a system) as a theory which begins with societal purposes or social norms has at the level of the social system. This individual-level deficiency is...far less debilitating to social theory than is the deficiency created by starting with a social purpose or a set of social norms.

It is nevertheless a deficiency, because individual interests do change and individuals do internalize norms (Coleman 1990: 292-93).

The problem, however, goes much further. Let us distinguish between: 1) creating a theoretically satisfactory account of decision-making, and 2) turning such an account into a general explanation of social processes. I have already given reasons for considering Coleman's treatment of the first of these to be at best radically incomplete. The second demands much more, more than rational choice can conceivably achieve. Even with a plausible account of decision-making, enormous difficulties would remain, notably:

1. given the generality of ignorance, error, error-correction, unanticipated consequences, and outcome-affecting interventions from other parties to an action, how to characterize and explain relations among i) interest-oriented decisions, ii) realized actions by decision-makers, and iii) outcomes of those actions;
2. how to explain and place incremental effects, delayed effects, indirect effects, and environmentally mediated effects such as those that appear repeatedly in demographic, economic, and linguistic change; and
3. how to explain and trace interdependence among situations of individual decisions and decision-makers, either simultaneously or over time.

While rational-action theorists such as Coleman have repeatedly attempted up-

stream revisions in order to increase the plausibility of explanations for decisions that actually occur, a void appears downstream: no rational-action theory publicized so far contains a serious set of propositions concerning consequences and interdependencies of interest-oriented decisions. Since those consequences and interdependencies actually include incremental effects, delayed effects, indirect effects, and environmentally mediated effects, any effective propositions concerning them will transform rational-choice theory into something quite different: a theory of organizational interaction. In the Clark volume, Peter Abell's supposed elaboration of Coleman's scheme becomes precisely that: a model of organizational interaction in which most of the causal arrows describe not decisions but flows of persons and resources (Clark 1996: 175-206).

If Coleman's new social science is to become, as he advocates, "science that extends its knowledge to the understanding of how power comes to be distributed and accumulated in society, and to the understanding of how natural persons can best satisfy their interests in a social system populated with large corporate actors" (Coleman 1990: 651), then not rational action itself but its consequences and interdependencies will form the foci of essential knowledge. Even rational-choice enthusiast Siegwart Lindenberg, who reflects on that very passage from Coleman, states his reservations about Coleman's formulation entirely in upstream terms, arguing that we need more complex models than Coleman's of how people make their choices. Lindenberg's welcome incorporation of relational processes into decision-making, while extremely promising for rational-choice theory, offers no explanation of consequences and interdependencies (Clark 1996: 299-312).

The great challenges await us downstream. For my part, I see no possibility that rational-choice theory will help us navigate the rapids. In any case, the ambitious program outlined by James Coleman offers precious little guidance—and that often misleading—for the perilous voyage down a turbulent stream.

References

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