BUILDING SOCIAL THEORY

Some Questions about Homan's Strategy

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With the publication of Homans' early exchange works (1958; 1961; 1962) sociological theorizing was thrown into yet another debate. Most of this debate has involved assessments of the merits of exchange theory in general and on the utility of Homans' specific strategy for developing theory in sociology. While it is difficult to synthesize the wide-ranging criticisms of Homans' exchange strategy, they can be grouped for convenience under three main lines of attack: (1) The general theoretical laws or axioms developed by Homans are tautologous and untestable (Abrahamson, 1970; Deutsch, 1964; Mulkay, 1971; Turner, 1974); (2) Homans does not follow his own definition of theoretical explanation by constructing rigorous deductive schemes (Razak, 1966; Maris, 1970; Gray, 1971; Turner, 1971; Price, 1971; Turner, 1974); and (3) Homans' psychologistic form of explanation cannot adequately deal with emergent levels of complex social organization (Parsons, 1964; Blau, 1964; Blain, 1971). Homans' response to these commentators and critics has been useful, for with each debate, his strategy of theory construction has taken on greater

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clarity. The most useful statement on this strategy can now be found in the revised edition of *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1974), since in this recent statement, Homans addresses many of his critics, but in contrast to previous works, the polemics are less extreme and arguments more carefully formulated. Further, several revisions of the psychological axioms have occurred, with the result that Homans' explanations of conformity, differentiation, esteem, and other social processes have undergone some alteration.

In light of these changes, it is useful to examine critically Homans' approach to building theory over the last decade, particularly as it has culminated in the most recent edition of *Social Behavior.* In order to assess this approach, emphasis will be placed on some of the persistent questions surrounding Homans' work: (1) Has Homans' obviated the problem of tautology? (2) Are his explanations logically adequate deductive systems? (3) Does he effectively counter the criticism that his theoretical formulations cannot explain emergent levels of social organization?

THE QUESTION OF TAUTOLOGY

The question of tautology in Homans' theory, and for that matter, in all of exchange theory, revolves around the extent to which "behavioral"[1] variables can be theoretically defined and then operationalized independently of the "rewards" which presumably cause the behavior in question to occur. All of Homans' basic axioms boil down to statements of the conditions under which these two generic concepts co-vary:[2] the "success proposition" (1974: 16) provides a general statement on how the emission of action will co-vary with the frequency of reward;[3] the "stimulus proposition" (1974: 22-23) sets another condition–similarly between present and past situations–where action and reward co-vary; the "value proposition" (1974: 25) simply states another condition–the degree of

reward—under which action will vary; the "deprivation-satiation" proposition (1974: 29) qualifies these earlier axioms by introducing the condition of satiation or marginal utility to account for the relationship between reward and action; "the aggression-approval" (1974: 37-39) proposition is more complex, but again merely specifies additional conditions—the degree to which rewards correspond to expectations—under which different types of action (aggressive and approving behavior) are likely to occur.[4]

Homans incorrectly assumes that it is the "value" proposition alone which is potentially tautologous (1974: 33-37), but in fact, they all are open to this charge. And thus, while his discussion only addresses the question of tautology for one axiom, he could formulate a similar answer for the others. Homans acknowledges and defends the circularity: If the axioms are viewed as part of a deductive system, the problem of tautology is soon obviated, for while "value" and "action" cannot be measured independently when stated so abstractly, the deductive system allows for their independent measurement at the empirical level. Thus, "a tautology can take part in the deductive system whose conclusion is not a tautology" (1974: 35). As Homans now argues, the tautological nature of highly abstract axioms in a deductive system can be obviated when precise and clear derivations from the axioms are performed, since in this process, independent definitions and indicators of key concepts can be provided. However, if these deductive steps are left out, and vague axioms are simply reconciled in an ad hoc fashion to empirical events, the problem of tautology will not be obviated. In virtually every "explanation" of social behavior in his recent work (1974: 51-339), however, rigorous deductive systems are absent. But in fairness, Homans has been only attempting to *suggest* the utility of his concepts for future construction of deductive systems. Perhaps better evidence of his strategy can be found in those few instances where Homans has at least arranged propositions in a deductive format.

TABLE 1
Examples of Homansian Deductions

Explaining Golden's Law (Homans, 1971)

1. Men are more likely to perform an activity, the more valuable they perceive the reward of that activity to be.
2. Men are more likely to perform an activity, the more successful they perceive the activity to be in getting that reward.
3. Compared with agricultural societies, a higher proportion of men in industrial societies are prepared to reward activities that involve literacy. (Industrialists want to hire bookkeepers, clerks, persons who can make and read blueprints, manuals, etc.)
4. Therefore a higher proportion of men in industrial societies will perceive the acquisition of literacy as rewarding.
5. And (by (1)) a higher proportion will attempt to acquire literacy.
6. The provision of schooling costs money, directly or indirectly.
7. Compared with agricultural societies, a higher proportion of men in industrial societies is, by some standard, wealthy.

Explaining Industrialization (Homans, 1964a)

1. Men are more likely to perform an activity, the more valuable they perceive the reward of that activity to be.
2. Men are more likely to perform an activity, the more successful they perceive the activity is likely to be in getting that reward.
3. The high demand for cotton textiles and the low productivity of labor led men concerned with cotton manufacturing to perceive the development of labor-saving machinery as rewarding in increased profits.
4. The existing state of technology led them to perceive the effort to develop labor-saving machinery as likely to be successful.
5. Therefore, by both (1) and (2) such men were highly likely to try to develop labor-saving machinery.
6. Since their perceptions of the technology were accurate, their efforts were likely to meet with success, and some of them did meet with success.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

8.	Therefore a higher proportion is able to provide schooling (through government or private charity), and a higher proportion to pay for their own schooling without charity.
9.	And a higher proportion will perceive the effort to acquire literacy as apt to be successful.
10.	And (by (2) as by (1)) a higher proportion will attempt to acquire literacy.
11.	Since their perceptions are in general accurate, a higher proportion of men in industrial societies will in fact acquire literacy. That is, the literacy rate is apt to be higher in an industrial than in an agricultural society.

In Table 1, two well-known and representative examples of deductive systems offered by Homans on various occasions are presented. Homans usually admits that these are only *examples* with many deductive steps inevitably left out–thus making criticism somewhat redundant. Further, these examples were offered prior to the revised scheme (1974)–thereby rendering comparison with the "new" axioms somewhat speculative. Yet, since Homans has been so insistent on the appropriations of deductive explanation (e.g., Homans, 1967) and since the use of such explanations seems the only clear way to defend the overall exchange scheme against charges of tautology, it is necessary to pause and examine these examples of Homans' deductions, while recognizing, of course, the limitations involved.

In all of these examples, the first two propositions are never related to the original axioms (1961), despite the fact that some new concepts–"perception of success" and "perception of reward"–are introduced. Further, it is not clear whether or not "perception of reward" and "perception of success" are rewards or activities. On the one hand, perception would seemingly be an activity, or one class or type of activity, while on the other hand, perception of "success" and "reward" can perhaps be a type of reward–say a "preliminary reward"–that keeps activity by persons in the pursuit of long-range rewards going. Thus, without precise definitions and statements of their relationship to the definitions of concepts in axioms, derivations resemble the axioms in that activities and rewards cannot be easily distinguished from each other–thereby making the derivations appear as tautologous as the axioms.

However, the revised edition of *Social Behavior* introduces a "rationality proposition" similar to these (1974: 43):

> In choosing between alternative actions, a person will choose that one for which, as perceived by him at the time, the value of the result multiplied by the probability of getting the result, is greater.

Homans then argues that this proposition "embodies, or corresponds to, our first three propositions" (1974: 44). Apparently, this "rationality proposition" has been a more convenient way to state several axioms at once, for as Table 1 reveals, Homans' earlier schemes have implicitly used it. However, its logical relationship to either the new and old axioms in a deductive scheme is not entirely clear; but with some effort, it would be possible to connect axioms I, II, III to this "rationality" proposition. Thus far, Homans' revised work has avoided the clear tautology evident in his earlier use of propositions (1) and (2) in the deductive schemes reported in Table 1, and in most of his other explicitly deductive schemes.

What of the subsequent deductions to empirical events? Homans' schemes do not fare so well when these deductions are analyzed. For example, the transition between propositions 2 and 3 in both schemes in Table 1 ignores so many necessary variables as to simply *describe* in the words of behavioral psychology what Homans *perceives* to have occurred. Why do men perceive labor-saving machinery as rewarding? Or, why are men in industrial societies prepared to reward literacy? These statements do not explain; they describe and thus open a large gap in the logic of the deductive system. The result is for problems of tautology to surface again, since "a tautology can take part in the deductive system whose conclusion is not a tautology" only when clear and unambiguous deductions from the axioms have been performed.

Homans has argued that "no theory can explain everything" and that it is necessary to ignore some things and assume them to be "givens" for the purposes of explanation at hand. Boundary conditions and givens are, of course, necessary in developing all theories, especially in the social sciences where so many extraneous and unmeasured variables can influence the events to be explained by a theory. Such a strategy is highly suspect, however, when used to create the deductive continuity needed to avoid the charges of tautology which can be leveled against Homans' axioms and first order derivations. Further-

more, it can be questioned whether sociological theory needs forms of explanation which, in order to appear logically acceptable, must also define away all the variables which would be of interest to sociologists and which would specify what is valuable and rewarding to actors.

In the end, whether or not the issue of tautology has been resolved may be a personal assessment of how much "givens" are perceived by critics to define away important relationships among unspecified variables and thereby achieve the appearance of "deductive continuity" in the propositions of Homans' schemes. It seems as though Homans' theory is less tautologous than before (1961), because he now seems to have some logical ordering to his abstract statements. But he has not removed the circularity of definitions among the key concepts of these abstract statements–reward and behavior–primarily because the adequacy of his subsequent deductions to empirical events is questionable. These considerations require a more careful examination of Homans' overall way of constructing deductive systems of explanation.

THE ADEQUACY OF HOMANS' DEDUCTIVE EXPLANATIONS

The problem of excessively restricted boundary conditions and givens is compounded by Homans' placement of the word "therefore" in his deductive theories. In Table 1, it can be noted that this transitive is typically used *immediately following* a statement of "givens" which, as noted, define away important classes of sociological variables. For example, in Homans' explanation of Golden's Law, the "therefore" preceding key propositions begs questions such as: Why do men perceive literacy as rewarding? What level of industrialization would make this so? What level of educational development? What feedback consequences does desire for literacy have for educational development? By ignoring the "why" and "what"

of these questions, Homans can then in propositions (5) and (10) reinsert the higher order axioms (1 and 2) of the explanation, thereby giving the scheme an appearance of deductive continuity; whereas in fact, answers to the critical sociological questions have been avoided, such as why "men" perceive as valuable and rewarding certain crucial activities.

While "no theory can explain everything," it must explain something. Unfortunately, the unsympathetic critic can conclude that Homans' prose gives the form—but not the substance—of axiomatic explanation.[5] While these deductive systems were offered as examples and not as complete explanations, they are misleading because they ignore key sociological questions. In so doing, they sustain the illusion that psychological laws have, or at least could have, explained something, whereas in fact, these laws explain little without the sociological propositions which would allow for the independent definition and operationalization of reward and behavior in a particular empirical context. Thus, not only do these examples not obviate the problem of tautology, they also reveal a lack of logical rigor, while deceptively giving the impression that something has been, or could be, explained.

The inclusion of the sociological propositions in each of the deductive schemes in Table 1 would yield a better explanation. Just whether or not the psychological axioms would be necessary would be a matter of preference. In terms of Homans' conception of explanation—subsumption in a deductive system under ever more abstract laws of less abstract propositions—the psychological laws would be necessary. Adopting a different strategy of explanation, such as causal modeling, others would be satisfied with the sociological propositions and the causal explanations of empirical events they allow. However, the examples in Table 1 should warn that to search for the ultimate laws of explanation in deductive forms of theorizing—whether they be psychological, biological, chemical, or whatever—can tempt us to ignore the very sociological laws which can account for diverse social phenomena at different levels of social organization.

DEDUCTIVE THEORY AND EXPLAINING LEVELS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Statements such as this have distributed many social theorists (Homans, 1964b):

> The institutions, organizations, and societies that sociologists study can always be analyzed, without residue, into the behavior of individual men. They must therefore be explained by propositions about the behavior of individual men.

This position has been particularly disturbing to some sociologists, since it invites reductionism: If sociological propositions are reducible to those about "men," then those about "men" are reducible to physiological propositions, with the latter being reducible to biochemical propositions, and so on in a reductionist sequence ending in the basic laws of physical matter. Apparently Homans (1964b) is advocating this position, for while his psychological axioms "cannot be derived from physiological propositions, . . . this condition is unlikely to last forever."

Homans and the Fallacy of 'Misplaced Concreteness.' The most persistent criticism of Homans' reductionist strategy has revolved around the assertion that he has falled into the fallacy of "misplaced concreteness," for as some critics believe (e.g., Parsons, 1964), Homans has "misplaced" the concreteness of phenomena by focusing on the individual. In reality, these critics assert, the relationships among the individuals forming a social whole is just as "real" as the individuals themselves. The organization of parts is not just the "sum of the parts," but rather, the constitution of a new kind of reality. These critics appear to be overreacting to Homans' reductionism, since Homans has never denied the importance of sociological laws describing complex sociocultural processes; on the contrary, they are critical propositions in any deductive system that attempts to *explain* these processes. All that Homans is asserting is: These sociological laws are not the most general; they can be

subsumed under more general psychological laws which eventually will be subsumed under a still more general set of laws. At no point is Homans asserting that the propositions subsumed by a more general set of laws are irrelevant or unimportant. Thus, Homans has not "misplaced the concreteness" of reality, for he has not denied the metaphysical existence of emergent properties such as groups, organizations, and institutions, nor has he argued that the laws describing these emergent phenomena are theoretically insignificant. Rather, Homans is advocating a particular *strategy for understanding emergent phenomena.*

The Utility of Homans' Reductionist Strategy. Once it becomes clear that Homans' reductionism is a theoretical strategy which does not deny the existence of emergent phenomena, the next question becomes: Is this strategy useful? Some critics (e.g., Buckley, 1967: 109-111) have emphasized that a reductionist strategy will affect the kinds of theoretical and research questions sociologists ask. If one is concerned primarily with psychological laws as the best explanatory principles, it is likely that research questions and theoretical generalizations will begin to revolve around psychological and social psychological phenomena, as well as micro forms of social organization, because these are the most readily understood in terms of psychological principles. Thus, despite a recognition that complex sociological phenomena are real, the adoption of a reductionist strategy for building theory could inadvertently result in the skewing away from macro and complex patterns of social organization the kinds of phenomena studied by sociologists. Further, even when these macro phenomena are examined, there appears some tendency to short-circuit explanation—as Homans appears to do in the deductive systems reported in Table 1—by visualizing sociological variables as "givens" and as "boundary conditions" for the psychological explanation.

Such problems raise questions of strategy: How should those social theorists committed to deductive theorizing proceed? For

logically, if one finds deductive theory "rewarding," Homans could be correct in his assertion that a deductive-axiomatic strategy necessitates reductionism, for the goal of such a strategy is to subsume under ever more general axioms what were previously considered the most general axioms. Such a process of subsumption may indeed lead first to the subsumption of sociological axioms under psychological axioms, and then to the subsequent subsumption of these latter axioms under physiological, biochemical, and physical laws. Just as many of the laws of chemistry can be subsumed under the laws of physics, so sociological laws could possibly be subsumed by the laws of psychology. However, even if Homans' assertion that reductionism is inevitable is granted for the sake of argument,[6] his position needs to be tempered by strategic questions of how best to proceed. In light of the problems with Homans' own explanations of events, the deduction of sociological laws from psychological axioms should involve a two-step process (Webster, 1973): (1) First, a series of well-established sociological laws, from which it is possible to deduce a wide variety of sociological propositions that have received consistent empirical support must be developed. And then, (2) a clear body of psychological axioms which are amenable to similar reductions and which have received consistent empirical support can be used to explain the sociological laws. Step (1) should preferably occur prior to step (2), as it typically has in the physical sciences (again, assuming that one prefers deductive theory and that reductionism is possible). Homans (1967: 86) has recognized the fact that the social sciences have not achieved step (1) when he notes that the "issue for the social sciences is not whether we should be reductionists, but rather, if we were reductionists, whether we could find any propositions to reduce."

However, Homans has failed to realize the full implications of this kind of statement. Without well-established sociological laws to subsume, what is the utility of attempting to subsume what does not exist? Would it not be far wiser to expend our

efforts in developing sociological laws and let the issue of reductionism take care of itself when these laws are established? To attempt prematurely to develop psychological axioms and then deduce sociological propositions from these axioms in the absence of well-established sociological laws is likely to generate, as can be seen from the examples in Table 1, logically imprecise deductions.

The long-range utility of Homans' reductionist strategy cannot be determined (time will tell), but in the short run, the use of this deductive strategy will enable sociologists to define away as "givens" those sociological problems that need to be studied if true sociological laws are to be developed. Without these laws in the deductive systems advocated by Homans, such systems are logically questionable and empirically vague (Movahedi and Ogles, 1973). A far wiser deductive strategy is to attempt to develop the "laws of sociology" which, at some distant point in the future, can be subsumed by a more general set of principles--perhaps ones very similar to those advocated by Homans (1974).

CONCLUSIONS: THE STRATEGIC DILEMMA OF LOGICAL POSITIVISM

The answers to the three questions of this paper raise serious doubts about the present utility of Homans' specific deductive theorizing, and perhaps of deductive theorizing in general. Yet Homans' polemics have been enormously useful, since they have forced social theorists to defend and justify *their* theoretical strategy. Obviously, Homans' work on exchange is far too insightful and provocative to be discarded, but the advocacy of axiomatic theorizing using psychological axioms is, at the very least, premature. The problems with Homans' own use of the strategy attest to its prematurity; and few could argue for the strategy more eloquently and forcefully than Homans. Thus, it is perhaps the strategy itself, not the form of advocacy, which must be questioned.

Many of the problems in Homans' strategy, and of axiomatic theorizing in general, stem from the dilemmas of logical positivism. That brand of science known as logical positivism was formed from two independently developed philosophical traditions: (1) logic and (2) positivism. Positivism was founded in the early decades of the last century, and it emphasizes the importance of observation and the formulation of generalizations about "objectively observed" events. Logic, on the other hand, is concerned with the form of argument and it stresses the importance of using consistent rules to make arguments coherent. Logic has a long philosophical tradition, certainly dating back as far as the ancient Greeks, but it was not until comparatively recently that symbolic logic gave scientists the tools for organizing theoretical propositions.

In many ways, logic and positivism are potentially contradictory. Logic emphasizes the order and form of presentation; positivism stresses the importance of isomorphism between observed events and descriptions of them. Concern for the form of an argument can distort observations, while poorly stated and ordered generalizations of observed events can render theory-building impossible. Homans' work appears to have become involved in this potential contradiction. His first major theoretical work, *The Human Group* (1951), sought to provide order to the observations of others by formulating a number of generalizations. But he appears to have abandoned this strategy just as it had begun to generate theoretical payoff. For had Homans continued to seek to understand the conditions under which generalizations about group processes held, he may have come across certain "laws" which could have wide applicability. But instead, Homans swung away from positivism toward logic, and hence, toward axiomatic theorizing with its concern with the *form* of argument and explanation (Homans, 1961).

In so doing, Homans sought to develop a type of reductionist, axiomatic theory which first requires the very sociological laws that may have emerged with his further execution of the strategy of *The Human Group* (1951). Without these

sociological laws, axiomatic explanation using psychological axioms comes to resemble more of the form than substance of explanation. Homans' theoretical position is thus premature without sociological laws created by the more balanced practice of logical positivism. But even more important, it distorts theory-building activities to the "logic side" of logical positivism and encourages ignorance about many of the more revealing events of the empirical world, events which could allow researchers more understanding of the laws of sociology.

To pursue Homans' strategy is to seek "proper form" while defining away as "givens" the very empirical phenomena that can give substance to his formal arguments. Stated differently, to feel compelled to construct deductive system can force theorists to set such highly restrictive boundary conditions as to lose the capacity to observe and formulate generalizations from these observations. Without these observations, the laws of sociology which need to be inserted into a deductive, axiomatic theory will not easily be discovered.

Thus, Homans' *Human Group* (1951) probably represents a more viable theory-building strategy. For indeed, his suggestive generalizations about human groups or other forms of social organization serve as one eloquent example of how to establish a body of theoretical statements about patterns of social organization. Exchange concepts can contribute to this body of statements, especially if Homans would abandon some of the highly restrictive and premature visions of deductive explanation and proceed to use his exchange perspective to develop sociological propositions that attempt to answer some of the sociological questions that he takes as "givens" in his current reductionist strategy. In tying his more abstract generalizations to sociological processes, Homans would be forced to specify the generic classes of value and rewards and how they operate in various types of social units, whether groups, organizations, institutions, or some other pattern of collective organization.

The best deductive-reductionist strategy, then, would require an effort to develop the sociological laws that, if one still finds

this task satisfying, can later be subsumed by psychological axioms. Homans (1967: 86) has often said that if sociologists had some sociological laws of their own, they would be less concerned about whether or not they were reducible to to more general psychological propositions. This probably is true; and it can only be wondered that if Homans and other sociological theorists would spend their efforts at developing these sociological laws, instead of arguing over whether or not they are ultimately reducible to psychological axioms, axiomatizing and reductions to these psychological axioms would seem a less compelling task.

NOTES

1. Homans once defined these as "activity" (1961), but now seems to prefer the concept of "action" to describe humans' overt behavior (1974).

2. For convenience of reference, I have listed below the axioms in Homans' most recent theoretical statement:

(1) Success Proposition: For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action.

(2) Stimulus Proposition: If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus, or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person's action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action, or some similar action, now.

(3) Value Proposition: The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action.

(4) Deprivation-Satiation Proposition: The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes for him.

(5) Aggression-Approval Propositions:

a. When a person's action does not receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will be angry; he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behavior, and the results of such behavior become more valuable to him.

b. When a person's action receives the reward he expected, especially a greater reward than expected, or does not receive the punishment he expected, he will be pleased; he becomes more likely to perform

approving behavior, and the results of such behavior become more valuable to him.

3. Actually, the "success proposition" is simply a rewording of the old Axiom 3 in earlier works (1961).

4. This proposition is, of course, a reworking of the old distributive justice (1961) axiom.

5. Movahedi and Ogles (1973) have usefully employed the concept of "information value" in examining axiomatic theorizing. The problems of definitional clarity in concept formation and transformation, as well as derivation of propositions, can lead to loss of so much necessary information as to create contradictions and vagueness in the explanations and predictions of some forms of axiomatized theory.

6. Webster (1973) has presented a well reasoned argument that reductionism is not necessarily the result of deductive theorizing. Such an assertion is, in Webster's words, an "article of faith" which is supported neither by the logic of deductive theorizing, nor by the substance of present deductive theories.

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