

Action-based explanations as a basis for the analysis and design of the social world

Andrea Maurer 

Department of Sociology, Trier University,
Trier, Germany

Correspondence

Andrea Maurer.

Email: andrea.maurer@uni-trier.de

Abstract

In sociology, the question of what it means to explain social phenomena and how this relates to the purpose of the social sciences is important but nowadays rarely asked. This article elaborates on this question and provides an answer by outlining the program of “explanatory sociology” as a branch of the modern social science approach. It is shown that, in this framework, to explain means to uncover cause-effect relationships based on models of individuals who are assumed the central force in social life. This idea is taken further to uncover specific challenges that individuals face in social life and how and why they establish and manage (or do not) social forms that help to organize the world from the viewpoint of their abilities and needs. Such action-oriented explanations have been presented and developed in sociology since its very beginning. Two main forms or logics to construct action-based explanations are outlined and developed due to the form and function of the used action theory or model. The article contributes to the discussion about the form and task of sociological theorizing by presenting action-based explanations as a form of sociological theorizing that defines a clear task in exploring challenges in social life and assessing possible forms of coping with them from the perspective of individuals. By doing so, two main ways of broadening

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explanations are considered and compared in light of what the purpose of sociology might be.

KEYWORDS

action-based explanations, explanations, sociological theory, weberian approach

1 | INTRODUCTION

Can social scientists define a clear purpose for their work? If so, how does such a purpose make them relevant to society? When proponents of the European Enlightenment such as David Hume, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith and John Locke, to name only a few, began to think about how to explain the social world in the 17th century, scientists also started to consider how human beings gain knowledge and how this enables them to design social order according to their intentions and abilities. Over time, within the various social science disciplines, different methodologies have been developed that come with conflicting ideas about the aim and tools of social scientific analyses as well as about the relationship(s) between social science and society. Sociology in particular has been shaped by divergent methodological positions and tools and thus no longer has a commonly shared understanding of the purpose(s) of social science. In sociology not only has the idea of a clear and well-thought purpose vanished but also that of a foundational methodological framework. As far as sociology is concerned, there is currently no agreement on whether and how sociologists could provide explanations and in which sense, they share a common understanding of its task.

This essay suggests that the provision of causal explanations could be seen as a central purpose of social scientific analysis. More specifically, action-based explanations are highlighted as a variant of causal explanations, which have been reinvented and elaborated in sociology over the last 50 years to explore how the social world is constituted through the actions of individuals. Even though, due to underlying methodological principles, we see at least two different forms of constructing and developing action-based explanations. On the one hand, a general action principle, such as rational choice, is used to interpret various social situations and to provide a general theory. On the other hand, models of action are chosen due to empirical contexts so that theories of middle range are offered. In both approaches, explanations of social phenomena are built on assumptions about the motives and abilities of human beings, which serve as both an analytical and normative point of reference. Thus, action-based explanations provide a framework for analyzing and empirically researching the social world and can serve as a useful basis for analyzing, evaluating and ranking social order, institutional settings or structures from the viewpoint of individuals.

I begin by linking the current ambiguity within sociology about its purpose to the often debated multiplicity of methodological principles. The following section presents action-based explanations as a promising way to redefine a clear purpose of social scientific analysis, particularly within sociology. The last section presents the main lines of action-based explanations to highlight how they deal with the tension between aiming for a general theory or middle-range theories (abstraction vs. realism), and, related to that, the referring potential to explain and handle social puzzles.

2 | SOCIOLOGY: THE TRAGEDY OF A MULTI-PARADIGMATIC DISCIPLINE

Sociology was conceived as an explanatory social science by the classics when it emerged. Max Weber, as well as Émile Durkheim, saw the main goal of sociology as providing causal explanations of real-world phenomena. To this end, they proposed gaining scientific assumptions and models through abstraction from reality to explore cause-effect relations.

Since both founders of sociology differed in their basic premises and epistemology, they outlined different explanatory forms or logics. Weber (2012) assumed that individuals define parts of the social world by attributing meaning and thus wanted to construct explanations of the social world based on the understanding of meaningful actions of individuals. He aimed for an understanding of the commonly shared meaning of individuals in certain social contexts to explain the rise of certain action patterns that bring about special effects in social, political and economic fields (see Maurer, 2024).

One of the best-known examples of Weber's program is his causal reconstruction of how the ideas of ascetic Protestantism brought about hard-working behavior and systematic rationalized profit-seeking that supported the rise of capitalistic institutions. By intentionally following the rules of ascetic Protestantism, Protestants supported the rise of modern rational institutions in the economy like the business firm and markets, which, together with the rising nation state and its bureaucratic administration, drove the rationalization of the modern Western world.

Émile Durkheim (1938), by contrast, assumed that the social world is structured by group morality and emphasized explanations based on structural laws or functionalistic relations such as rising suicide rates due to a gap between existing social norms and current developments, which he termed *anomie*. While Max Weber presented a special kind of the so-called *Methodological* or *Institutional Individualism*, Émile Durkheim presented *Methodological Collectivism* and Structural-Functionalism. In this sense, Max Weber can be seen as a founder of action-based explanations that take the individual's properties as an analytical and normative point of reference. Émile Durkheim, in contrast, can be seen as a forerunner for macro theories like Structural-Functionalism, which take the supposed necessities of a group or society as an analytical and normative point for theorizing.

After the Second World War, the question of how to construct explanations and what the purpose of the social sciences could be was further differentiated by even more conflicting methodologies. In the 1970s, criticism of macro theories increased, after highlighting their functionalistic fallacy. The entry of systems theory in the social sciences in the 1970s based on social constructivism came with the total denial of explanation and the denial of the possibility of rational intervention in social life. The conflicting methodological principles led to many controversies and an enormous ambiguity regarding aims and tools.¹ The often poorly understood differences and conflicts ultimately led to a loss of identity and relevance, especially for sociology.

3 | METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM: ONE ACTION MODEL FOR ALL

In this context, action-based explanations can provide a clear purpose for sociology. Action-based explanations are generally based on the principle of Methodological Individualism, meaning that social phenomena need to be explained by referring to the properties of individuals, in other words by taking individuals and their main properties as the causal force in the social world.

One way to elaborate this principle in sociology is to combine one model of action with various social contexts. Then, various forms of social interdependency, interaction or institutions are explored from the viewpoint of a general individual and translated into certain action patterns. Those action patterns are transformed into social phenomena; this can be done according to Weber by translating actions directly into institutions or using transformation rules such as the Prisoner Dilemma.

In its most abstract form, all kinds of social contexts are interpreted from the perspective of one action model. In the social sciences, for analytical reasons, a well-established action model is the model of intentional rational action. This model is based on the core premise that individuals are motivated by intentions and able to use certain cognitive abilities to interpret the social world and choose actions according to their motives (for more details see eg. Boudon, 1989; Elster, 1989).

This basic explanatory logic can be developed and put into practice by specifying, motives or intentions related to social contexts. Additionally, the assumed cognitive abilities, which are relevant for intentional action, can also be modified, like in the case of bounded rationality. In this basic variant, the cause-effect relations show how and why a

certain social context brings about specific action patterns of rational-intentional individuals that can result in particular social effects. This kind of explanation takes the intentions as well as the respective abilities of individuals as an analytical starting point to interpret social contexts. At the same time, it offers a normative basis for evaluating both the initial social context as well as the observed social effects. Both can be evaluated in light of individuals' intentions and abilities. Based on this, individuals can be described as being driven by ideas instead of intentions; those ideas become the analytical and normative point of reference. In any case, this avoids the need to define a collective normative standard by philosophical fiat.²

Starting from the general perspective of an intentional rational actor, it is possible to ask whether and how formally free individuals can overcome unfavorable situations and construct the social world in light of their intentions. Starting with Thomas Hobbes (1991), social scientists began to differentiate social and individual rationality thus focusing on social institutions and order that could help them handle unwanted or problematic constellations such as the undersupply of public goods. Institution theory or the theory of social capital specifies which social factors help individuals to establish hierarchies, markets or norms to realize their interests. This framework could link various sociological studies that conduct empirical research in different fields such as the economy, politics and society.

Moreover, under this roof, the question can be explored what social institutions might help and emerge so that overestimating markets on the one hand and hierarchy on the other hand are avoided. For example, based on the model of a rational intentional actor, the issue of cooperation can be outlined focusing on free riding and its various forms of handling it (see Lindenberg et al., 1986). Currently, political scientists as well as sociologists and economists have begun to study under which circumstances pro-social or pro-environmental behavior will emerge that supports common interests such as sustainability. In this framework, networks, strongly knitted groups, places to meet, hierarchies, political and economic entrepreneurs and other forms of social interaction have been studied as important for organizing collective action and reaching common goals (e.g., Ostrom, 1990). In this sense, new empirical insights about coordination forms have been offered and alternative ways of theorizing such as middle range theories rediscovered.

4 | MIDDLE RANGE THEORIES: MORE REALISTIC ACTION MODELS

A major issue of giving explanations in the social science has always been, and always will be, the tension between abstraction and realism. The use of rational choice theory as a micro foundation has often been criticized for being too abstract. In contrast to the above-outlined logic of explaining, which is oriented towards one action principle, another line has been developed in the framework of action-based explanations using context-related models of action and emphasizing the idea of middle range theory as did Max Weber (2009) and Robert K. Merton (1967).

This form attempts to avoid the shortcomings of a general theory such as rational choice theory by working on and with various action models that are chosen by considering certain empirical contexts. Max Weber outlined this idea in his action typology and his methodological writings (2012). He suggested starting with means-end rationality and constructing rational explanatory models for evidence and clarity but then switching to less rational action models when empirical proof is given.

Other examples of working with context-related action models can be found in various sociological approaches such as new economic sociology, the mechanism approach, new institutionalism and comparative historical research. Particularly the concept of social embeddedness in new economic sociology is based on the idea of taking interactions between social context and individual's properties into account to highlight the social constitution of individuals' motives instead of assuming given, stable motives. Some proponents of the concept of social embeddedness - such as Ronald Burt (2005) - have been using rational-choice-based explanations as a starting point that can be elaborated systematically, while others such as Mark Granovetter (1985) began to use various action models and mutually linking models of action and social context for different contexts.

In economic sociology, the effects of interactions between social context and intentions of individuals help to explain some puzzles in the modern market economy (Smelser and Swedberg, 2005). For example, ethical behavior between merchants, collaboration of competing firms, risk capital in family and kinship or the production of common goods give evidence of a turn from egotism to social orientation or goals (Maurer, 2021). In contrast to the basic model, action patterns then are no longer explained solely by cost-benefit considerations in light of egotistic motives but by a switch from egotistic motives to social ones.

In parallel and sometimes having overlapping efforts, proponents of the so-called mechanism approach in the 1970s also started to work on causal explanations that cover rational choice theory as a special case. Beyond this, they aim for a more realistic approach by focusing on various interrelationships between intentions and cognitive abilities in certain contexts. The explanatory force then moves from the intentions of individuals framed by social context to the mutual interplay between social context, intentions and cognitive aspects of individuals.

Proponents of the mechanism approach share the aim of causal explanations but attempt to widen their explanations by taking various constellations of intentions, beliefs and context into account (for an overview see Hedström and Swedberg, 1998). One of the first social scientists elaborating on this idea was John Elster who, for example, introduced, conceptualized and empirically studied the mechanism of wishful thinking. By this, it is meant that individuals in contexts where social opportunities are restrictive behave as if their wishes were possible (Elster, 1989). Elster also demonstrated, using the example of Ulysses, that individuals sometimes are able to restrict themselves by using social bonds and literally tying themselves to the mast of rational thinking so that they do not follow the sirens of irrational wishes.

Peter Hedström has recently developed this notion by viewing and systemizing all kinds of logical combinations between intentions, beliefs and opportunities. Besides the model of rational intentional action, he suggests also using, in accordance with Elster, models of belief formation or rational imitation. Based on this, Peter Hedström (2005) outlined the concept of combining specific mechanism models on both individual and social levels to explain social processes that sequence by sequence bring about social puzzles such as bankruptcies, traffic jams and panics.

In general, mechanism-based explanations are more realistic but are pulling up their analytical and normative anchor: the assumption of intentional individuals endorsed with cognitive abilities. Instead of interpreting the social world from the viewpoint of individuals having intentions and certain cognitive abilities, the model of the rational intentional actor is taken as a special case and can therefore no longer be seen as a general, analytical or normative point of reference. As a result, social scientific analysis are focusing on rare and unexpected social phenomena. By stepping away from the general assumption of a reasonable and sensible individual, the approach steps away from the classic aim of analyzing the social world in order to show how social life can be improved. What remains is the focus on specific social dynamics and the various factors and interplays that bring them about.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this special issue, we pose the question of whether social science is only about causal explanations, or is it, in fact, nothing? In light of the classics, I outlined that the social sciences have been expected and have been able to offer deeper insights into the constitution and structuration of the social world and inspire betterment. One way of fulfilling this purpose is discovering causal relationships that provide insights about why things happen as they do. We have seen that although causal explanations can be given in many ways, the notion of Methodological Individualism that aims for action-based explanations has helped to develop a social science program which covers a clear purpose and a tool set to move forward.

In the last 50 years, approaches have risen that reject both the concept of and the tools for providing causal explanations. In doing this, they change the essence of the social sciences. Furthermore, this raised the question if social sciences, and more specifically sociology, move into nothingness. In contrast to an 'all-or-nothing' approach to this question, we propose the idea of further development of sociological explanations so that we as sociologists

can explore how and why social factors influence social and economic life and to what degree and in what sense this might improve living conditions. For example, how and why social relations and institutions help to reduce uncertainty, how organization and community governance support collective action and, last but not least, how and why competition improves economic and social outcomes. By doing so, the classic imperative of market research is questioned. Instead, the framework for comparative analyses of markets, hierarchies and social self-governance forms is outlined. Is this nothing?

Although causal explanations are never a complete mirror of reality and in this sense not perfect, having a starting point is better than having nothing. In light of this, there seems also a space for some of us to exchange ideas, collaborate and work together (see for example Benzecry et al., 2017) and, in the end, contribute to the betterment of our global society?

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There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Andrea Maurer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6178-6639>

ENDNOTES

¹ For a more detailed overview see Turner, 1974.

² The problem of defining such collectivistic normative points of reference has often been discussed but remains unsolved until today. One of the most promising and debated suggestion was Jürgen Habermas' idea of a discourse free from domination (see for the background Adorno et al., 1975).

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