

## Typicality, Explanation and Understanding

There are immense differences not only as regards what counts as an explanation of social phenomena, but as regards the object of such an explanation. This last is often obscured by the uncritical assumption that the social sciences, including psychology, have as their object 'the explanation of behavior.' But if one looks even cursorily at the literature, this seems to cover a vary wide range of objects including: explanation of the acts of *kinds* of individuals (or kinds of behavior), e.g., criminals or criminal behavior, and includes both the explanation of the behavior of 'groups,' including gangs, mobs or 'social movements,' and of institutions, e.g., the behavior of governments or firms. Still others seem interested in explaining the properties of institutions, e.g., bureaucracies, or explaining 'system behavior,' including, e.g., social reproduction and transformation, conflict and crisis. Still others aim at explaining the powers and competences of persons and others have an entirely different object: call it the explanation of 'events,' e.g., a war or revolution, or (as above) *kinds* of social events, including wars, revolutions and the like. One could go on here and include, e.g., explaining how selves are constituted, or how cultural objects function in maintaining solidarity, etc.

As regards the character of social scientific explanation, there remains the lingering confusion between explanation and description, and an uneasy bifurcation between causal explanation and interpretation (Little, 1991; Skocpol, 1984). Moreover, there is debate over the character of both, e.g., between those who hold that a causal explanation requires appeal to covering laws, likely of a statistical sort (Coleman, 1990: 1) and those who, for very different reasons, deny this. For the former, who still strangely dominate mainstream thinking on such matters, any explanation which does not also produce predictability is at least an inferior explanation, if an explanation at all. There are still confusions regarding what should be included in a proper causal account, starting with confusion regarding the concept of causality, and including the role of the past and the role of 'structure' and 'human agency' in explaining outcomes. Some offer explanations in terms 'reasons,' or more narrowly in terms of 'rational choice' models of action. Still others offer what may be called 'structural' accounts, and some of these explain by appeal to 'functions.' Coleman puts a piece of this confusion (and adds some of his own?) as follows: 'Social Theory continues to be about the functioning of social systems of behavior, but empirical research is often concerned with explaining individual behavior'(1990: 1).

We may grant that inquirers with different interests will pursue different goals and have different strategies. We may grant also that we are often illuminated even if sometimes the source of illumination is misplaced (and if sometimes we are fooling ourselves, as in most so-called functional explanations). Finally, while one can surely doubt that there could be any powerful characterization of explanation which will fit all the cases (Scriven, 1969; Achinstein, 1993), it may still be useful to try to bring some order to this rather messy business. What follows is not meant to be exhaustive, still less definitive. I am interested, first, in arguing against the pervasive assumption that the object of social scientific explanation is 'the explanation of behavior,' where this means the effort to explain the actions of some concrete individual. But I offer a rescue of this idea through appeal to the idea of a 'typical individual,' a 'homuculus' constructed for purposes of

explanation. Second, I suggest a distinction between understanding and explanation and then third, I offer two sorts of causal explanation which center agents as causes. One regards the explanation of events, the other, which appeals to the idea of a typical actor, shows how we can explain empirically confirmed patterns or generalizations, statistical and otherwise, and how social structures get reproduced and transformed. Although I argue that only human agents are causes, I do not, I hope, fall into a methodological individualist trap.

### **The Explanation of Behavior**

I argued some years ago (in 1982 at an earlier conference sponsored by the then editor of JTSSB, Paul F. Secord) that we are misled if we think that the object of social scientific explanation is the concrete behavior of individuals, that e.g., we should try explain why Sam mugged somebody in the IRT last Sunday night. I would like to think that this is obvious, except that it is easy to show that inquirers persistently suppose that explaining behavior is their aim.

Consider, e.g., Coleman's remark, quoted earlier, or better, a \$32 million project entitled 'The Project on Human Development In Chicago Neighborhoods.' Its size and expense suggests that what it represents is not marginal in the human sciences. Quite the contrary, very much social science shares in its most fundamental assumptions.

Writing in defense of this project, James Q. Wilson notes rightly that crimes are committed by all sorts of people, from all classes, gender, ethnicities, with the full range educational attainment, family structure, you name it. But in the face of this, he does not throw up his hands. Correlational studies, he says, cannot help much since they 'can tell us next to nothing about what causes what.' Longitudinal studies help, but:

...Most longitudinal studies cannot tell us very much about causality because they did not begin when their subjects were young enough and did not involve a sufficient number of measures, such as looking at early patterns of mother-child bonding (Wilson, 1992).

The Chicago study presumes to remedy this. It is interdisciplinary. It includes a selected sample of 11,000 research subjects, grouped into overlapping cohorts. Along with community studies, each will be 'followed' for eight years. 'By the year 2001 data will be available on the entire development process of a large number of criminals and non-criminals' (Earls, 1994).

These inquirers think that to explain criminal behavior, one needs to find the causes in individual biography (or perhaps in individual biology--a crime gene, perhaps). Wilson thinks that if we look at enough individual cases and do enough multiple regressions, we will find the key 'factor' or perhaps the right combination of factors. We will be in a position to know the cause or causes of Sam's criminal behavior that Sunday night on the IRT.

It is clear enough what misleads us here. A crime statistic is, after all, a descriptive summary of the criminal acts of many individuals, nothing more. It is then assumed that to explain 'crime,' even the crime statistic, we need to identify what caused these persons to commit crimes.

There is something right about this, but also something which is terribly wrong. I do not think that we could, even in principle, improve on our ordinary unscientific explanations of the concrete actions of persons (Manicas, 1982), but from this, as I shall subsequently argue, it doesn't follow that social science has nothing to contribute to explaining social phenomena.

Scriven long ago (1964) gave two of the reasons for insisting that we shall not improve on our ordinary, pre-scientific explanations of concrete action. First, a 'colossal quantity of psychological knowledge has already since been snapped up and incorporated in our ordinary language' (1964: 167). We know a good deal about one another; otherwise it is hard to imagine how we could exist as social beings in continuous interaction. It will be quite easy to establish why Sam mugged the woman and we can be quite confident in the answer we get. Indeed, if this were not true, our courts could not function.

Second, (and this was problem for some of the reviewers of that 1982 volume), acting agents are radically open systems in the sense that they are continually being affected, not only by changes in their biochemistry, but by random and largely uncontrollable 'stimuli' in an objective environment which is only as it is seen or taken by the agent. Although concrete acts flow from habits and dispositions acquired in the epigenetic developmental process, no particular action is determined by this causal past.

The bottom line has been emphasized by Giddens who insists that social science requires the concept of agency, and agency requires that the actor 'could have done otherwise.' This is *not* 'a denial of a thoroughgoing determinism of agency' (and hence a qualified endorsement of 'free will'), since whatever the actor in fact does was caused. Nor can a spurious (Kantian) dichotomy between 'freedom and determinism' be overcome by holding that 'enablements and constraints in the exercise of agency will vary considerably in different historical circumstance[s]' (Cohen, 1987: 285). Cohen, like many, confuses agency and freedom. Actors acting under the most severe forms of constraint still exhibit agency in that even if we did successfully predict the behavior, the agent 'could have done otherwise.' It is hard to measure the damage done to the idea of social scientific explanation through the assumption that a scientific analysis could overcome this limitation and thereby improve on our ordinary capacity to explain and predict behavior. At the same time, freedom, properly construed, has *only* to do with enablements and constraints. No one is absolutely free even if the freedom of many, many people--the poor, e.g. is sharply restricted. (Feinberg, 1973).

But if we err in thinking that social scientific explanation should aim at explaining the concrete acts of persons, what are some of its proper objects?

### **Understanding and Explanation**

I suggest that we distinguish 'understanding' and 'explanation,' although I am uncomfortable with the choice of words to mark the distinction I want to draw. 'Understanding' has often been used to refer to a particular sort of explanation which involves *Verstehen*. It is often held, accordingly, that it is the proper kind (and only proper kind) of social scientific explanation. I

have no doubt that, as Weber insisted, inquiry in the social sciences requires *Verstehen* (Giddens's 'double hermeneutic') since all human activity is meaningful, but with Weber, I would insist that causal explanation is still possible and sometimes required.

In any case, I use the term more broadly. We can and do get an understanding of what goes in nature as well as society (Dilworth, 1992; Friedman, 1974). 'Understand' is both equivocal and unclear. I mean here something like acquiring a grasp of the generative mechanisms or structures at work in the world. For example, with a grasp of the fundamental principles and processes given in celestial mechanics, we can understand why the moon has phases, why there are seasonal changes (hardly noticeable in the Hawaiian Islands), what accounts for tidal motions and much else besides. This understanding comes from understanding how gravity and inertia affect the relevant masses in the solar system. Prescientific peoples knew, of course, that there is a full moon every twenty-eight days, more or less, but understanding why awaited Copernicus and Newton. Similarly, one doesn't need molecular chemistry to know that water freezes, but does not explode. But lacking the theory, we do not understand why. This understanding comes with a bit of chemistry which provides us with an understanding of 'things' as structured complexes with particular powers (Harre, 1970, 1986; Bhaskar, 1976).

Although ignored by most philosophical accounts of science, the real power of the successful sciences is that they give us understanding. This is, indeed, the whole point (or ought to be?) of science education in our schools. Moreover, at least as theoretical sciences, the successful natural sciences make almost no effort to try to explain the occurrence of particular outcomes, the focus of most philosophical accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Although I do not pursue this here, I have argued that understanding (in the foregoing sense) is the proper goal of a theoretical psychology (Manicas and Secord, 1983; Margolis *et al*, 1986). Such theory gives us understanding--so far very much incomplete --of our competences and powers as persons. For example, we may hope to understand the generative mechanisms of perception or memory, even if explaining particular perceptions and memories of particular persons is beyond the scope of any science. For me, many of the papers offered in the present issue (including those by Harre, Farr, Leiber, Ossorio, Solomon and Shotter) are best understood as having the goal of achieving a better understanding of the social factors in human competences.

I concentrate here on causal explanation and as I shall use the term, it differs from understanding in that its primary focus is the explanation of events, particular concrete outcomes, from the explanation of why, e.g., the plant on my back porch died last night, to the explanation of the explosion of TWA 800, to the explanation of the French Revolution or the Great Depression. Since concrete outcomes are always the product of many causes working conjunctively, the causal explanation of events must also always be concrete and historical (Kim, 1993). This is also the case in the natural sciences. For example, the explanation of the eruption of Kilauea volcano or the evolution of *homo sapiens* must be concrete and historical (Gould, 1986).<sup>2</sup>

Understanding and explanation are logically related in that explanation presupposes

understanding. We could not, e.g., begin to explain the demise of my plant last night without an understanding of the many causal mechanisms which were involved (Mathews, 1993). But to explain that particular event, we need to know more, in particular how the causal mechanisms--including my failure to anticipate the severe temperature fall--came together to produce (contingently) the outcome.

My distinction between explanation and understanding resonates in ordinary use, even if, of course, it is hardly enforced. But among social scientists, confusion has been aggravated by wide acceptance of the philosophical claim that all scientific explanation fits the form of the covering law model.<sup>3</sup> For example, historians, adamant that their explanations were of the concrete insisted, rightly, that no covering law model would suffice. Of course, they were correct; but as Hexter (1971) long ago argued, the argument had nothing to do with the fact that human agents were involved. No covering law (or ensemble of them) would give us an explanation of the TWA disaster either.

Generalizations, of course, and singular causal statements do often serve in explanatory contexts and may well be sufficient for the purpose at hand: The plant on my porch died because it froze (Woodward, 1993). But it is hardly clear what a *complete* causal explanation would look like. And given some understanding, we can provide explanations of generalizations --including those which in the sciences get expressed quantitatively and are often thought of (misleadingly) as empirical laws, e.g.,  $pV = k$ , or  $D = 1/2at^2$ . (It may be that we should say here that we provide an understanding why the generalization holds.) I want to exploit this feature of understanding in explaining patterns in society.

Moreover, given an understanding of causal mechanisms, we can generate technologies, heat engines, missiles, telephones and televisions. Still, it is quite stunning that the social sciences are less modest than the physical sciences, indeed, so immodest that they seek what is rarely possible in the domain of the natural world: explanations which are symmetrically predictions. Celestial mechanics is the notable exception. One cannot over-state the damage created by that image of science.

### **Social Structure and Understanding**

`Structuralists' see rightly that social structure sets limits to action; what can be done, what cannot be done, and given some other assumptions, what is likely to be done. This parallels, in my view, the sort of thing one gets from studying the `structure' of a molecule. Structuralist accounts can give us an abstract understanding of the social world.

There is, of course, a huge literature regarding how social structure should be theorized (Porpora, 1989). Here I want to emphasize that while structures both enable and constrain actors, the properties of a structure (or for Giddens, `system') are independent of the persons who occupy positions or roles in the structure. Thus, the activities of persons in bureaucracies are structured by the form of a bureaucracy, but the particular individuals and their characteristics *qua* individuals are wholly irrelevant to understanding bureaucracies. Who the individuals are, whether, for example, they are female or male, individually conservative or altruistic, etc. is irrelevant insofar

as the concern is properties of bureaucracies *qua* bureaucracies.

One can, accordingly, give a fully adequate analysis of a structure without mentioning any particular persons. But this does not mean that persons are irrelevant to structure. Indeed, we can say that in theorizing structure, implicit is the idea of a typical individual. We speak of bureaucrats, not of Charlie who works in Motor Vehicles in Mineola, New York, of monarchs, not Louis XIV, or of capitalists, not Bill Gates.

The idea of a typical individual has been richly elaborated by Schutz (1953).<sup>4</sup> Typical individuals are not real persons. They are 'models of actors' which are not 'human beings living within their biographical situation in the social world of everyday life.' In Marx's abstract analysis of capitalism, there are *only* typical capitalists and wage workers, theoretical "homunculi" who reproduce theorized capitalist social relations and social process. While flesh and blood workers have a host of other socially (and thus structurally) relevant characteristics, gender, ethnicity, level of education, etc., these characteristics are all omitted. Of course, because real (flesh and blood) workers and capitalists are complexly motivated (by virtue of their existential situation), they act unpredictably. Moreover, the abstracted (but real) social relations of capitalism do not exhaust the structuring relations of any concrete capitalist society. *But, of course, no science reproduces reality.*

The main idea is consistent with a number of variants in the theory of structure. It rules out, however, those accounts which identify structure *with* pattern. For example, for Collins (1988: 243): 'Structure is repetition: it is the pattern of the same kind of events happening over and over again.' But if so, then structure cannot be appealed to explain the pattern. That is, on the present view, the pattern is what is *because* individuals are enabled and constrained by structure.

The view is consistent with strongly 'objectivist' readings of structure (Layder, 1990; Archer, 1995)--which I reject. In keeping with the ontological concerns of the present volume, we should note that it is both unnecessary and unwarranted (versus variants of Durkheimian theory) to hold there are independently existing social forms which are somehow 'connected,' dialectically or otherwise, to human action (Jukes and Barresi, 1993). It is quite sufficient that social forms exist only as incarnate in persons and their interactions. Indeed, the recognition that flesh and blood persons are *more than* workers, or females, etc., that they are idiosyncratic and act unpredictably, contributes to the idea that social structures are an "external" cause of their behavior, sometimes 'determining' it, sometimes not.

On the other hand, unlike typical persons which are but abstracted constructions having no existence, on the present view, social structures are real, the actually existing materials of action--even if, as always, they are known through abstraction, most profitably, if I am right, through the construction of typical actors. Still, since the reality of structure is activity-dependent, social structures have no causal power--unlike a magnetic field, e.g. which does. Put in other terms, social structures have effects only insofar as they are incarnate in the activities of persons, for example, insofar as Charlie *behaves* like our theoretical bureaucrat.

One can find variant formulations of the idea in a wide range of recent writers, including recent Marxist writers who insist on the need for a micro-foundation for so-called 'macro-explanations' and even in the recent work of James Coleman, who identifies himself as pursuing a 'special variant' of methodological individualism. For Coleman, roughly, the 'macro' level is 'the abstraction which establishes the conditions for an action,' and the 'individual-level theory of action...is... the dominant model of action we apply when we say we understand the action of another person: We say we understand the "reasons" why the person acted in a certain way, implying that we understand the intended goal and how the actions were seen by the actor to contribute to that goal' (1990: 13).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while there are no proper names figuring in Marx's account of capitalist reproduction, we get an understanding of capitalism. His analysis tells us why, e.g., depressions are a regular feature of capitalism, but by itself, it cannot explain any particular depression. The analysis of the commodity gives us 'the micro-foundations' of capitalist reproduction, but cannot give us any information about price ratios in any concrete society.

Similarly, with his account of vassalage and land tenure, Bloch's *Feudal Society* (1971) gives an understanding of Western feudal societies, but it cannot explain how Arnulf secured recognition as King of Italy or why the Norman Kings 'set themselves to stretch to the limit the scope of military obligation' (Vol. 2: 329).

### **Explaining Social Events**

As Weber well recognized, the physical sciences can be "worthwhile" even while they pay no attention to explaining concrete events. This is not true of the human sciences, where very often our "interest" is precisely an interest in explaining events of human significance (Weber).

But structuralists sometimes do mislead us. Sometimes they would like us to think that structure explains outcomes or that structural analysis allows us to produce explanatory generalizations which thus serve to explain events (Skocpol, 1984; Manicas, 1981, 1985). In part, this is due to some understandable unclarity as regards goals. It is easy for structuralists to slip into some historical (and explanatory) narrative along the way. Sometimes, these are merely illustrative, giving some concrete feeling to the abstract analysis; but sometimes they introduce particular agents (or groups) whose actions were causally critical to the outcome.

Skocpol's influential work exemplifies these problems clearly. We are illumined by her comparative structural account; but misled insofar as she leads us to believe that the illumination derives from her explanatory generalizations.

Consider briefly her account in *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). Her explicit aim is to explain the social revolutions in France, in 1789, in Russia, 1917 and in China, 1911. In two very interesting chapters she undertakes a comparative-historical analysis in which she considers these and though briefly, three 'negative' cases, or situations where there were no social

revolution. She concludes that the three positive cases have in common (1) state organizations susceptible to administrative and military collapse when subjected to intensified pressures from more developed countries abroad and (2) agrarian sociopolitical structures that facilitated widespread peasant revolts against landlords... (1979: 154). Taken together, she concludes that these are 'the sufficient distinctive causes' of these revolutions. Presumably, then, we have an explanation of modern revolution (or at least of these three modern revolutions) by means of an explanatory generalization. This has its form:

If C1 (and C2...), then E (explaining generalization)  
C1 (and C2...)  
Hence, E (the event to be explained).

In this case,

If a state organization susceptible to administrative and military collapse is subjected to intensified pressures from developed countries abroad *and* there is widespread peasant revolt facilitated by agrarian sociopolitical structures, then there will be a social revolution.  
In 1789, France was subjected to such pressures and had an agrarian social structure which facilitated widespread peasant revolt.  
Hence, France in 1789 had a social revolution.

The first premise is the 'explanatory generalization.' We can replace China or Russia for France in the second premise and thus also 'explain' their social revolutions.

Putting aside the question of whether any science explains in this way (it does not!), we can see that since the conditions are not sufficient, we have been cheated. As Skocpol admits, to explain the French Revolution we still need at least the specific actions of the King of France: '...as everyone knows, the summoning of the Estates-General [by the King] served not to solve the royal financial crisis but to launch the Revolution' (1979: 65). This is surely causal language.

Although the point cannot be pursued here, one either admits contingency in history or one does not. If one does, agent causality is the best place to find it. One either admits that the King could have done otherwise and others, consequently, would have done otherwise, or that he could not have done otherwise or that even if he did, those others would still have done what they in fact did.

Mixed into her structural account is a thin narrative, a narrative which she later said was unnecessary (Skocpol and Somer, 1980: 194). We need to be clear here: Her comparative structural account illuminates because it gives us a better understanding of the character of the three revolutionary societies, but the generalizations do nothing for us. The thin narrative, however, takes us along comfortably, not because it is convincing narrative, but because given our new understanding, we fill in the explanatory blanks ourselves. Had the narrative been omitted, we

would not, I think, have been misled. But this objection shows how *structural understanding* should get coupled with *causal explanation*.

Scores of pages have been written to explain the French Revolution. On the present view, the King's decision to convene the Estates-General was causally critical. It was as a (corny) analogy the match which lights the fire. To have a fire one must have (at least) something which will burn and an one must have oxygen. (The force of the `must' here is that these two conditions (causes) are necessary conditions). But of course these conditions do not always lead to fires. A host of other `conditions' (causes) are necessary. One is an agent: perhaps a spark from a short circuit, perhaps lightning, perhaps someone with a match. And we need to know what else happened--and what didn't happen. Normally, there will be fuses (or circuit breakers) in the system. Were there? If there were, why did they fail? Perhaps fuses were replaced with pennies or circuit breakers were tampered with.

Pressing the analogy, if the King--without intention--`launched' the revolution, it was because revolutionary conditions were present in France in 1789 (the structural analysis) *and* because a great number of other actors did things which led to the storming of the Bastille and to the resulting effort at revolutionary transformation. Marx was correct that we all make history, but as C. W. Mills wisely remarked (and Marx would have agreed!), we are not in this regard equal contributors.

As any historian would insist, to explain the revolution one needs to tell the story which begins at least with the King's decision. But as the sociologist would also insist, most historians fail to give attention to the structural conditions which set the problems and which enabled and constrained the various actors. By recognizing that actors work with `materials at hand,' a properly conceived causal explanation of a social event tries to do both.

We can further illustrate this with a look at the often misunderstood work of Perry Anderson. In *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, he writes:

...the aim of this study is to examine European Absolutism simultaneously 'in general' and 'in particular': that is to say, both the 'pure' structures of the Absolutist State, which constitute it as a fundamental historical category, and the 'impure' variants presented by the diverse monarchies of post-mediaeval Europe' (1974: 7).

Anderson rejects both the sociologists thirst for `universal categories' and the historian's rejection of `abstract models.' After years of immersion in historical materials, Anderson arrived, via abstraction, at a general model for the place and period under study. This led him to argue that Eastern Europe was not `merely a poorer copy of that of Western Europe, which can be added side by side to it, without affecting the study of the latter' (1974: 9). In the first chapters of each of two parts of his book, Anderson then abstractly theorizes the emergence of the absolutistic state in both the West and the East. In summary:

The Absolutist State in the West was the redeployed political apparatus of a feudal class which had accepted the commutation of dues. It was a *compensation for the disappearance of serfdom*, in the context of an increasingly urban economy which it did not control and to which it had to adapt. The Absolutist State in the East, by contrast, was the repressive machine of a feudal class that had just erased the communal freedoms of the poor. It was a *device for the consolidation of serfdom*, in a landscape scoured of autonomous urban life or resistance (1974: 195).

Having identified in these chapters the key structures employed by actors, Anderson then develops narratives of histories of states in Europe, employing his model to show how in each of these there were critical variations which help explain the very different outcomes. For example, in Italy, because mercantile capital had already developed in the north, Frederick II failed--despite his 'many assets'--to extend his relatively advanced baronial state from his base in the south. The consequences of this failure on subsequent development were significant. Or, 'Swedish Absolutism...was built on a base that was unique, because--for historical reasons outlined earlier--it combined free peasants and nugatory towns.' This absence of significant urban centers meant the absence of a challenge from the bourgeois. This combination was to give the Swedish monarchy both its stability and 'its distinctive cast' (1974: 180).

These chapters (10 in all) are *not* case studies meant to confirm the logic of the causal model; rather they are offered in their own right as, he hopes, better *particular* histories of European states in the period under study, better because by identifying key differences in inherited structures, they conjoin theory and history.

### **Explaining 'Social Facts'**

I want now to suggest a different object of explanation, the explanation of a wide variety of what for convenience may be called 'social facts,' including weak generalizations, rates, probability statements and exception-laden patterns and regularities--the very stuff of statistical description. The regularities are not, as on the covering law model, regularities which pretend to explain the behavior of individuals. Rather, they are facts which demand explanation. We do not explain why Sam mugged by appeal to a statistic about urban black males. Rather we need to explain that statistic. And we need to do this without being able to find some 'cause' of crime which explains the criminal actions of all criminals.

As I noted, structuralists see rightly that structure sets limits to action; what can be done, what cannot be done, and given some other assumptions, what is likely to be done. We explain social facts, as above, by explaining the acts of *typical* individuals in terms of their enabling and constraining conditions of action. (Compare Little, 1991: 176). Again, if our typical actor has been well constructed and we have properly identified the actually *existing* conditions of action, we have an explanation (understanding?) of the social fact.

This is a powerful reason for insisting that a social mechanism be unpacked in terms of the

actions and the consequences of actions of individuals using materials at hand. Here the idea of the typical individual abstractly representing idiosyncratic existential persons is a useful device. But there is another relevant reason: Once we abandon the regularity determinist theory of science we see (versus Little) that it is silly to suppose that there could be *causal* regularities at the level of social phenomena (Porpora, 1987). 'Functional relations' between 'macrovariables' are not causal relations and they cannot explain!

Indeed, once we confuse structuralist understanding which legitimately omits reference to persons with structuralist explanation (Parsonian or Marxist), we have a typical sociological inversion in which structures bear all the explanatory weight and persons effectively drop out as causes. For quantitative applications of this, the regression, then, looks for 'strong relations' between 'social facts,' e.g., anomie and suicide rates which, then, are covering laws 'explaining' individual action.

### **Explaining Crime**

My example is crime. I choose this problem and develop it at some length because Wilson and his associates are not the only social scientists who talk nonsense when they try to explain crime. The beginning of wisdom here is to see that since crime is not a unitary phenomena, there is no typical criminal! That is, different *sorts* of crime are structured differently. But we need to notice, as well, that some criminal acts may not be explained by *any* social scientific analysis. These are crimes which fit no intelligible pattern. Most obviously these are crimes committed by individuals for reasons which, for us, are themselves not intelligible. It is a sad fact, of course, that such criminals (e.g., the Jeffrey Daumers and the 'pathological' criminal of typical TV crime shows) occupy so much of our attention, for attention to these sorts of cases leads us believe that we shall never find the causes of crime (or that they are in our genes) and hence that we cannot effectively even reduce crime. But most crime is intelligible, has social causes, and can be causally explained.

There are at least three different sort of crime involving different structures, 'white collar crime,' e.g., bank fraud, 'one-on-one crime,' e.g., burglary, rape, and 'crimes without victims,' e.g., prostitution. Here then are some social facts which can be explained.

1. Between 1987 and 1992, Federal bank regulators investigating the Savings and Loan scandal, filed 95,045 criminal referrals with the FBI. 75% of these were dropped without prosecution. Those convicted served an average of 2.4 years in minimum security prisons, compared with 7.8 years for those convicted of bank robbery. From October 1988 through June 1992, courts ordered defendents to pay more than \$846.7 million in fines and restitution. 4.5% of this amount had been collected as of 1992. (*New York Times Magazine*, 9 May 1993).

2. In 1992, 58% of persons in federal prisons and over 30% in state prisons were sentenced for drug offenses. Over two thirds of drug arrests were for possession and less than a third for the sale or manufacture of drugs. According to the US Justice Department (February 1994), over 21% of all federal prisoners were 'low-level offenders with no current or prior violent offences on their records, no involvement in sophisticated criminal activity and no

previous prison time.' They served an average of 81.5 months.

4. White high school students are twice as likely to report using illegal drugs as African-American students. 24% of whites report marijuana and 3.3% report cocaine; 11.5% of black students use marijuana; 1.3% use cocaine. But young black males account for 40% of drug arrests and 60% of prison commitments for drug offences.

5. Between 1987 and 1991, juvenile arrests for murder climbed 85%. Arrests on charges of robbery, assault, rape, and other violent crime rose by 50% among juveniles, double the adult rate (*New York Times*, 1 December 1994).

6. Perhaps 85% of those processed through the criminal justice system come from the lowest 15% in income.

7. In Chicago, 80% of the men jailed are high school dropouts; since 1973, the income of dropouts has declined 37% (*New York Times*, 12 June 1994).

Unsurprisingly, class, race, gender, age and drug-use leap at us as critical structural variables in explaining these social facts. We can think of these as structuring the activities of typical persons: they are 'materials' which enable and constrain activity and, insofar, they structure motivations, opportunities, expectations, values, attitudes, goals, etc. I should emphasize here that in my view there is no useful distinction to be made between structure and culture. So-called "economic" determinants are always cultural and conversely. Thus, persons lacking marketable skills have beliefs and values which are part, perhaps essentially, of their existential condition. As Marx insisted, their social being determines their consciousness. A great deal more needs to be said on how class, race, gender, etc. comes together in structuring action, but plainly, this cannot be accomplished here.

We can do what we need to do here with a fairly simple model. Individuals are reared in households characterized by class, race and family condition (e.g., male or female headed, two parents, one working, both working, etc.). Households and schools are in neighborhoods structured by race and class.

Begin with the explanation of white collar crime. Because committing white-collar crime requires institutional access to a position of trust and authority, the typical white collar criminal is neither poor nor uneducated. He (and sometimes she) was not reared in slums in broken homes. Typically, they were not 'problem-children' and did not appear in juvenile courts. Why do they commit these crimes?

Social theory has tended to be divided into two schools as regards 'social control,' Durkheimians who hold that internalized social norms constrain behavior and 'utilitarians,' who hold that individuals act on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis. Actual motivated behavior, of course, does not so easily get divided up and, I think, it is always overdetermined. But no sophisticated psychological theory is necessary for our model of the typical white collar criminal: The situation is structured such that white-collar crime pays! One anecdote, not in the least an exception, makes the point.

John McNamara defrauded GM of \$436 million. In exchange for his freedom, he agreed to

testify in a bribery trial. The officials he testified against got off and Mr. McNamara kept nearly \$2 million. *The New York Times* commented: 'But with all the tough "three strikes" talk, he'd better watch out: If he steals \$436 million from G.M. two more times, he's going to be in *real* trouble.' Sutherland summarized the issue well:

The crimes of the lower class are handled by policemen, prosecutors, and judges, with penal sanctions in the form of fines, imprisonment and death. The crimes of the upper class either result in no official sanction at all, or result in suits for damages in civil courts, or are handled by inspectors, and by administrative boards or commissions, with penal sanctions in the form of warnings, orders to cease and desist, occasionally by the loss of a licence, and only in the extreme cases by fines or prison sentences (Sutherland, 1940).

Typically, white collar criminals know that they will not be arrested, if they are, they will not face criminal charges, if they do, they will pay a fine or serve a light sentence in a comfortable prison. There is, accordingly, next to nothing to lose and very much to gain. Explaining this stunning difference in the structure of law enforcement will, of course, require a historical explanation which will need to include an account of of the social mechanisms which produce the criminal law and the criminal justice system.

What then about the criminals who fill our prisons? As above, there are two social mechanisms at work. One structures choices for crime; the other structures who ends up in prison. As regards much one-on-one and victimless crime, poverty is a cause of crime in the sense that it makes these sorts of criminal activities rational alternatives for poor people, especially if they are young. There is here a vast ethnographic literature to draw upon.

Felicia Lee comments on the circumstances of Lakeshea Hill, a sixth grade graduate PS 158 in East New York:

For Lakeshea and the other students who graduated in the past week, the choices are complex and painful, like staying in school or dropping out, selling drugs or fast food, carrying a gun for protecting themselves or staying in the house. They ask themselves: 'Can I make it?' (*New York Times*, 28 June 1992).

Terry Williams shows that the young drug dealers he spent several years with are deeply committed to mainstream values, including the work ethic and the American dream (Williams, 1989). Says Masterrap:

Selling dope is just any other business...You gotta work hard, stay on your toes, protect what's yours.

Williams makes it clear that the drug business is a direct response to the absence of legitimate opportunities. Charlie reports:

I don't plan to be in this business forever; I've got potential to do better, and I will. But right now, the thing is to make some money. After I do that, I can think about college and all that.

Charlie knows, of course, that what he is doing is illegal. But is it wrong? How can one criticize a hardworking young man like Charlie? He is not harming anyone. After all, he is merely providing others what they want. This is, however, a vicious trap. The typical youthful dealer knows that his opportunities are structured by his circumstances but because he is intelligent, he knows what he can expect from life. There is no good reason to struggle with the books if he is not likely to find more than a part-time work in a dead-end job (Ogbu, 1978).

It is often said that, like crime, poverty is ill-understood, that it is, e.g., the complicated result of family breakdown, lack of education, poor motivation, welfare dependency--one could go on. But this so much nonsense. It confuses two different questions: the understanding of poverty in capitalist societies and explaining why some groups are over-represented in poverty statistics.

*Understanding* poverty is easy. As any adequate structural account will show, in a capitalist economy there is no mechanism which guarantees enough jobs for all those who want to work, still less enough jobs which pay wages which would put a family above the poverty line. It is also easy to provide the micro-foundations for this consequence: The (typical) capitalist, facing competition, will seek to reduce costs. Since Say's so-called law does not hold, even in a perfectly competitive economy, there will be at least periodic unemployment and, since workers are in competition for available jobs there will be low wages for many of those who do find work. Who then will be poor?

We know too why African Americans are disproportionately poor: about 3 in 10 as against 1 in 10. Explaining this requires looking at the history of African-Americans in America beginning with slavery and its effects--right up to the present. For example, as late as 1930, 54% of men were in agriculture. 5% were white collar. Since WW II some four million African-Americans were driven from Southern fields and immigrated to northern cities. But as Harrington wrote, by the 1960s, "there was no growing industrial sector to absorb them." It requires noting that *only* African Americans suffered net employment losses in the recession of 1990/91 and that as Ellis Cose has written, even the most successful African-Americans 'find themselves haunted by racial demons.'

The micro-foundations of reproduced black poverty are also well understood. As Elliot Liebow argued as early as 1967, each man on Tally's Corner

comes to the job with a long job history characterized by not being able to support himself and his family. Each man carries this knowledge, born of his experience, with him. He comes to the job flat and stale, wearied by the sameness of it all, convinced of his own incompetence, terrified of responsibility--of being tested still again and found wanting.

Marriage is an occasion of failure. To stay married is to live with your failure... It is to live in a world whose standards of manliness are forever beyond one's reach (Liebow, 1967).

While grounded in empirical reality, 'the men on Talley's corner' are, for purposes of explanation, 'typical men.' Indeed, one can hardly be surprised if there are patterns of abuse, abandonment, womanizing, drinking or drugs? Indeed, the real question is how, given the conditions of racism and poverty which produce these typical experiences, so many--the forgotten majority of working class black men-- manage to avoid these patterns (Duneier, 1992; Staples, 1994).

This is, however, but one side of the 'crime problem.' The other is the criminal justice system itself. As the discussion of white collar already suggested, it, too, is structured by class and race. Arrest records are just that. We do not know how many crimes are committed. But that means that the allocation of law enforcement resources will be critical.

We must begin by looking at resources devoted to enforcing safety regulations whose violation often cause loss of life. As Labor Secretary Robert Reich noted, OSHA's 2,300 employees cannot hope to police the nation's six million employers. While it is difficult to determine from police departments how many officers are assigned to vice squads, almost certainly the number in a dozen or so of our major cities will exceed the number of OSHA inspectors. With the Reagan cuts, these number now approximately 700.

We then can look at other government agencies responsible for enforcing, e.g., laws regulating the \$20 billion coal industry. According to inspectors who head regional offices of the Office of Surface Mining, the director, Harry M. Snyder, ordered them "to end investigations of violations, reduce fines, eliminate penalties, divert prosecutions and prevent inspections." As it turned out, ranking officials, including Secretary Manuel Lujan Jr., knew of Mr. Snyder's actions and 'by not interfering, in effect sanctioned them.'*(New York Times, 22 November 1992)*. No one served prison time.

Next, we can look at the practices of other critical regulatory commissions, e.g., the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Commodities Futures Trading Commission. For example, Thomas Collins defrauded investors of some \$40 million. He had been under investigation for five years. Edward T. Joyce, a lawyer representing some of Mr. Collins' former clients asserted that the 'CFTC was utterly and totally incompetent.' The *Wall Street Journal* commented that if this were an exception, it would not be worrisome, but it is not. Indeed, critics content that 'the CTC remains undermanned and beholden to the interests it is supposed to police'(4 October 1994). Mr. Collins has disappeared.

Finally, we must look at police resources and practices. The US doubled the number of police officers between 1980 and 1990. The 1994 Crime Bill will add another 100,000--even while according to official victim surveys, the crime rate has not changed significantly.

What of police practices? Between 1985 and 1989, the number of white juveniles in locked detention declined, while during the same period, the number of imprisoned non-white juveniles increased by 259%. But it is well established that young males who live in poor neighborhoods and apprehended for delinquency are many times more likely to appear in an official record than males from wealthier neighborhoods who commit the same offences. Since a criminal record is the scarlet letter of our era, this is highly significant. Indeed, not only does it nearly guarantee a low-paying job, but it ensures that any subsequent apprehensions will guarantee prison-time.

Chambliss' recent work with Rapid Deployment Unit (RDU) of the D.C. Metropolitan police shows that there are two distinct sets of practices for black and white neighborhoods. It is not merely that the RDU does not patrol predominately white neighborhoods, but the governing assumption in black neighborhoods is that a black male is presumptively guilty of some crime.

But, of course, the class and race bias in the system does not end here. While the US Constitution requires that all defendants have attorneys, it does not guarantee that they should put equal time into a defense, have psychiatric services, investigatory assistance, expert witnesses or bail. Not only are the indigent found guilty more often, but are less likely to be recommended for probation or granted suspended sentences. And mandatory sentencing and the 'three-strikes' policy has exacerbated the differences. Since stiff mandatory sentences for crack have been instituted by the the US Congress, very few whites have been federally prosecuted in the region from San Luis Obispo to the Mexican border, while hundreds of blacks and Hispanics have been imprisoned. Nearly all white crack offenders are prosecuted in state courts where the sentences are far less -- up to eight years different! Remarkably, the average sentence for murder is six and half years. Possession of seven hundred marijuana plants has a federal mandatory sentence of eight years, with no possibility of parole (*New Yorker*, 13 April, 1992).

I have argued that too much social science misconceives the proper tasks of a social science. It asks the wrong questions and confuses them; it is immodest in its goals. Worse, it is too often ideological in that its results serve the interests of the powerful. I think that we can explain crime. But of course, much depends, as I have argued, on what one thinks one is explaining and how this is to be explained.

Peter T. Manicas  
Department of Sociology  
University of Hawai`i at Manoa

## ENDNOTES

1. As recognized by Friedman (1974). But for him, 'the central problem for the theory of scientific explanation comes down to this: what is the relation between a phenomena in virtue of which one phenomenon can constitute an explanation for another, and what is it about this relation that gives us understanding of the explained phenomenon' (1974: 6). For him, then, the philosophical literature on explanation can be divided into rough groups. One group, advocates of the covering law model, attempt to offer precise proposals as to what will count as an scientific explanation, but have little to say about the connection between their proposals and understanding, usually on grounds that understanding takes us into the psychology and pragmatic. The other group, e.g., Toulmin, Scriven and Dray, are helpful as regards understanding, but are vague as to just what 'relation it is that produces this understanding' (p. 6). Friedman's approach assumes that the D-N model provides at least a necessary condition for explanation and that the problem, accordingly, is to see what needs to be added to such an account to achieve understanding. Unsurprisingly, "rational expectation," "familiarity," "ideals of intelligibility" and Friedman's preferred notion, "unification" fail. The approach I suggest is entirely different. It rejects the covering law in toto and focuses on what one needs to understand if there is to be understanding.

2. Among philosophers, the covering law model no longer dominates. In addition to the now classic critiques of it by Harré (1970) and then by Bhaskar (1976), see the essays by Salmon, Brody, Lewis, Kim and Mathews, all collected in Ruben (1993).

In addition to the causal explanation of events, there are other contexts, including the causal explanation of emergent properties, including probably, consciousness. I utterly ignor this complicated and confusing business here.

3. Thus Wallerstein, wrestling with the 'nomothetic/idiographic' distinction, writes: 'Since all explanation is ultimately in terms of a covering law, however implicit and even if specifically denied, it is tempting to wish to make covering laws as general as possible' (1995:214). He urges us to resist this temptation on pain of triviality. Of course. But it is surprising that he remains a captive of the positivist understanding of explanation! Will it be a generation before social scientists give up this dogma? Wallerstein's work, it may be noted, contributes to what I term understanding.

4. While much of Schutz's work is most valuable, Giddens would seem to be correct in judging that Schutz never entirely cut "the umbilical tie to the subjectivity of the ego which distinguishes [Husserl's] elaboration of transcendental phenomenology" (Giddens: 1976: 31).

5. As Giddens has noted, some writers are strong on action, weak on "institutions." For others, the converse is true. Coleman, like much "micro-sociology" is notably weak on structure.