

## In Memoriam: George Homans

One of the giants in sociology is gone. George Homans died on May 29, 1989, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near where he grew up, where he studied to become a sociologist, and where he taught for most of his career. Homans was important for sociology as a whole, and he had a special importance for the direction in sociology reflected in this journal.

Homans's career covered the period during which theory and empirical research in sociology diverged. In American sociology, survey research replaced community studies as the dominant mode of empirical work, and Parsons' typological theories swept the theoretical field. Neither had much room for the other.

Homans refused to accept the divergence. *The Human Group* (1950), his first major book that developed theory from empirical research, did so by use of observations on individuals in interaction in small group settings. The set of connected empirical generalizations that he developed in this work was "theory of the middle range," to use a term of Robert K. Merton's (Homans's fellow student at Harvard in the 1930s). The next step was an important one for sociology. In 1958 Homans published "Social Behavior as Exchange" in the *American Journal of Sociology*, a paper that introduced (or some would say, reintroduced) rational choice theory into sociology. This work took the empirical generalizations about the behavior of groups, and of individuals in groups, and provided a rational choice foundation to explain this behavior.

In his *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961), he took the next step, a grounding of purposive action in operant conditioning. Although this last step has not been followed by sociologists, the social exchange—or rational choice—step has been extensively followed. This journal, now in the second number of its first volume, is the most recent manifestation of the strength of that following.

There seem to have been four precepts that permeated Homans's work and informal conversation about work. In his characteristic style of self-deprecating pride, he never claimed originality for any of these precepts, but at the same time he put his modesty to good use by claiming that they were not just simple but obvious, which by implication made the skeptic blind rather than contrary.

First, while personalities differ greatly, human nature is the same for all. This was certainly a rock-bottom conviction of his that informed virtually everything he did in sociology. According to his own story, he learned this from folk wisdom and from reading social (as opposed to cultural) anthropology, especially Malinowski (“who observed well and used his common sense”).

Second, the most important reward is social approval, especially from people close to you. So whatever one does as a sociologist, one must look for the sources and flow of social approval. No institutional arrangement will persist if adherence to the rules is at odds with the flow of social approval.

Third, social behavior is exchange of material and nonmaterial goods, so that stability in human relationships can only derive from an ongoing process of exchange and not from any social categorization of the relationship itself. Such categorizations and other aspects of social structure (say a status structure) are themselves the result of ongoing exchange relationships. However, once created, such structural aspects turn into the conditions under which exchange takes place.

Fourth, a theory must explain something and, given a uniform human nature, that explanation must show how human nature combines with circumstance to produce the behavior or structure in question.

All four precepts provide sound advice. Those of us interested, as George Homans was, in the development of sound social theory consonant with empirical reality will have occasion to use these precepts in our own work. Altogether, not only through his own work, but through the work it has spawned, George Homans’s contributions to a science of society live on.

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