

# How Social Psychology Can Build Bridges to the Social Sciences by Considering Motivation, Cognition, and Constraints Simultaneously

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## WHAT IS NEEDED

**T**he potential (and probably increasing) relevance of social psychology for the social sciences may lie in the fact that in the social sciences, there is an increasing need for theories on individual behavior and interaction that help explain how collective phenomena come about. By collective phenomena, I mean phenomena such as many people doing similar things (like committing crime or divorcing or discriminating), or doing things cooperatively (like joining a movement or working in teams), or doing things competitively (like competing in the market place or in politics), some combination of these (as in social exchange and social dilemmas), or the collective results of these actions (such as rates or social norms). This requires theories that can deal with a great variety of different influences on behavior at the same time. For example, if one wants to explain the difference in divorce rates between, say, Moroccan and autochthonous Dutch couples in the Netherlands, one would have to be able to trace theoretically the simultaneous (and possibly interactive) effects of relevant factors. Looking at the literature of empirical studies, one would be able to compile a list of factors that have come up in various studies, such as the information about the partner before marriage, age at marriage, investments in the relationships (such as joint children and property), norms of

significant others, quality of the partner relationship, availability of alternative partners, psychic and material costs of divorce, prior experience with divorce (from parents, from self), social and personal resources (such as education of parents, self and partner, size and overlap of the partners' social networks), homogamy (say, in terms of education, religion, social value orientation), and many more. In practice, the value of such a list derives from the theories that generate the place and relevance of the various factors for the explanation of divorce rates. Without understanding how a factor affects the divorce rate (directly or indirectly via its impact on other factors), and how it interacts with other factors, it is difficult to know how to operationalize it and/or how to interpret the empirical results. This is difficult enough if the effects of all these factors are additive, but it gets to be a very tough problem if there are interaction effects (e.g., negative effects of joint property on divorce may turn out to be higher for partners with overlapping social networks), and there may be seemingly contradictory effects (e.g., some studies find religion to be a negative influence on divorce and others don't).

In addition to these problems, it will not do in most cases to rely solely on a literature search for coming up with a list of relevant factors in the first place. We know from research that often factors are relevant in one context and not in another. Thus, what the social scientist needs, in addition to being able to trace the simultaneous effects of factors, are heuristic devices to guide the search for relevant factors (be they situational factors, institutional, cultural, individual, or possibly also dispositional factors).

What theories are there that help the social scientist in tracing the simultaneous impact of a variety of factors on a dependent variable? So far, social psychology has played a rather modest role here. Rather, it was microeconomic theory that had an increasing an overall enormous impact on both sociology and political science, riding the tide of the increasing demand for individual level explanations of collective phenomena. However, as I argue next, this enormous influence of microeconomics is "faute de mieux," that is, due to a lack of better alternatives provided by social psychology. Before I turn to this question in more detail, I discuss what in my opinion made microeconomics so attractive to social scientists for dealing with these tasks of tracing the relevant factors and their simultaneous influence on a particular collective phenomenon.

## **MICROECONOMIC THEORY AS A FIRST PROTOTYPE OF THE BRIDGE**

In the social sciences, it had long been taken for granted that the acting unit has to be an "actor," that is, a more or less intelligent human being who perceives his or her situation and acts in this situation with intentions directed at reaching certain goals. This was even true of role theory in traditional sociology. Yet this theory had great difficulty dealing with varying situational "constraints" (i.e., opportunities and limitations for carrying out a particular kind of action). For example, a woman may have been socialized to want to play the



roles of housewife and mother. However, her role performance will be influenced by, say, attractive alternatives and by competing claims on her time. Theories of role conflict, which were invented to explicitly deal with these problems, were useful to describe problems (such as a conflict between playing the mother role and working), but they could not be used to trace the simultaneous effect of both internalized role expectations and work and there was no heuristic help in bringing in other relevant factors. One could predict stress or trace the “depth” of internalization of the role expectation in contrast to the “working role,” but that was about it. In order to be able to predict what behavior would result from such a role conflict under various conditions, and to solve similar problems in other areas of sociology, an increasing number of sociologists in the 1970s and 1980s turned to a theory that was the most detailed and worked out in relating preference (what people want), constraints (opportunities and limitations to realize preferences), and active and intelligent goal pursuit (rationality). This theory was microeconomic price theory.

### THE SEARCH FOR RELEVANT FACTORS AND THEIR SIMULTANEOUS EFFECTS

In this theory, the heuristic device for the search of relevant factors was systematic search for preferences and constraints, and the translation of these two into costs and benefits of a certain course of action. In such an analysis, role expectations would either be seen as part of the (internalized) preferences and/or part of the constraints (e.g., the cause of approval and disapproval from significant others). Thus, following the internalized role expectation would yield the benefits of realized preferences and approval from some significant others, and the benefit of not incurring the costs of working (such as more leisure time, less effort), at the cost of losing the benefits from work (such as income, status).

The next crucial research question then was: What is the net result, that is, what are the simultaneous effects of the various factors? The operational form of this question within this framework is: Are the costs higher than the benefits or the other way around? In order to answer such a question, the heuristic search for relevant factors would first lead to the simplest way of dealing with costs and benefits, namely, to consider only money. For example, are arrangements such that household income is shared? In that case, it is likely that the amount of work of each partner would adapt in such a way that household income was maximized, given the constraints (i.e., given the tasks at home, the ability to deal with those tasks, what each can earn outside, how prone or averse each is to work, etc.). Later, additional factors, such as the value of leisure time, can be added to income. By adding uncertainty about important traits of the partner, divorce can also be explained in this framework (see Becker, 1981).

There was, however, also a downside of this useful tool. For sociologists, it became increasingly clear that, despite its magic, this solution had severe limita-

tions for solving the two major tasks of a social scientist. Microeconomics assumed that preferences were given (i.e., outside the theory) and that they were always ordered, that is, that people always know what they want (the rationality assumption depended on this). This had the advantage of very tractable models with easy use of formalization. In practice, however, this meant a severe limitation of what preferences could be considered: only those for which the assumption of ordering would be most plausible. Because the constraints considered are dovetailed with the preferences considered, problems concerning the assumptions about preferences carry over to assumptions about constraints (see Frey, 1992, p. 21ff). The assumptions on rationality were also very limiting, with virtually no link to cognitive psychology. The field of “behavioral economics” is meant to provide this link, and to some extent it succeeds. The same can be said about the field of decision theory. Both fields show important advances for the social sciences, pushing for some more realistic models of rational choice. However, for sociology, research in both fields still remains too limited with regard to the goals, cognitions, and constraints that are being considered.

### THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE: THE ENHANCED MAGIC TRIANGLE

What is needed is a replacement of microeconomic theory that retains the advantages of this theory with regard to solving the two big problems of social scientists but surmounts the considerable limitations of this theory. This is not an easy task. Outside decision theory, psychologists have made use of some form of rational choice theory in the past to deal with problems of motivation and achievement (e.g., Vroom, 1964). However, these theories did not explicitly deal with dovetailed constraints.<sup>1</sup> The theory that, at present, comes closest to what is needed is Ajzen’s (1985) theory of planned behavior, in which he explicitly pays much more attention to beliefs than economists and also considers constraints in the guise of norms and control over internal and external factors. It has been rightly seen as an important advance, and it spurred much research in various substantive areas. Yet Ajzen’s theory is not making full use of the magic triangle. For one, it is not concerned with constraints per se, only with social pressure (norms) and control over constraints, and it is thus of limited use for solving the two major problems in the social sciences. Especially, it does not handle substitution (i.e., relative price) effects. It also does not make use of important developments within psychology about interdependencies between motivation and cognition (see Fig. 22.1).

Thus, social sciences are still waiting for a suitable replacement of microeconomics from social psychologists. Its replacement (see Fig. 22.2) would have to be a theory that keeps the basic structure of the magic triangle

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is research on social dilemmas, which was close to microeconomic theorizing from the beginning.

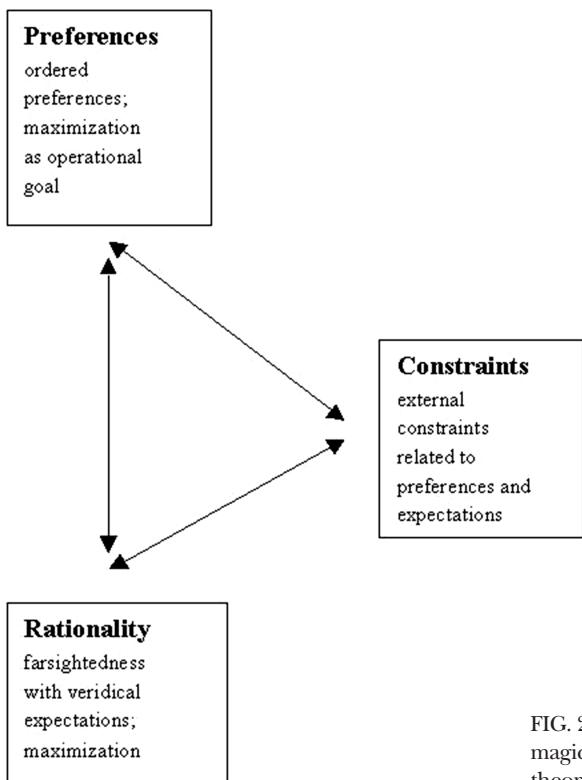


FIG. 22.1. The first version of the magic triangle: microeconomic theory.

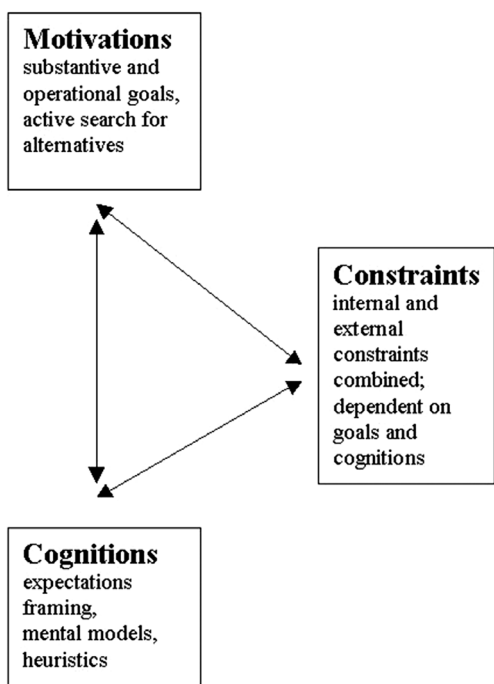


FIG. 22.2. The improved version of the magic triangle.

but replaces the assumptions on preferences with suitable theories and research on motivation, replaces the assumption of rationality with suitable theories and research on cognition, and dovetails with both suitable theory and research on constraints (i.e., the individual's barriers and access to means that are necessary for reaching the goals). Because motivations and cognitions will be much more varied than "preferences" and "rationality" in the microeconomic model, the constraints that can be linked to motivations and cognitions will also be much more varied.

Contrary to economics, they will include combinations of internal and external constraints, such as self-esteem and the criticality of the audience. It boils down to a theory of goal-directed behavior, the important characteristic of which is that motivations and cognitions are explicitly dovetailed with constraints.

### THE CONTOURS OF THE BRIDGE

The contours of the task by social psychologists essential for building a bridge to the social sciences now begin to come into relief (see also Lindenberg, 2001a, 2001b). First of all, some social psychologists would have to take the trouble of integrating and promoting social psychological research with the aim of making a great variety of substitution effects traceable, by offering ways to conceptualize nonmonetary cost and benefits. A theory of general human goals and needs is likely to be essential here.

Second, social psychologists could systematize and promote research that is done on questions regarding relevant "shift parameters," such as mind states, priming effects, orientations, frames, and so on, that trace the influence of goals on cognitions and the perception of constraints. Again, there is much relevant work in this area, but as of yet it is fragmented.

Third, people are busy influencing themselves (what one could call self-management). All these processes boil down to an individual's active attempts to influence inner and outer constraints. Here too, social psychologists have done much research that is as yet not systematically related to a theory of action.

### CONCLUSIONS

The message of this chapter is quite simple. The social sciences are confronted with at least two difficult problems for which social psychology could be very helpful. First, there is the problem of how to identify the relevant factors for the explanation of collective phenomena. Second, there is the problem of how to trace the simultaneous effects of a variety of factors on the dependent variable. In order to be able to help social scientists with these two problems, social psychology would have to put much more effort into theories of behavior that have the special feature of being based on the magic triangle, that is, on the interrelation between motivation, cognition, and constraints.

Constraints define the possibilities and limitations (i.e., the available and necessary resources and barriers) for reaching particular goals, and cognitions stand between goals and constraints. The advantages of such theories of behavior lie first in the heuristic guidance they offer for the identification of relevant factors, and second in the relative ease with which various factors (situational, institutional, cultural, individual) can be connected, once the relations in the magic triangle are spelled out. When doing research on the magic triangle, social psychologists are also likely to use research not directly related to the magic triangle (at present, this is the bulk of social psychological and purely psychological research). In that sense, they are then also a bridge between general psychology and the social sciences.

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