

## Micro-macro problem in sociology: Towards a solution

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### Abstract

This article is an attempt to simplify or solve the problems of social or sociological theory which is a micro-to-macro problem. The researcher reviewed the works of some major micro-theorists and deduced solutions to the problem. The researcher deduced one of the solutions from the works of Randall Collins which is named aggregation model. Similarly, another model was deduced from the works of James Coleman called coordination model. These models show a movement from micro-observations made or data collected to the macro level where generalisations are made or conclusions are drawn. The two models have depicted a scale of transition from micro (individual members of the society) to macro-level which is a large-scale structure of the society. The paper concludes that either of the two models presented above can solve the micro-macro problem in sociology and social theory in general.

**Keywords:** Aggregation model, coordination model, micro, macro.

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## 1. Introduction

There are two major problems in sociological theory: theoretical and methodological. Social theorists and sociologists like James Coleman, Randall Collins, Peter Blau, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Jon Elster, George Ritzer, Anthony Elliot and McClelland have discussed it extensively. The major methodological problem in social theory is from who data is collected and from which field. Movement from micro where the data is collected to the macro where conclusions are drawn from and generalisations are made from the data collected from individuals has received attention from James Coleman and Randall Collins. Some theorists like Coleman, Collins and Blau refer to micro-macro methodological problem, while Alexander and Giesen (1987) regard the micro-macro dichotomy as an analytical distinction. As an analytic categorisation, they are both relational and arbitrary, so something treated as micro from one perspective could be treated as a macro from another (Alexander, 1987, p. 291). Addressing the problem has become pertinent because it generates a lot of criticism against social theory generally and sociology in particular. This is in line with the observation of Turner (2016, p. 123): the failure of closing the micro-macro gap in sociological theory was often used by enemies of sociology that it is not a science. This paper aims to examine how Collins and Coleman attempted to resolve the methodological problem in social theory.

The micro/macro problem has attracted a good deal of attention of social theorists, particularly in the field of sociology (Alexander, Giesen, Munch & Smelser, 1987; Coleman, 1986; Collins, 1981; Fine & Kleinman, 1983; Knorr-Certina & Cicourel, 1981; Ritzer, 1985), Understood as levels, the effort to solve the problem has led to a proliferation of distinctions, adding 'meso' (Maines, 1979) and 'mega' (Jones, Gallagher & McFalls, 1988) to micro and macro. The proliferation of levels reveals a good deal about what is wrong in this debate. It continually waffles between treating the issue as analytic (Alexander et al., 1987), which promises some sort of solution, and treating 'levels' as if they were ontological realities which promise only a dead end (Jones et al., 1988; Maines, 1979).

The article aims to derive a solution for the problem from the works of Coleman and Collins. The rationale behind is to simplify the difficulty of understanding the solution among undergraduate and postgraduate students. Even there were attempts for micro-macro integration by some social theorists, but this article considers Randall Collins and James Coleman's attempt as the best to address the micro-macro problem. These attempts are referred to as the aggregation model of Randall Collins and coordination model of James Coleman. The starting point of attempt is that sociology is more concerned with human interactions rather than individual behaviour alone. It also deals with functions of social systems and social structures in a given time and space. In conducting social research, data collection is conducted in a natural setting where individuals interact with each other in time and space, i.e., natural observation is of individuals, not an entity called society. The central problem in the discipline is the movement from the individual level, where the observations are made, to the systemic level, where the problem of interest lies, which marked the onset of a micro-macro problem in social theory.

In explaining the micro-macro problem, Knorr-Cetina (1981, p. 20) described micro-macro distinction as the processes and entities on the micro-level which are simple or uniform, whereas processes and entities on the macro-level are complex. However, Pawlak (2015) countered the position of Knorr-Cetina. He stated that it is not true, because the micro-transactions of everyday life might be enormously complex, while some processes (or at least their representations) on a macro-scale might be quite simple. Some approaches to the macro-level treat it as an aggregation of micro-level processes or entities, which in consequence may lead to the assumption that macro-level is more complex as it is a totality of micro-level phenomena. It is a naive way of thinking because having in

mind that micro and macro are analytical categories, it is necessary to reduce the complexity on both levels through the development of models of reality. The model of macro-process does not include all the elements of its micro-components (Pawlak, 2015). This depicts that some theorists view the micro-macro problem as analytical categorisation, not a methodological problem. However, this article argues that it is a methodological problem because it centres on the data collection from an aggregation of individuals (micro) and such findings from individuals are presented as a macro (society, groups, organisation etc.).

However, before Collins and Coleman, some social theorists explained the micro-macro problem in sociology and social theory in general. McClelland (1961) used the work of Max Weber to digest the micro-macro problem and showed that it can be resolved but he did not use the term micro-macro problem. McClelland (1961) explained that in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Protestantism and modern capitalism depend on how Protestantism affects micro-level phenomena and processes that in turn affect the development of capitalism: a psychological means by which the historical development described by Weber may have come about (McClelland, 1961, p. 47). McClelland studied specifically how achievement motivation at the micro-level is related to economic growth at the macro-level. He did not aim at developing a broader sociological research programme that systematically attempts to explain macro-level phenomena using micro-macro models. This shows that there attempts to solve the problem which predates Coleman and Collins attempts.

## **2. Aggregation model of Randall Collins**

Collins (1981) represents the micro-end perspective with a radical micro-sociology approach. According to this approach, only the translation of macro-concepts into aggregates of micro-events makes them fully empirical (Collins, 1981, p. 984). There are only three pure macro-variables which cannot be reduced to micro-events: time, space and number (Collins, 1981, p. 98). All other variables of an alleged macro-level are reducible to micro-reality: structural variables often turn out to be sheer numbers of people in various kinds of micro-situations (Collins, 1981, p. 99). Thus, according to Collins, only the reality of interactions between individuals is empirically researchable and this is the only kind of social reality. The variables or concepts of the macro-level are of different ontological status they are not real *per se*, although participants of interactions make references to these macro-concepts.

Similarly, Collins (1975) identified four main types of macro-references made in social situations: individual micro-histories, situational macro-views, pure macro-variables, and analysts' macro-comparisons. The individual micro-histories are implicit macro-references in many micro-situations the participants refer to some broader segments of time or space, which are external to a given situation. The pure macro-variables of time, space, and number are abstract, yet they allow to construct temporal, numerical or spatial aggregations of micro-experiences. This kind of aggregations is constitutive for the macro-level of analysis (Collins, 1981, p. 99). The fourth type of macro-reference is different from the first three types: analysts' macro-comparisons refer to the frames of situations, while the first three types are within these frames (Collins, 1981, p. 101). Humans have the analytical ability to compare various situations, and under this ability, they are also able to create macro-concepts. Therefore, it could be deduced from the argument of Collins that sociologists produce macro-concepts by comparing micro-situations, even though some of them seem to believe that they discover some hidden variables, and not simply produce them in concrete micro-situations of doing the actual analysis.

Collins, in micro-foundations of macro-theory, observed that society is an addition of individuals and the focus of social theory should be on them. He further observed that macro has its foundation

on micro because the macro is an aggregation or collection of individuals found in the society. Collins' approach to the micro-macro issue is one of the most advanced products of the interactionist tradition represented by theorists like Herbert Blumer, George Homans, Erving Goffman, Emmanuel Schlegoff, or Harald Garfinkel (Pawlak, 2015). Collins identified three sociological variables which aggregate individuals: size, time and space. At any time, people are interacting in numbers, time and space. Macro, therefore, is the aggregation of encounters of individuals over a prolonged period. However, if the interaction is within a short time with a small number of people, such could be referred to as micro. Collins borrowed from the work of Erving Goffman who viewed the world as a stage in his work on impression management where people behave concerning the audience watching them as they act on the stage. Collins, drawing from the work of Goffman, emphasised on the prolonged period between an actor and audience on the stages of life. For instance, described a state is a collection of individuals with leaders, relating for a prolonged time within a specified space. In sum, a state full of bundles of interactional experience between individuals intersecting each other as they interact in a specified space and over a prolonged time. He further established that micro-relations are the foundation of macro-sociology because encounters are what the observer observes and all the rest is constructed by the observers is not tenable position because the micro-world is no less observer-constructed than the macro world.

### **3. James Coleman: coordination model**

James Coleman was a prominent member of the camp of sociologists who employed assumptions on the rationality of the individual actor to tackle the problems at the macro-level. As he phrased it, 'a central intellectual problem in the discipline (of social science theory) is the movement from the individual level, where observations are made, to the systemic level, where the problem of interest lies'. This is referred to as 'micro-to-macro problem', and it is a problem which is pervasive in the social sciences generally (Coleman, 1987, p. 154). Coleman maintained that micro is equal to the individual but macro was on the level of the system and not the society. However, Pawlak (2015) argue that Coleman's attempt to solve the micro-macro problem was analytical rather than methodological even though at some extent believed it has methodological element. Pawlak (2015) put it this way, Coleman's understanding of the micro- and macro-notions was analytical in a way that he placed on the micro-level all entities and processes that are directly observable. On the macro-level, he saw 'hidden' important entities and processes which exist but are not directly observable, thus showing that micro and macro have a methodological dimension. The macro-level thus refers to collective phenomena that are described by concepts referring to properties of social systems, such as the size of a group. In terms of the number of actors involved, 'macro' may refer not only to large but also to small social systems such as a dyad, a triad or a small group. The micro-level refers to properties of individuals, such as their preferences, their information or behaviour. Hence, the distinction 'micro' versus 'macro' corresponds to the distinction 'individual' versus 'collective' (Raub and Voss, 2016).

To further simplify the problem, the coordination model is described as, when sociologists want to carry out research, the researcher studying individuals, which make up the society and an anti-positivist; there is no tangible object called society standing as an entity. Therefore, the conclusions and generalisations of social research are based on data collected from individuals, not society. This depicts that micro is the foundation of macro-sociology. Therefore, generalisation and conclusion should be reduced to the individual level not to the systemic level. Coleman posited that when people come together in an interaction, they do so because of their vested interest, i.e., interest in what other individuals possess. These individuals who are into interactions transfer rights to others who

begin to coordinate the activities of everyone in time and space. Once the interaction begins, a hierarchy is established and some people assumed the leadership position. This is the beginning of the coordination model moving from micro-macro and the better way of macro-events based on micro-interactions of individuals who collectively surrendered their rights for someone to coordinate produce a system or social category called society or organisation.

Furthermore, it could be deduced that micro-social behaviour is a relation of interests. Individuals come together for the sole purpose of realising their interest. In this relationship, individuals because of their vested interests downplay the importance of values, norms or laws. All relationships are goal-directed behaviour; all behaviour is directed towards attaining a goal. Therefore, a macro is established when individuals accept to transfer or surrender their rights to someone. Once these rights are transferred to someone to act on behalf of the whole, a hierarchy of coordination is structured in social institutions. Leadership is established because the leaders have power and prestige which other members lack, i.e., a power relationship between a leader and the followers produce macro-entity called society. Additionally, as to prolong interactions in time and space continues, norms and values emanate from people who assume power and who also have their vested interests to pursue and those who take instructions from the leaders. In sum, norms, values, mores and law are developed as a result of interactions between individuals who surrendered some of their rights for someone to coordinate. This shows that radical micro-sociologists take norms, values and societal morals into consideration because it aids coordination and interaction at the micro-level.

In this connection, coordination shows a movement from micro to macro, because society is only an aggregation of individuals who are not goal-oriented. These are within the aggregates of people who coordinate the activities of other individuals who surrender their rights willingly. Out of this coordination, individual members who are dissatisfied with the coordination of their activities by the leaders would become frustrated and may become aggressive. However, Coleman stated that frustration does not often lead to revolution for the revolution to exist; there must be individuals whose interests are thwarted and have leaders to coordinate their activities and actions. In this sense, a revolution is a micro-event because it requires the occurrence of micro-events (frustration and coordination of frustrated individuals) for it to occur. Without some people who would coordinate the activities of aggressive and frustrated individuals, revolution is impossible.

Coleman further explained that improved social conditions in his bathtub diagram as macro-conditions which when deteriorating caused frustration (as micro-conditions). The frustration of individuals was causing their aggression (micro-outcomes), which according to Ted Gurr was sufficient to produce an aggregated effect by saying that it supposedly is 'a simple aggregation of individual aggression somehow is capable to magically produce a social product (i.e., revolution)'. What Coleman pointed to as missing in this mechanism was a social organisation or, in cases of other failed micro-macro causal explanations, the lack of institution. The properly identified institution is, therefore, a mediating mechanism allowing the transition from individual to the systemic level, a simple aggregation of individual behaviour was not enough for him. According to Coleman, a good example of an institution as a mechanism explaining the transition from the individual to systemic level was the political institution of the electoral system, which may differently translate voters' preferences into victory in the elections (Pawlak, 2015). Based on the above, at any stage, situation or condition, coordination essential in human interaction for macro-situations or events to be properly explained by tracing its micro-foundations.

#### 4. Conclusion

Deducing from the above discourse, it is sufficient to conclude that either of the two models presented above can solve the micro-macro problem in sociology and social theory in general. Both models have succinctly depicted and explained macro events by tracing their micro-foundations since society is an addition of individuals who make up the society. Therefore, this understanding of the micro-foundation would prevent social scientists against sweeping generalizations based on the data collected from individuals. Sociological analysis based on aggregation or coordination model is an attempt towards qualitative methodology, which gives importance to a human agency and produces valid findings. In doing so, the aim of translating macro-phenomena into a combination of micro-events has been achieved. This redirects social researchers to focus on the natural unit of observation which is the individuals. The essence is to explain individual behaviour as he interacts with other individuals in time and space. Interactions, encounters, time and place, as well as individuals, are some of the variables in solving the micro-macro problem. Aggregation and coordination models have explained macro events as the by-product of micro-interactions because social interaction, events and action are carried out by individuals who are either members of the society or group. This simplifies the movement from individuals (micro) where data are collected or observation to the system (macro) where conclusion and generalizations are made. Therefore, jostling between radical micro- and macro-theorists is not an indication of weakness of sociological theorising but it shows how both minute aspects of social life, as well as global events, are important in social research and theoretical explanation and development.

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