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Against the unification of the behavioral sciences

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Abstract

The contemporary behavioral sciences are disunified and could not easily become unified as they operate with incompatible explanatory models. According to Gintis, tolerance of this situation is ‘scandalous’ (p. 28). I defend the ordinary behavioral scientist’s lack of commitment to a unifying explanatory model and identify several reasons why the behavioral sciences should remain disunified for the foreseeable future.

Main Text

Herbert Gintis aims to unify the currently very disunified behavioral sciences, advocating the general adoption of his ‘BPC model’ of human behavior. The BPC model is a variant of the ‘rational actor model’, ubiquitous in economics (p. 4). According to Gintis, it is ‘scandalous’ that the different behavioral sciences currently offer up ‘... partial, conflicting and incompatible models’ and have done so for most of the Twentieth Century (p. 28). Here I defend the ordinary behavioral scientist’s lack of commitment to any one unificatory model, identifying several reasons why the behavioral sciences are better off remaining disunified for the foreseeable future.

According to Gintis, the last serious proposal for the unification of the behavioral sciences was presented in 1951 (p. 29, note 2). This claim suggests a narrow construal of what counts

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as a serious proposal for the unification of the behavioral sciences. The structuralist social theories developed by Althusser, Poulantzas and others, in the 1960s and 1970s, can be understood as attempts to unify the behavioral sciences (Resch 1992). While the rational actor model locates the agent at the centre of social explanation, structuralists downplay the importance of agency, and emphasise the importance of a socially-determined unconscious in explaining individual behavior. Attempts to reconcile social structure with agency, such as those due to Bourdieu (Harker et. al 1990), the later Sartre (Levy 2002, pp. 119-144) and the critical realist Bhaskar (1979) can also be understood as attempts to unify the behavioral sciences.

There are several models and proto-models for the unification of the behavioral sciences currently available. Why think that behavioral scientists, most of whom appear happy to do without any particular unificatory model, would be better off accepting one of these? Apart from alluding to benefits that follow from breaking down disciplinary boundaries (p. 28) Gintis does not address this question. It seems plausible to think that Gintis simply assumes that unificatory power and explanatory strength go hand in hand. And indeed there is a long tradition of relating the two (Kitcher 1989).

The project of unifying the sciences was pursued by many in the middle third of the Twentieth Century. However, it has fallen out of favour, at least in philosophy, mostly as a result of unanswered criticisms of the various proposals to unify particular sciences (Wylie 1999). A far reaching criticism of unificatory models of explanation in the natural sciences is due to Cartwright (1999) who argues that the apparent success of simple explanatory models in the natural sciences results from these being heavily idealized and distantly abstracted from the complexity of reality. Cartwright also asks us to contemplate the possibility that nature is

at bottom ‘dappled’ and that there may be no descriptively accurate unified model of reality to be had. Prominent advocates of explanatory unification, such as Kitcher, now accept that reality may be intrinsically disunified in at least some of its aspects and advise us to accept unificatory explanations only when and where these remain descriptively accurate (1999, p. 339). Social reality is at least as complicated as physical reality and it seems plausible to think that simple ideal models that may be used to explain social reality, such as the BPC model, have the explanatory reach that they have, only because they are abstracted away from the messiness of reality. If social reality is disunified then explanatory unification in the behavioral sciences can only be had at the cost of descriptive inaccuracy.

But even if social reality is unified it may still be a bad idea for contemporary behavioral scientists to collectively adopt one unifying explanatory model. The adoption of a particular model poses three problems. First, because the different behavioral sciences have developed in incompatible ways, the unification of the behavioral sciences would involve the abandonment of much work that does not fit easily into the unifying framework adopted. Radin (1996) argues that the expansion of the rational actor model of explanation into areas of behavioral science in which it has not traditionally been employed would cause a significant loss of ‘local knowledge’. Crucially, she argues that the rational actor model has no capacity to account for incommensurable values. Because Gintis’ BPC model is a variant of the rational actor model, Radin’s criticisms apply straightforwardly to it.

Second, the general acceptance of a particular unifying model may prevent new perspectives from being developed, from which criticisms of the presuppositions of accepted model might be made. Gintis devotes much space to showing how the BPC model can be reconciled with evidence of apparent failures of people to behave rationally that has been identified by

Tversky and Kahneman and others. But a more serious concern is whether research that challenges the presupposition that people generally act rationally, would have been conducted in a unified behavioral science in which the BPC model was adopted. A unified behavioral science could be expected to have many of the characteristics of a Kuhnian paradigm, as we find in the natural sciences. This would bring some benefits to the behavioral sciences.

However, it would also involve a serious disadvantage. As Kuhn (1970, pp. 35-42) argues, under normal conditions, in a unified discipline researchers are severely discouraged from attempting to conduct work that threatens to undermine accepted background assumptions.

Finally, the general acceptance of one unifying model of the behavioral sciences would presumably involve the cessation of work intended to advance the case for other unifying models of the behavioral sciences. There are a multiplicity of unifying models and proto-models of the behavioral sciences available, none of which has won anything close to general acceptance. Plausibly, this is because none of these offers explanations that are clearly better than those offered by its rivals. Give this state of affairs, it would be extremely reckless for behavioral scientists as a whole to only conduct work within the framework of one such model. To do so would involve abandoning work within other frameworks that might enable superior explanations of behavior to be developed in the future.

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