Coleman on social norms

James Coleman’s Foundations of Social Theory is the most explicit and detailed statement of the rational-choice research paradigm in sociology. (1) It took form in Chicago in the 1980s, when Coleman collaborated closely with Gary Becker. The “Becker-Coleman seminar” that met weekly with invited speakers from all over the USA and sometimes from other countries, was in that period probably the most influential seminar of its kind. As I know from having presented papers there on five occasions, it could be a grueling experience. The true believers in rational-choice theory –Becker himself, Sherwin Rosen, Richard Posner, David Friedman, George Stigler– combined extreme intelligence and articulateness with an imperialistic and no-nonsense attitude towards other ways of viewing the world. (2) Coleman, by contrast, had a milder voice. In discussion, he was tentative, generous and open-minded. When Shmuel Eisenstadt, Edward Shils, Coleman and I jointly taught a class on his book at the University of Chicago in 1991, he showed himself very open and receptive to criticism.

The book, unfortunately, is more dogmatic. It develops the rational-choice perspective in an unflinching manner, with little attention to possible objections and alternative explanations. To mention only one point, which will have prove important later, he implicitly dismisses emotion as a possible motivation for human behavior. Although he does cite the important work by Jack Hirshleifer and Robert Frank on emotions as “guarantors of threats and

(1) References to the book is given by page numbers in the text.
promises”, to use Hirshleifer’s phrase, he trivializes their contribution in a footnote (p. 510) that refers to “crocodile tears”. Whereas crocodile tears are signs of “feigned” emotion (Oxford English Dictionary), the arguments offered by Frank and Hirshleifer turn crucially on the emotions being genuine ones.

In this note, I focus on Coleman’s treatment of social norms. I believe his treatment is deeply unsatisfactory. It is a piece of crypto-functionalism, in spite of his official rejection of that method (pp. 259-260) and his professed methodological individualism (p. 5). It is also somewhat panglossian, in its emphasis on the beneficial effects of norms. Although Coleman is fully aware of norms that benefit only a subset of the relevant community, at the expense of others, he completely ignores norms that make everybody worse off (examples are offered later). In my opinion, social norms cause vast amounts of pointless suffering.

According to Coleman, “a norm concerning a specific action exists when the socially defined right to control the action is held not by the actor but by others” (p. 243). Minimally, this means that A can sanction B’s action if it deviates from the norm, without A thereby becoming the target of disapproval or sanctions from third parties. Sometimes, third parties will say “Why are you meddling with him? This is none of your business.” At other times they will not make such comments, or even positively encourage the interference. In that case A has the right to meddle, that is, to impose sanctions. Anticipating the sanction, B may or may not find it in his interest to conform to the norm. One reason for conforming arises if the sanction is so severe that he is better off by following the norm than by violating it. Another arises if he would himself want to invoke the norm on later occasions. Coleman says that “if residents of a dormitory attempt to establish a norm that one cannot use the public telephone for more than 10 minutes if others are waiting, then if one resident rejects the legitimacy of such control, he thereby rejects the norm and cannot claim the right to sanction others when they make long telephone calls” (p. 288). However, by violating a norm a person contributes only infinitesimally to its demise. Why could he not violate it and invoke it? There seems to be a general norm to the effect that if a person violates a norm, he cannot also express disapproval of violators without receiving disapproval from third parties. They will say, “Why are you meddling with him? You’re no better yourself.” This norm of consistency between words and behavior is itself in need of explanation. It’s not clear to me how Coleman would explain it.

Coleman argues that norms thus defined arise only when actions impose negative externalities on others (p. 275). In any given transaction, the effect of the norm is to favor others (the beneficiaries) at the expense of the actor (the target). The person who abides by the norm of not littering in the park suffers a net loss (the cost to him of not littering is greater than the benefit to him of an unlittered park), whereas all other users of the park derive a small benefit from his abstention. If we look at the same behavior in a collective perspective, however, the class of beneficiaries and the class of actors may
coincide. If all users of the park abstain from littering all will be better off than if nobody abstained. But not all norms generalize in this way. For a norm such as “Children should be seen but not heard”, the targets of the norm and the beneficiaries are disjoint groups; hence Coleman refers to them as “disjoint norms” to be distinguished from the “conjoint norms” illustrated by the littering example.

I believe Coleman’s analysis of disjoint norms misses an important aspect of the phenomenon. To capture it, let me add a third group to beneficiaries and targets: the category of enforcers. Enforcers are those who sanction targets who violate the norm. Coleman assumes that the group of beneficiaries and enforcers coincide. In my opinion, however, targets can also act as enforcers of disjoint norms. Children who do not show the proper deference to adults may be penalized by other children. More importantly, social norms intended to keep the lower class in their place are often enforced by internal policing of members of this class by each other. Although Coleman does consider (p. 292 ff.) how targets may internalize disjoint norms, on his account the effect of internalization is merely self-policing by individual target actors rather than mutual policing within the set of target actors. This is related to his statement (p. 292) that internalization installs a propensity in the target to abide by the norm even when not observed by others. I believe this to be empirically wrong. In the language of emotion that Coleman carefully eschews, social norms operate through the emotion of shame rather than guilt. I shall return to that issue.

I have discussed norms that benefit all and norms that benefit some at the expense of others. But some norms do not benefit anyone. (3) Consider the norm in our society against walking up to the person at the head of the bus queue and asking to buy his or her place in the queue. This practice, if allowed, would not harm anyone. The person asked to give up the place is free to refuse. If the offer is accepted both parties to the transaction will be better off and no third parties will be hurt. By blocking such potential Pareto-improvements, the norm makes everybody worse off. Or consider the pointless suffering induced by norms of etiquette, which penalize people for wearing the wrong kind of clothes or having the wrong kind of haircut. The argument that these norms are useful in that adherence to them “will declare one’s group identity to other members and to nonmembers” (p. 258) may be adequate in some cases, but hardly in all. When a small girl comes home crying because her friends ridicule her purchase of the wrong sort of pram for her doll, no useful function is served. These may seem to be inconsequential matters, and in one sense they clearly are. Yet as Tocqueville (4) noted, although “nothing, at first sight, seems less important than the external

(3) This statement is slightly inaccurate. Usually, some individuals benefit ex post from the operation of the norms discussed below. This is compatible with the idea that nobody benefits ex ante, and a fortiori with the idea that the average benefit is negative. (4) See Tocqueville (1969, p. 605).
formalities of human behavior [...] there is nothing to which men attach
greater importance”. Proust and Edith Wharton would have concurred.

Some norms that are unambiguously consequential also fail to provide any
benefits. In my view, norms of revenge fall in this category. (5) The Mediter-
ranean and Middle Eastern societies that subscribe to these norms have levels
of violence and mortality rates among young men far above what is found
elsewhere. The idea that the practice of revenge is a useful form of population
control is too arbitrary to be taken seriously. The idea that norms of revenge
provide a functional equivalent of organized law enforcement in societies
with a weak state is also fallacious, albeit more subtly. In many cases, the
question “whether feuds created more disruption than they controlled” (6)
may be answered in the affirmative. In dueling and feuding societies, many
people do in fact engage in deliberate provocation, to insult or offend another.
Moreover, one cannot achieve honor by insulting just anybody. In Iceland,
“The possession of honor attracted challenges, because that was where honor
was to be had.” (7) For a medieval knight, the “prime concern must be pursuit
of distinction, and a challenge should never be rejected. Rather he should go
out of his way to confront others.” (8) Montaigne refers to “what is said by
the Italians when they wish to reprove that rash bravery found in younger men
by calling them bisognosi d’honore, ‘needy of honour’: they say that since
they are still hungry for that reputation, which is hard to come by, they are
right to go and look for it at any price—something which ought not to be done
by those who have already acquired a store of it”. (9) Thus norms of revenge
and the code of honor in which they are usually embedded may create as
many fires as they put out.

In many small-scale societies there is a general norm against sticking one’s
neck out. In Aksel Sandemose’s “Law of Jante” (a mythical small town in
Denmark), the fourth of the ten commandments is “Thou shalt not fancy
thyself better than we”. (10) Keith Thomas writes that in many primitive socie-
ties, beliefs in witch-craft “are a conservative force, acting as a check on
undue individual effort. Similarly, in twelfth-century England the chronicler
William Malmesbury could complain that the common people disparaged
excellence in any sphere by attributing it to demonic aid.” (11) Unlike egal-
tarian norms that have a redistributive effect, the norm against sticking one’s
neck out does not benefit anyone. Although Coleman recognizes this fact
(p. 311), he does not try to meet the challenge it poses to his general claim.

Coleman argues that social norms are created and maintained by the
rational self-interested action by individuals who exchange in voluntary
exchanges with one another. Often, however, his accounts amount to little

(7) See Miller (1990, p. 33).
(8) See Kiernan (1986, p. 33).
writer to the effect that “giving [insults] pertains to the nature of man; because everyone
seeks distinction, one mark of which is to offend fearlessly”.
(10) See Sandemose (1936, p. 77).
more than social science fiction. The discussion of voting (p. 289 ff.) is a case in point. Voting may be described as if it were based on exchange of rights, each person holding a little share in everybody else’s vote, but it is clear that no such exchange ever took place in any known society. It is story-telling, not explanation. The problem is not only that the second-order free rider problem (see below) is assumed to be solved. The transaction costs of carrying out the exchange would be prohibitive. Also, it’s often easy to abstain from voting without being observed by anyone.

Coleman recognizes and addresses the “second-order free rider problem” in the provision of public goods. A first-order problem is that of littering. A second-order problem is that of penalizing others for littering, by disapproving remarks, looks, and the like. The benefit to the sanctioner of sanctioning is negligibly small, but the costs and risks may be substantial. If you walk up to someone littering in the park and say “You really shouldn’t do that”, he might hit you in the face. Much ingenuity has been expended on “solving the second-order free rider problem”. Like others, Coleman appeals to “social capital” to explain why people find it in their interest to sanction others for norm-violating. I find this a case of obscurium per obscurius.

In a more specific argument (p. 283 ff.) Coleman refers to gossip as a way of overcoming the second-order problem. His argument, however, seems to involve a confusion between two senses of interest. When he writes that “Each person has an interest in the maintenance of the norm and the application of sanctions to those who violate it comes thereby to have an interest in the spread of information that can lead to a consensus on legitimate sanctions” (p. 284) he means an interest in an outcome. When he goes on to say that “This means that such a person will be interested in listening to gossip and interested in passing gossip” (ibid.), he must mean an interest in the action that will lead to that outcome. But we cannot infer the latter from the former. People gossip because it’s fun. Gossip may or may not have the effect of facilitating sanctions; if it does, that might be just a coincidence. Coleman owes us an account of why the sanction-facilitating effect of gossip can explain the fact of gossip. By offering no such account he leaves himself vulnerable to the charge of crypto-functionalism.

In my opinion, social norms are sustained by the emotions of shame and contempt. (12) By virtue of mechanisms that we only dimly understand, some actions are targeted for social disapproval. These may be actions that harm everybody, that harm some but benefit others, or that benefit everybody. The disapproval is conveyed by gestures or phrases that signify contempt; in Albania, for instance, it can take the form of passing a cup of tea under one’s left arm to a person who has failed to avenge his brother. The correlative feeling in the target of disapproval is the devastating feeling of shame. Thus in 1997 six people killed themselves in France after being exposed as consumers of pedophiliac material: presumably the shame was too much to

(12) For a fuller exposition, see Elster (1999, ch. II).
bear. Prior to the exposure, however, these people presumably led more or less normal lives.

In such cases, we are dealing neither with a fully internalized norm that will be just as causally efficacious in the absence of observers, nor with purely material sanctions such as a loss of one’s job or a fine. Beyond a certain level of satisfaction of material needs, our need for the esteem of others is more important than anything else, except perhaps our need for self-esteem; and their withholding of esteem can be intensely painful. Thus A. O. Lovejoy quotes Voltaire as saying that “To be an object of contempt to those with whom one lives is a thing that none has ever been, or ever will be, able to endure. It is perhaps the greatest check which nature has placed upon men’s injustice”, Adam Smith that “Compared with the contempt of mankind, all other evils are easily supported”, and John Adams that “The desire of esteem is as real a want of nature as hunger; and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as gout and stone.” (13) Because Coleman focuses exclusively on (i) material sanctions and (ii) internalized norms, he misses what I believe to be the most important feature of the operation of social norms.

As indicated in this diagram, the causal structure of social norms differs from that of moral norms. There are other differences too. Anger is triggered by the action of the norm-violator, contempt by his or her character. Similarly, guilt is triggered by the belief that one has done a bad action, shame by the feeling that one is a bad person. The guilty person can hope to rid himself of guilt by making amends, but the person in the grip of shame can only hope to escape the contemptuous look of others. I do not want to make too much of the distinction. Littering in public may elicit anger in some observers and

contempt in others. There are emotions that involve anger and contempt at the same time, as when a social inferior violates a moral norm. What matters for my purposes is that there are clear-cut cases on both sides of the large borderline area.

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To conclude, I believe that Coleman focuses too much on efficiency-promoting social norms and that even for these norms he fails to show how their promotion of efficiency helps to explain them. The second problem is a pervasive one. Kenneth Arrow, for instance, makes the very same mistake in an even more transparent form:

It is a mistake to limit collective action to state action... I want to [call] attention to a less visible form of social action: norms of social behavior, including ethical and moral codes. I suggest as one possible interpretation that they are reactions of society to compensate for market failure. It is useful for individuals to have some trust in each other’s word. In the absence of trust, it would become very costly to arrange for alternative sanctions and guarantees, and many opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation would have to be foregone. Banfield has argued that the lack of trust is indeed one of the causes of economic underdevelopment.

It is difficult to conceive of buying trust in any direct way (though it can happen indirectly, eg a trusted employee will be paid more as being more valuable); indeed, there seems to be some inconsistency in the very concept. Non-market action might take the form of a mutual agreement. But the arrangement of these agreements and especially their continued extension to new individuals entering the social fabric can be costly. As an alternative, society may proceed by internalization of these norms to the achievement of the desired agreement on an unconscious level.

There is a whole set of customs and norms which might be similarly interpreted as agreements to improve the efficiency of the economic system (in the broad sense of satisfaction of individual values) by providing commodities to which the price system is inapplicable. (14)

Arrow and Coleman both exemplify a mind-boggling combination of rational-choice individualism and society-wide functionalism. In Arrow’s case, the lack of microfoundations is evident. In Coleman’s case, the fallacies involved are more subtle, but in the end I do not think he is any more successful.

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(14) See Arrow (1971, p. 22).
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