Recently an article in Personality and Social Psychology Review urged social psychologists to reacquire their “sociological imagination” and incorporate broader, structural factors in their work (Oishi, Kesebir, and Snyder 2009). Studies of social inequality in particular seem ripe for this kind of collaboration.

Psychological investigations relating to inequality typically center on interpersonal prejudice, stigma, or power relations. To some extent, these perspectives incorporate sociostructural factors, but only rarely (a notable exception is the Stereotype Content Model; Fiske et al. 2002). In contrast, sociology has much to offer in explaining how dimensions of stratification (e.g., race or occupation) drive psychological reactions between people at the face-to-face level.

The sociological concept of social capital—loosely, benefits derived from social networks—has great relevance to social psychological theories of prejudice and discrimination. Psychologists often conceptualize prejudice as exclusion from ingroup resources and status based on a stigmatized characteristic (e.g., race, gender). Sociometric analyses have come a long way toward explaining why these disparities occur. For instance, being impoverished as well as black compounds the discrimination problem and may foster deficiencies in other types of capital (e.g., cultural, physical) that cannot be explained by race alone (Grusky and Ku 2008).

Research on the reciprocal relationship between neural and social networks also shows interdisciplinary promise. In a recent effort to explain the self, LeDoux (2003) argues that the structure of neural networks in the brain is the driving factor for many observable individual traits. At the same time, however, the structuring of neural networks is subject to change throughout the life course (Greenough, Black, and Wallace 1987). These biological processes should be incorporated into a structural theory of behavior. As argued by Mayhew (1980:346): “structuralists generally consider that there...
are two fields of study relevant to understanding human society: biology and (the structural version of) sociology.” Much as cognitive psychologists map behavioral processes in the brain and determine how brain anatomy changes as a result of experience, social network researchers can now model dynamic networks in conjunction with other forms of non-relational data. From this perspective, psychologists and sociologists both can model, for example, the diffusion of stereotypes or racial prejudice in a social system based on assumptions about how people process outgroup information and the likelihood of intergroup interaction. Together, these independent streams of research can jointly develop a structural theory of action that explains how neural and social networks change reciprocally. It is here that the future (understanding) of inequality lies.

REFERENCES


Bridging Social Psychologies

Converging Perspectives

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Views of culture in psychology and sociology have converged markedly in the past two decades. Both have rejected what Adams and Markus (2004) refer to as the “entity” conception of culture—the view that culture is coherent, stable, and located in the heads of collectivities’ members—in favor of more supple and dynamic constructs. Culture, in this new view, entails dynamic interactions between mind and environment, each of which serves as a selection regime for the other (mental structures selecting aspects of the environment as salient, and environments selectively reinforcing mental representations) (DiMaggio 1997). Because environments vary, this view implies that people know more culture—have a larger stock of representations enabling them to function in multiple environments—and that these representations are less coherent, with many elements specific to particular domains or settings. It further implies that we cannot understand culture as isomorphic with groups: Instead this perspective raises the salience of identities (self-schemata that serve as organizational foci for cultural material characterizing the self and its relationships), institutions (environmental scaffolds that organize cultural material around places and symbol systems), and networks (which replace groups as the social...