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## The Economic Person in Sociological Context

### Case Studies in the Mediation of Self-Interest

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
And if I am for mine own self, what am I?  
—Hillel

The subject of this paper is an old question that has attracted renewed interest in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Broadly stated, the question is whether individual behavior is motivated by essentially egoistic criteria—if not selfish concerns, then at least paramountly self-centered ones—or by criteria defined and operating at the supraindividual level.

This paper explores the general hypothesis that economic self-interest is mediated by social bonds and the normative influences such relationships exert on individuals. The first part of the paper is devoted to a brief critique of the behavioral models specified by neoclassical (rational choice) and major sociological theories. This theme is further developed in the second section of the paper using some recent survey data on attitudes toward government spending for a range of “public goods” to assess empirically the proposition that a hybrid model incorporating the mediation of self-interest by social relationships and normative factors can explain outcomes that cannot be readily accommodated by the neoclassical model of economic behavior.

#### Neoclassical and Sociological Approaches Compared

In their behavioral assumptions and models of action, sociology and neoclassical economics are opposite sides of a coin. Neoclassical economists have been preoccupied with rational choices made by individual actors; sociologists have tended to look beyond the individual to behavior at the level of the group or

collectivity. While the charge that sociology has concerned itself with the irrational aspects of behavior is debatable, it is true that it has paid insufficient attention to the question of rationality at the individual level. Where neoclassical economists have encountered difficulty in making the Economic Person a social being, sociologists have had problems disentangling individuals from the web of social relations in which they are enmeshed.<sup>2</sup>

The intellectual distance separating neoclassical economics and sociology has fostered a little hostility, some suspicion, and a good deal of indifference (Hechter 1987). Like tribes living in neighboring valleys separated by high mountains, the two disciplines have developed their own languages, symbols, and customs to the point of near mutual incomprehensibility. One consequence of this isolation is the widespread belief that economics and sociology have little to offer one another. While there are crucial differences between the models of behavior employed by the two disciplines, some of these differences are complementary rather than contradictory, with each approach having something to offer the other. As Wrong (1961) has suggested, sociology's "oversocialized" conception of human behavior is the direct counterpart of the "undersocialized" conception of classical liberalism.

### *The Problem of Missing Variables*

Both neoclassical economics and conventional sociological modes of explanation suffer from the problem of missing variables or, to be more precise, incompletely specified models. In sociological theories the question of individual motivation often has been left unattended (Turner 1987), leaving ambiguous the question of what, sociologically speaking, constitutes self-interest. Is the Sociological Person driven to attain social status, to dominate and control, to fill a need for ontological security, to conform or otherwise seek the validation of others? The answer is that there is not much agreement among sociologists on these matters. The fact that sociology has so many theories of deviant behavior and criminality, each with insufficient explanatory power, to account for departures from normative behavior testifies to the need to fill in the gaps in theory between micro- and macro-levels of analysis. In contrast, the neoclassical model of behavior lacks virtually all variables having to do with the collectivity. For purposes here, I will limit discussion to the most important omissions concerning the role of variables contributing to social solidarity.

### *Social Solidarity*

It has been suggested that the problems encountered by rational choice theory in explaining collective action can be traced to the critical absence of social solidarity as part of its explanatory framework. For example, Fireman and Gamson (1979, p. 21), writing from the perspective of resource mobilization theory of

social movements, state that "the utilitarian approach to collective action [exaggerates] the role of self-interest while obscuring the role of solidarity and principle." The authors go on to define solidarity as "the configuration of relationships linking members of a group to one another . . . in a number of ways that generate a sense of common identity, shared fate, and general commitment to defend the group." They further suggest a variety of conditions that contribute to group solidarity, including kinship, participation in organizations and voluntary associations, shared problem-solving techniques, similarities of subordinate and superordinate relations with outsiders, and the difficulty of exit from the group. The key insight here is that solidarity acts to inhibit the retreat to self-interest by "rational" actors, and so makes possible collective action without the selective incentives or sanctions deemed essential on strictly utilitarian grounds (cf. Olson 1965).

Other studies have identified group size, homogeneity, and moral density as determinants of solidarity. Others have singled out conflict along class, racial or ethnic, or national lines, as a catalyst for sharpening the delineation of boundaries between groups and thus contributing to the development of solidarity within groups (Coser 1956). Still others have cited major disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, as triggers for the spontaneous emergence of solidarity in the form of cooperative, helping behavior among strangers.

Although there are some variations on the surface, manifestations of social solidarity all appear to involve one or more of the following: (1) the coalescence of a group identity, which is often characterized by (2) a high degree of embeddedness of social relationships (cf. Granovetter 1985), and (3) a structurally defined common interest. While it is not possible here to explore fully the conditions under which solidarity occurs, it is clear that these elements are to some degree mutually reinforcing. A strong sense of group identity and frequent interaction make it easier to recognize commonalities of interest as such. The sacrifice or deferral of immediate self-interest, which is a requisite of collective action, is facilitated by densely formed networks of social interaction. It is entirely possible, of course, that in the long run collective action may be to the net benefit of the individual as well as the group; under such conditions solidaristic behavior becomes equivalent to so-called "enlightened self-interest." But since there is also a risk that the collective goal will never be achieved, the *sine qua non* of solidarity is a sufficiently strong social bond so that the individual chooses to cooperate rather than opting for a "free ride."

### *Normative Factors*

In addition to the coalescence of group identities, solidarity has a second subjective dimension, consisting of normative values and beliefs. Normative factors are generally ignored in the neoclassical paradigm or are simply defined as individual preferences. For many economists, morality, like altruism, is just another

taste. Sociological theories, in contrast, pay considerable attention to norms and values, but seem unable to reach accord on the relationship between these factors and elements of social structure. In large part, the disagreement centers on which way the causal arrows point: from social structure to norms; from norms to social structure; or in both directions at once. Such debates tend to be endless.

For purposes here, it is sufficient to recognize that both norms and social structural factors are potentially important in the creation and maintenance of solidarity. It is reasonable to posit a positive relationship between the two: that is, solidarity based on structural interests should reinforce the moral commitment of the individual to the group; in turn, moral commitment should promote the recognition among individuals that structural interests are group interests. Indeed, in the extreme case the two dimensions collapse into one and the same thing—moral commitment becomes a special case of group interest in which the welfare of the individual and the welfare of the collectivity become indistinguishable from one another. Such a description may, in fact, accurately depict the situation in tightly knit groups or small, simple societies.<sup>3</sup>

In large and complex societies the relationship is not so simple. Although structural bases of solidarity may coincide with shared normative values and beliefs, more frequently the two retain some independence. The tendency toward pluralism and rapid social change ensures that, outside of ethnic enclaves and closed religious communities, socialization to collective norms and values occurs at many levels and loci of society. Just as there are overlapping and cross-cutting group identities and structural interests in modern societies, the normative and moral foundations of behavior may be indistinct or even contradictory (Coughlin 1980). The multiple layers and heterogeneity of norms and values found in modern societies tend to inhibit the development of broad-based solidary group ties, but they do not preclude them.

Finally, it should be noted that the concept of social solidarity, particularly in regard to normative/moral commitment, can be used in place of—that is, it replaces—the concept of altruism as it is usually employed in neoclassical economic theories.<sup>4</sup> Functionally, altruism can be reduced to a sentiment or action based on the recognition of some commonality of interests, or an action undertaken on moral or ethical grounds, or some combination of the two. Even the slightly pejorative connotation of altruism—that is, an act performed merely to assuage individual feelings of guilt—can be accommodated here, since why would an individual feel guilty in the face of misery or suffering if not for some stirring of moral sensibility?<sup>5</sup>

### Empirical Evidence

This section presents some empirical case studies that explore the hypothesis that social solidarity, and normative factors especially, play an important role in economic behavior, specifically, in shaping attitudes toward government spend-

ing programs. While this effort is exploratory, the results clearly point toward the significant advantages that an explicitly socioeconomic approach has over models based exclusively on neoclassical economic or traditional sociological assumptions.

This exercise draws mostly on data collected from 1973 to 1988 by the National Opinion Research Corporation (NORC) as part of the General Social Survey (GSS). In the main, the GSS data analyzed below concern public willingness to support spending for various governmental programs and activities—all of which are, in a broad sense, “public goods.”<sup>6</sup> These items are supplemented in some places by other items from the GSS and data from other surveys.

### *Limits of Rational Choice Explanations*

A basic version of the rational choice model holds that individuals always seek maximum rewards at minimum cost, and that in making these assessments individuals apply criteria that are logical-empirical in nature (Etzioni 1988). Under these assumptions, we would expect individuals to support only those expenditures for those public goods from which they might benefit and for which they would not expect to pay—or at least pay less than they expect to receive in return. Conversely, we would expect rational actors to oppose spending for public goods they perceive to be of little or no benefit to them, and for which they are likely to have to pay in the form of taxes or higher prices.

Actual results of the GSS items on attitudes toward spending for various public goods from 1973 to 1988 are summarized in Table 4.1.

In its basic form the rational choice model can account for some of the results shown in Table 4.1, such as the low levels of public support for foreign aid and welfare, but on the whole it fares quite poorly as an explanation for the observed results. We can improve the model's fit by interpreting as “self-interested” a variety of indirect benefits that individuals may perceive in some kinds of spending. Support for increased expenditures to combat crime can be interpreted in terms of “purchasing” some protection against harm from criminal acts. Similarly, the assumptions of rational choice can be stretched a bit to explain support for measures to combat drug addiction. Making this connection presupposes that nonaddicts are willing to help those who are addicted out of fear of the danger untreated addicts pose to nonaddicts or their families. Applying a similar logic, a (nearly) rational actor might also support increased efforts to improve race relations.

Other results, however, seem to defy interpretation in rational choice terms. Consider, for example, the extremely generous public attitudes toward Social Security and education. Such attitudes are difficult to reconcile with the alleged advantages of private alternatives so often cited by critics of government programs (see Coughlin 1986). Moreover, armed only with elements of rational choice theory, it is hard to see how we even begin to account for the extraordinarily high levels of support for aid to the poor over the years.

Table 4.1

**Attitudes toward Government Spending, 1973–88**

Category of expenditure	Mean percent responding current level of spending is "too little" (by year)	
	1973–83	1984–88
Halt the rising crime rate	70.4	69.0
Assistance to the poor	—	67.0
Deal with drug addiction	62.7	66.1
Improve nation's health	61.3	64.2
Improve nation's education system	54.6	64.2
Protect the environment	57.0	64.0
Protect Social Security	—	56.3
Solve problems of the big cities	50.7	49.2
Highways and bridges	—	39.7
Improve conditions of blacks	31.5	38.0
Improve mass transportation	—	33.3
Parks and recreation	—	32.1
Military, armaments, and defense	26.9	16.4
Welfare	19.5	23.4
Space exploration	11.3	14.1
Foreign aid	4.5	6.4

Source: NORC, General Social Surveys.

Many proponents of rational choice will undoubtedly object to this line of analysis. They might respond that survey responses cannot be taken at face value, and that apparent attitudes concerning government spending programs are influenced by the fact that individuals are not free to choose whether or not to contribute, since contributions in the form of taxation are exacted under threat of criminal prosecution, and so individuals' true preferences cannot be discovered. At one level this is a reasonable argument, although it becomes quite unrealistic when carried to its logical conclusion.<sup>7</sup> The argument can be countered, however, by asking the obvious question, why individuals presumed to be thusly coerced do not avail themselves of the opportunity offered by the survey interview to register blanket objection to government spending of all sorts? That so few people actually do object to spending for all or most public goods suggests that another dynamic is at work.

This brings up another criticism sometimes heard from the rational choice camp, to the effect that individuals do not object to spending for public goods because they are unaware of true costs. This criticism is the mirror image of the coercion argument. Without linking potential benefits to actual costs, the argument goes, individuals are prone to the "fiscal illusion" that benefits can be had

at little or no cost (see Lewis 1982). The argument is that it "costs" virtually nothing to respond to a survey interviewer that more money should be spent on *X* (where *X* may be a ballistic missile, a freeway, or a day care center), but it is quite another thing to have to pay for it. Underlying this argument is the assumption that if respondents were aware of true costs, support for public goods would decrease or disappear.

While it is possible that respondents in surveys (and, by inference, the public at large) underestimate the actual costs of many or most public goods, they nonetheless appear quite able and willing to draw distinctions among different categories of such goods. If respondents actually priced all public goods equally at zero, would not the "rational choice" be to want "more" of everything? Except where the marginal value of the good is valued at zero or even negatively—that is, the "good" is seen as "bad"—the rational choice model's answer to the question would have to be yes. Yet in practice this result does not occur in any survey or any other context of which I am aware. Again, it seems clear that another type of explanation is needed.<sup>8</sup>

### *Toward a Socioeconomic Explanation*

Let us begin to look for an alternative explanation by restating the problem in socioeconomic terms. First, note the extraordinary stability in the pattern of results reported in Table 4.1. Indeed, the results are more stable than they should be given changes in real and relative levels of program spending over time, the ebb and flow of the political debate over taxing and spending, the ups and downs of the economy, and other changes that took place from 1973 to 1988. Empirically, however, the public's assessment of how much money should be spent on public goods hardly seems to have budged. In virtually all spending categories, the mean deviation over the period is on the order of the variation expected due to sampling error.

How can we account for this remarkable stability? The answer does not lie in the conventional economic explanation. Judging by the end result, the process by which people determine how much money should be spent on a particular public good is not rational in the usual sense. Individuals do not, apparently, attempt to calculate the marginal utility of the *n*th increment of spending for each program or activity. If this were the case, attitudes would almost certainly be more responsive to actual spending patterns, both across programs and over time, than appears to be the case. Instead, these policy-related attitudes appear to be a function of rather general orientations, what Sears et al. (1980) call "stable affective preferences," that tend to be quite stable over time.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the results in Table 4.1 are more representative of a rough rank ordering of public priorities for government spending than they are detailed calculations of the expected value of marginal changes in spending for each program or activity. In a narrow sense, then, the critics of surveys are right when they say that the polls

Figure 4.1. Typology of Support for "Public Goods"

		Normative/Affective Valuation	
		Positive	Negative
Logical/ Empirical Valuation	Gain	High	Mixed
	Loss	Mixed	Low

cannot be taken at face value. But it is a mistake to dismiss the results as meaningless. The challenge is to locate and correctly interpret their meaning.

The interpretation I shall argue for here is socioeconomic in nature: viz., that these general orientations toward public goods are the product of interaction along two dimensions of valuation. The first consists of individual perceptions of probable net gain or loss from spending changes in a public good—that is, considerations of conventional self-interest. The second dimension consists of reactions to the desirability or worthiness of the public good itself based on the normative or affective associations it possesses. Following Etzioni (1988), I refer to these as, respectively, the *logical-empirical* (L/E) and *normative-affective* (N/A) dimensions.

Figure 4.1 shows a simple typology based on the interaction between the L/E and N/A dimensions of valuation.<sup>10</sup> Where L/E and N/A valuations reinforce one another, the net effect is clear-cut. For example, where a positive N/A valuation is combined with a positive L/E perception, a high level of public support is virtually assured. Spending to protect Social Security and improve health care and education fall into this category. All are widely regarded as inherently desirable goods that individuals are likely to view as beneficial to themselves and their families or their communities. As discussed in more detail below, efforts to protect the environment have similarly come to be widely regarded as positive along both N/A and L/E dimensions.

Where negative N/A valuations coincide with negative perceived L/E effects, overall public support is likely to be low. Welfare and foreign aid are both goods that have tended to have negative N/A associations, and for a majority of Americans neither is perceived as contributing positively to self-interest.

Where L/E and N/A valuations cross-cut one another, public support is less predictable. The combination of positive N/A and negative L/E produces a mixed pattern of support. For example, "helping the poor" evokes an extraordi-

narily high level of public support, while "space exploration" falls near the bottom of the list. In the proposed typology both are assumed to have positive N/A loadings, in the sense of being viewed as desirable activities, but both are likely to be generally perceived as negative in terms of L/E effect. So why such different levels of support? The difference, it seems, lies in the strength of the N/A factors involved. In American society, "helping the poor" is not only normative behavior, it carries overtones of moral duty as well. Exploring space, on the other hand, may be thought of as worthwhile, but it may also be viewed as a luxury that the nation can ill afford—and it certainly does not suggest any moral imperative.

The combination of negative N/A and positive L/E also tends to produce a mixed pattern. On the GSS items concerning efforts to fight crime and drug addiction, negative N/A loadings manage to coexist with widespread willingness among the public to spend more money. A plausible explanation is that fear of crime and drugs (negative N/A) contributes to the perception that increased spending might lessen the danger to oneself and one's property (positive L/E). In the case of military spending, however, public support for spending was low for nearly the entire period between 1973 and 1988. The only exception occurred in the 1980 GSS, when the endorsement for increases in military and defense spending shot up to 60 percent. The fact that 1980 was a year marked by heightened tensions in the Middle East, focused around the highly emotional issue of American hostages held captive in Iran and the recent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, is likely significant. It suggests that L/E perceptions of self-interest, in this case the threat to national security, and N/A associations (hating the Ayatollah and, perhaps, the Russians by loving the military) can change rapidly in the face of external events. But they can also change back again: in 1982 the proportion of the GSS national sample supporting increases in defense spending dropped back to 28 percent, about where it had stood in 1978 before the crises.

A few public goods do not appear to fit neatly into the typology. For example, public support for roads and bridges, and parks and recreation is lower than expected given the imputed positive N/A, positive L/E combination. This may be due to low intensity of the N/A loading or some ambiguity in the L/E valuation, neither of which is captured by the dichotomies of this simple typology.<sup>11</sup> In addition, as suggested by the volatility of attitudes toward military spending from 1978 to 1982, the location of items may change depending on circumstances or interpretation. Such illustrations underline the preliminary and exploratory nature of this effort. Nonetheless, the typology serves to demonstrate the advantages of incorporating both logical-empirical and normative-affective factors in the analysis of public goods.

To reject the narrow, self-interested model of rational choice is not, however, to embrace diametrically opposed assumptions that solidarity or moral commitment are exclusive determinants of behavior. A model in which individuals evaluate public goods solely in terms of perceived effect on the common good,

giving no weight whatsoever to considerations of individual gain or loss fares little better than the unmodified rational choice model. As seen in the next section, a model of economic behavior codetermined by self-interest and normative factors not only accounts for much of the aggregate pattern of attitudes toward public goods, it also provides a good basis for explaining the distribution of attitudes within the population.

### *Case Studies in the Relative Impact of L/E and N/A Factors*

The case studies included in this section explore in greater detail the interaction and relative impact of L/E and N/A valuations in shaping attitudes toward a range of public goods. The examples included in this section probe the effects of solidarity, normative values, and moral commitment as explanations of variations within the general orientations toward public goods discussed in the preceding section.

#### *Support for Welfare among Blacks*

For most Americans welfare carries strongly negative associations along both N/A and L/E dimensions. The low level of public support for more welfare spending (refer again to Table 4.1) is consistent with the negative esteem in which public assistance programs aimed at the nonelderly, nondisabled poor are held.<sup>12</sup> The only significant exception to the American public's unwillingness to spend more on welfare is found among blacks as a group, individuals in low-income families, and people who have been unemployed in the last five years. Since all of these conditions are associated with increased likelihood of actually receiving welfare benefits, and there is potentially considerable overlap among these conditions, the first task is to disentangle the relative effects of each.

Because of the small number of categories on the dependent variable, and other violations of assumptions of ordinary least squares regression, a series of logit regressions were run using dependent dummy variables representing, respectively, "too little" and "too much" spent on welfare (see Cleary and Angel 1984). The independent variables included were race (coded as a dummy variable including only blacks and whites, excluding a small number of respondents of "other" races), total family income, recent unemployment, subjective social class identification, political views (measured by the respondent's self-location on a scale running from extremely liberal to extremely conservative), and total years of education. The last three variables, for reasons explained below, are treated as controls. To achieve a large enough subsample of blacks, GSS samples for the years 1983 to 1988 were pooled prior to running the regressions.

The results, shown in Table 4.2, point toward a codetermination model to explain both support for and opposition to welfare spending. Income and unemployment both represent a component of self-interest. To the extent that individ-

Table 4.2

### **Attitudes toward Spending for Welfare, 1984-88**

Variables	Logit regression coefficient (standard error)	
	Current spending is "too little"	Current spending is "too much"
Race	0.426** (0.087)	-0.365** (0.094)
Political views	-0.118** (0.025)	0.088** (0.022)
Income	-0.053** (0.012)	0.060** (0.012)
Unemployed in the past 5 years	0.155* (0.070)	0.067 (0.062)
Social class identification	-0.064 (0.054)	-0.015 (0.048)
Education	0.003 (0.012)	-0.021* (0.011)
Intercept	5.702** (0.223)	4.106** (0.197)

Source: NORC, General Social Surveys.

Note: 5 added to intercept and logit divided by 2; \*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

uals are low income and recently unemployed, they are more likely to perceive welfare as a program of potential benefit to them.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, those with high incomes and no unemployment experience will likely see little or no personal advantage in the welfare system. The magnitude and sign of the logit regression coefficients of income and unemployment in Table 4.2 bear out this interpretation.

The influence of race on attitudes toward welfare spending, however, remains significant apart from any indirect effects attributable to income and unemployment. Variables measuring education, social class identification, and political views were included as controls, in the sense that the correlation of each variable with race raised the possibility of confounding the net effect of race. In the full model, race nonetheless retains significance as a determinant of both "too little" and "too much" responses.

I interpret this result as evidence of some degree of solidarity among blacks with respect to welfare, in the sense that black support for welfare contains a component that does not represent either individual economic self-interest, generalized liberal views, class consciousness per se, or cognitive differences associated with education. There is, of course, an inferential leap from the finding that race retains a strong independent statistical effect and the interpretation that the source of this effect is solidarity among blacks. The implicit link between the

two is the assumption that blacks continue to support welfare even when they personally do not benefit from it because they perceive welfare to be a benefit to blacks as a group.

Some indirect evidence in support of the solidarity hypothesis comes from a question asked of black respondents only in the 1982 GSS about product boycotts. Asked whether they had ever stopped buying certain products because of the way a company or country has treated blacks, over a quarter (28 percent) of all blacks and nearly half (46 percent) of those with at least some college education responded yes. This figure seems surprisingly high, given the absence of any highly publicized product boycotts involving blacks. To be sure, various trade embargoes and institutional boycotts of South Africa have received widespread attention in recent years, but outside of shunning South African diamonds and gold coins, there would appear to be few opportunities for individual blacks to participate in these efforts.

Additional support for the solidarity hypothesis is found below in the analysis of support for income redistribution.

#### *Support for Income Redistribution: Blacks versus Whites*

In narrow economic terms, the issue of income redistribution is approximately the same as that of welfare spending, and so the perception of L/E interests should be substantially the same in both cases. In terms of N/A associations, however, income redistribution is mostly free from the negative moral overtones associated with welfare. The first question, then, is whether or not this difference makes a difference.

The results shown in Table 4.3 suggest fundamental differences in the respective patterns of response to income distribution and welfare spending—differences that cannot be explained solely by the slightly differing formats of the two items. Faced with the choice between government action to reduce income differences between the rich and poor and no such action, the 1978 GSS sample expressed a plurality preference in favor of redistribution.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, excluding neutral responses and don't-knows, the proportion of the entire sample supporting income redistribution was over 60 percent. Among black support, the corresponding figure was more than 80 percent.

Table 4.3 shows that attitudes toward income redistribution are strongly associated with income among whites but not among blacks. Among whites, nearly thirty percentage points divide support in the lowest income group from the highest income group (74.3 percent for those making less than \$5,000 per year versus 44.9 percent for those making \$20,000 or more, in 1978 dollars). In contrast, among blacks the differences in responses at extremes of income are negligible (80.3 versus 77.2 percent).

The interpretation of these findings is straightforward and strongly supportive of the solidarity hypothesis. American blacks support government efforts to nar-

Table 4.3

#### **Support for Income Redistribution, ca. 1978**

	Income <sup>a</sup>					Refused	Total
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)		
United States (N =)	74.3 (167)	71.0 (217)	64.5 (217)	58.5 (176)	44.9 (323)	54.5 (33)	60.4 (1133)
Blacks <sup>b</sup> (N =)	80.3 (147)	81.6 (136)	91.0 (89)	82.3 (62)	77.2 (149)	88.9 (18)	81.9 (601)
Sweden (N =)	91.5 (213)	88.8 (295)	84.6 (280)	84.4 (250)	73.0 (389)	83.9 (174)	83.3 (1601)

Source: NORC, General Social Surveys (for United States); Verba et al. (1987), unpublished data (for Sweden).

<sup>a</sup> Total annual family income: (1) less than \$5,000 or SEK 50,000; (2) \$5,000–\$9,999 or SEK 50,000–69,999; (3) \$10,000–\$14,999 or SEK 70,000–89,999; (4) \$15,000–\$19,999 or SEK 90,000–109,000; (5) \$20,000 or more, or SEK 110,000 or more.

<sup>b</sup> Pooled black subsamples, 1978–86.

row income differences even at higher income levels where as individuals they will probably not benefit and may well be hurt by such action. White support for income redistribution, in contrast, decreases monotonically as a function of economic self-interest. In sum, for blacks the prominent explanation is solidarity (N/A), while for whites self-interest (L/E) plays a more important role.

But there is one more point that should not be overlooked: some 45 percent (excluding don't-know responses) of the highest-income whites in the 1978 GSS survey expressed some support for income redistribution. While low by comparison to less affluent whites and blacks of all income levels, this figure is high if judged solely in terms of economic self-interest. The conclusion that suggests itself is that income redistribution, like other public goods, has an N/A component that mediates the effect of L/E considerations and raises the baseline of public support above the level expected on the basis of simple rational choice.

#### *Support for Income Redistribution: United States versus Sweden*

The normative dimension of income redistribution, and by inference other public goods, can be further illustrated by comparing the GSS responses on income redistribution to data from a survey conducted in Sweden in 1978 by Verba et al. (1987).<sup>15</sup> As shown in Table 4.3, the U.S. and Swedish responses to very similar questions concerning income redistribution differed in two important ways. First, the overall level of support for redistributive policies is much higher among

Swedes than among Americans (83.3 percent versus 60.4 percent, respectively). Although some allowance needs to be made for minor methodological differences between the surveys, other studies have reached similar conclusions about the broad support for the welfare state in Sweden (e.g., Hadenius 1986; Svallfors 1989). Second, the relationship between income and attitudes toward redistribution is weaker among the Swedish sample than in the American sample. Although higher-income Swedes favor income redistribution less than those of lower income, the total spread across income categories is only about two-thirds of that found in the GSS sample (18.5 points for Sweden, 29.6 for the United States).

These patterns suggest that although attitudes in both nations appear to be codetermined by N/A and L/E factors, the N/A factors have a greater impact in Sweden than in the United States. Put another way, the "general orientation" toward income redistribution in Sweden tilts more in the direction of norms and values emphasizing economic and social equality, which serves to attenuate expressions of narrow economic self-interest. In the United States, the general orientation toward income redistribution is located more toward the ideological center, allowing more competition among conflicting norms and values concerning equality and collectivism, leaving self-interest more room to operate, as it were.

Qualitatively, the argument for Swedish solidarity is further supported by the efforts that Social Democratic governments have assiduously promoted for the nearly sixty years they have been in power (Heclo and Madsen 1987; Logue and Einhorn 1989). These efforts have succeeded in fostering a high degree of support for collectivist principles of the welfare state (Zetterberg 1979; Hadenius 1986; Milner 1989; Svallfors 1989). In addition, it has been suggested that Sweden's small size, high degree of ethnolinguistic homogeneity, and high degree of unionization have all conduced to the development of a higher degree of solidarity than is found in other industrialized nations (Stephens 1979).<sup>16</sup> For purposes of this analysis, it is sufficient to note the strong role that N/A factors play in constraining manifestations of narrow self-interest.

#### *Attitudes toward Abortion for the Poor*

Abortion is usually thought of as a political issue or a moral question, and it is not often discussed in economic terms. An economic dimension of abortion was tapped, however, in the GSS item probing attitudes toward legalized abortion under circumstances where the family "has a very low income and cannot afford to have more children." Whether or not the question on abortion and low income was intended to tap the question of economic costs, there are indications that this is how it was perceived by some respondents. Approval of abortion for the poor shows a moderate positive correlation with income ( $r = 0.10$ ), with about a 15-point spread between the highest and lowest income categories. This relation-

Table 4.4

#### **Approval of Legal Abortion for the Poor, 1984-88**

Variables	Logit regression coefficient (standard error)
Frequency of church attendance	-0.109** (0.006)
Education	0.067** (0.006)
Catholic	-0.437** (0.066)
Protestant	-0.393** (0.061)
Political views	-0.079** (0.012)
Sex	0.096* (0.032)
Income	0.017* (0.006)
Race	-0.041 (0.045)
Intercept	4.874** (0.122)

Source: NORC, General Social Surveys.

Note: 5 added to intercept and logit divided by 2; \*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.01$ .

ship can readily be interpreted in terms of a simple (if somewhat cynical) economic self-interest argument: upper-income groups disproportionately approve abortion for the poor as a means of reducing the future number of children added to the public assistance rolls.

A series of logit regressions were conducted to test the multivariate effect of income and other determinants of abortion attitudes suggested by previous research.<sup>17</sup> In addition to income, variables representing education, sex, race, and religion were included in the model. Two different measures of religion were introduced: dummy variables representing respondent self-identification as a Catholic or Protestant, and a simple measure of the frequency of church attendance. Finally, as in the analysis of welfare attitudes, the measure of political views was introduced as a control variable.

The results of the regression analysis, shown in Table 4.4, indicate that even in the presence of powerful determinants, income retains statistically significant explanatory power on attitudes toward abortion for the poor. But income is by no means the most important variable in the model. Church attendance and education exert powerful, opposing influences on abortion attitudes, followed by religious affiliation (independent of church attendance),



political views, and gender. Race adds nothing to the explanatory power of the model.

In one sense, these results are not surprising. That abortion is fundamentally a question of normative values and moral commitment has been driven home by more than a decade of intense debate and bitter conflict. Those most likely to oppose abortion for the poor—but not only for the poor—are members of religious congregations in which opposition to abortion is based on moral and theological grounds, who practice their religion by attending church often, and who define themselves as political conservatives. In contrast, those mostly likely to support the availability of abortion tend to be highly educated, female, and political liberals, for whom the right to choose may also be an important matter of principle.<sup>18</sup>

In the clash of these opposing positions, economic costs and benefits (L/E) are not likely to be accorded much importance. However, our results indicate that income (L/E) retains some explanatory power in the presence of powerful N/A variables. The lesson here seems to be that where moral commitment or deeply held normative values are at stake, as they are in the abortion question, the calculation of marginal economic costs and benefits plays only a minor role—but a role nonetheless.

#### *Support for Environmental Protection*

Since emerging as a political issue in the 1960s, environmentalism has gained prominence in the public debate in the United States and other industrialized nations. The new issue of protecting the natural environment has given rise to new expressions of common interest and normative value orientations organized around a consciousness of interdependence (Mitchell 1988)—the idea that the planet is a fragile ecosystem of which humanity is only a part and on which it is no less dependent for survival than are rain forests, humpback whales, or bald eagles. In socioeconomic terms, environmentalism may provide the basis for the definition of a new “We.” Compare the subtle but crucial difference in the connotations of the following two statements:

“Protect *the* environment.”

“Protect *our* environment.”

One indicator of the growing importance of environmental issues is the high level of public support for increased spending found in the 1973–88 GSS (refer again to Table 4.1). As discussed above, a plausible explanation of the support environmentalism has enjoyed is the confluence of a strongly positive N/A loading with an emergent positive L/E perception of the issue. Protecting the environment has for some time been seen as an inherently good thing, but only recently has a widespread awareness developed that it may be to everyone’s rational long-term interest to protect the planet’s biosphere against destruction.

Table 4.5

#### Attitudes toward Spending to Protect the Environment, 1984–88

Variables	Logit regression coefficient (standard error)	
	Current spending is “too little”	Current spending is “too much”
Age	−0.011** (0.001)	0.009** (0.003)
Political views	−0.110** (0.016)	0.115** (0.034)
Size of community	0.0001** (0.00003)	−0.0001 (0.0001)
Education	−0.018* (0.008)	−0.019 (0.016)
Income	0.011 (0.008)	0.011 (0.017)
Race	0.012 (0.064)	−0.237 (0.159)
Intercept	5.894** (0.151)	2.788** (0.324)

Source: NORC, General Social Surveys.

Note: 5 added to intercept and logit divided by 2; \*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.01$ .

To explore the underpinnings of attitudes toward protecting the environment, a series of logit regressions were run using pooled data from the 1984–88 GSS. Two dummy variables were created as dependent variables, representing “too much” and “too little” responses to the question about spending “to protect the environment.” Included as independent variables were income, education, age, size of community, race, and political views.<sup>19</sup>

The results of the logit regression analysis are shown in Table 4.5. In the case of both “too little” and “too much” responses, age and political views have the biggest impact. Size of place and education show up as significant for the “too little” response, but not for “too much.” Income and race show no significant effects. These results are consistent with the image that is commonly attached to proponents of environmental issues: young, urban, and well educated; but not, according to these results, disproportionately high income or white.

What is the balance between narrow self-interest and a “consciousness” of environmental responsibility? The answer lies in how one chooses to interpret the empirical findings. It might be argued that the negative relationship between age and support for environmental protection is a result of rational calculation: older members of the population have, so to speak, discounted the future value of a clean environment. Similarly, the tendency of those who live in urban areas to support spending for the environment might be explained in terms of

self-interest, on the grounds that pollution is arguably more serious a problem in big cities than in rural areas.

The other interpretation is that concern for the environment is an emerging issue, one that has been embraced first by the vanguard segments of the population—the young, urban, educated—and so represents the wave of the future. As discussed above, environmental protection is already one of the most widely supported public goods in the United States. Indications are that this trend will continue, if not accelerate, in the future, due to continued degradation of the natural environment (Mitchell 1980). If this occurs, it will be due in large part to a coalescence of a potent new normative orientation with a decidedly novel transnational expression of solidarity.

### Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the contrasts and complementarities of neoclassical and sociological approaches to explaining economic behavior. I have argued that the variables omitted from neoclassical models, namely social solidarity and its normative concomitants, are essential to understanding attitudes toward public goods and, by inference, other types of economic behavior. Conversely, conventional sociological models have not dealt adequately with individual-level variables, including the pursuit of self-interest, that also play a role in explaining attitudes toward public goods.

To conclude the discussion, I will address some remarks to the implications for further development of an explicitly socioeconomic theory. The propositions offered below serve both to formalize somewhat the conclusions drawn from the main body of the paper and to suggest hypotheses for future research in socio-economics.

First, the analysis strongly supports the basic position of socio-economics, viz., that behavior is codetermined by individually centered and collectively centered concerns (cf. Etzioni 1988, p. 63ff.). In more formal terms, this proposition can be stated as follows:

*Economic behavior and other types of behavior take place in a field defined by the interaction of (a) individual concerns ("self-interest"), and (b) collective concerns (i.e., affiliations, obligations, and/or commitments to the collectivity). These dimensions are represented, respectively, by L/E and N/A factors.<sup>20</sup>*

Each group identity and network of social relationships potentially defines a different set of common interests and normative value orientations. These elements vary in strength, content, and form. In modern societies they are manifold, overlapping, and often cross-cutting; there is little reason to expect that patterns in one field will necessarily extend to other fields (i.e., transitivity cannot be assumed). In other words,

*Interaction between L/E and N/A factors is not uniform across all fields of economic behavior. Empirically, the following combinations are possible:*

- a) L/E is a first approximation to explain some behavior; introducing N/A variables adds little or nothing to the explanatory power of the model.*
- b) L/E is the first approximation; introducing N/A variables significantly improves the explanatory power of the model.*
- c) N/A is the first approximation; introducing L/E variables has little or no effect.*
- d) N/A is the first approximation; introducing L/E considerations significantly improves the model.*

The balance between L/E and N/A factors is not predetermined, and may be subject both to cross-sectional and longitudinal variation. In the case studies of public goods conducted above, attitudes toward welfare and income distribution are consistent with *b)*, while attitudes toward abortion tend to fit *c)*. Attitudes toward environmental protection might be described by either *b)* or *d)*, depending on how one defines L/E factors in this instance. The absence of an empirical example in this paper reflecting *a)* is likely due to the sample of survey items available for analysis. Conceptually, *a)* represents the pure market relations approximated in many economic transactions.

Third, codetermination of behavior, in which both L/E and N/A factors exert some independent influence, is a common, perhaps modal, condition. All other things being equal, however, the two factors tend to be inversely related, so that:

*L/E factors tend to gain explanatory power as N/A factors diminish within a particular field as a result of conditions that weaken the social bonds and normative values and moral commitment within a collectivity;*

and,

*L/E factors tend to recede and N/A factors gain explanatory power within a particular field as a result of conditions that strengthen the social bonds and/or normative values and moral commitment within a collectivity.*

In simple terms, the hypothesis is that the more solidary the group (in terms of group identities, social networks, and normative integration), the less expressions of narrow self-interest will predominate. Conversely, the less solidary the group, the more self-interest will tend to take on importance. While both hypotheses receive some support from the empirical case studies in this paper, further research using other data and methodologies is clearly needed to develop this model more fully.

Finally, this analysis has implications for the attempt to extend the concept of rationality to include N/A and L/E factors on an equal basis. Such a socially constructed conception of rationality would allow for more than one possible "rational" response to a given situation based on the specific content and interaction of N/A and L/E factors.<sup>21</sup> Such a formulation might well serve as a bridge between neoclassical economics and sociology and other social sciences. It

would certainly be applicable to the public goods problem addressed above, but its usefulness might well extend to other types of economic behavior that appear to defy neoclassical assumptions. Possible examples of socially rational (but economically "irrational") behavior include the curious wagering habits Geertz (1973) describes in Balinese cockfighting, or the apparently uneconomical purchasing habits of Japanese consumers (*The Economist* 1987). By expanding the concept of what behavior is deemed rational in any given social setting, socio-economics can begin to rehabilitate Sen's (1977) "rational fool," making the Economic Person less of a "social moron."

## Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference on Socio-Economics, Harvard Business School, March 31–April 2, 1989, and the Meetings of the Pacific Sociological Association, April 13–16, 1989, in Reno, Nevada. I would like to thank Paul DiMaggio, Robert Fiala, and Henry Milner for their comments and suggestions.
2. See Hechter's (1987) discussion of this issue.
3. Durkheim (1964) made much of the rigid moral uniformity of small homogeneous communities. The notion of perfect congruence between individual volition and collective need can also be found in Rousseau's concept of the General Will. On this point, Dahl states, "In a solidary community, egoism is indistinguishable from altruism. One's interests are those of the community; the interests of the community are one's own" (1980, p. 4).
4. In the neoclassical literature, altruism is typically invoked to account for behavior that departs from self-interest. While a few neoclassical theorists have steadfastly sought to reduce altruistic behavior to individual utility maximization (e.g., Hammond 1975; Kurz 1977), the majority seem willing to allow that under some circumstances individuals may act to forgo some utility for the benefit of others. In Becker (1981), for example, altruism amounts to solidarity: the family is a solidary unit.
5. Sen (1977, p. 326) argues that such altruism ("sympathy") is consistent with neoclassical assumptions, since "pleased at others' pleasure and pained at others' pain . . . one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action." This may be true, but the question remains, what makes an individual "pleased" or "pained" by someone else's condition?
6. A "public good" is a good provided through collective action that has widely distributed benefits. A "pure public good" is one from which no individual can be excluded.
7. The prospect of a society without any coercion ignores a variety of benign social controls, such as traffic lights, without which social life would be chaotic.
8. I do not mean to imply that linking program benefits to costs (e.g., an increase in taxes) would not provide useful information. My point is that even in the absence of an explicit statement of costs, the relative ranking of programs is clear and remarkably stable.
9. See Green (1988) for a critical review of self-interest in political behavior.
10. This typology is similar to the one I proposed to explain levels of public support of social welfare programs in eight industrialized societies (Coughlin 1980, p. 122).
11. Nor does this simple typology make allowance for such potentially important variables as individual attentiveness to issues and access to accurate information (Green 1988).

12. The term "welfare" is most often associated with the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, although at times it may also include food stamps and other public assistance programs. See Coughlin (1989) for a review of negative welfare myths and stereotypes.

13. In one survey the GSS asked respondents if they had actually received welfare in the past five years. This variable turned out to be very highly correlated with recent unemployment experience and behaved in essentially the same way in the regression analysis. The unemployment question, which was asked in every year of the GSS, was used in the final regressions because of the much larger number of cases it yielded.

14. The year 1978 was chosen to allow comparison with the corresponding data for Sweden.

15. Verba and his colleagues did not publish the mass sample survey data in their book. They have generously made the raw data available for secondary analysis.

16. Whether or not one accepts the solidarity argument in its fullest form, it is clear that the public debate in Sweden over income equality and related issues is strongly influenced by normative factors that act to buffer expressions of crude economic individualism. Related issues, such as public disenchantment with high taxes and excessive bureaucracy (see Hadenius 1986; Svallfors 1989) are important, but remain beyond the scope of this paper.

17. For a review of the determinants of attitudes toward abortion, see Rodman et al. (1987), and Hall and Marx Ferree (1986).

18. Some inherent tension between normative commitments and individual self-interest is not restricted to one side of the ideological spectrum. In the debate over legalized abortion, for example, pro-choice ideology derives its inspiration and internal logic from feminist theory, which links the individual woman's "right to choose" to the emancipation of women as a class—an essentially solidaristic ideology. The trend in American public opinion on abortion since *Roe v. Wade*, however, can be just as readily explained in terms of rational choice by women who seek to minimize the costs imposed by an unwanted pregnancy.

19. The choice of independent variables was suggested by various studies, including Dunlap (1985), Gillroy and Shapiro (1984), and Mohai and Twight (1987). Preliminary attempts to include a variable reflecting respondents' type of work were abandoned because of problems with the GSS industry codes.

20. See Etzioni (1988) for an in-depth discussion of L/E and N/A concerns. The concepts of individually centered and collectively centered factors are similar to Margolis's (1982) utility functions of *S* (utility from the point of view pure self-interest) and *G* (utility from the point of view of pure group-interest).

21. Cf. Taylor (1988) on the concept of "thin" and "thick" rationality.

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