George C. Homans, a sophisticated and urbane social psychologist, identifies himself professionally as a sociologist. Neither the subtlety of his description of human values and human sentiments nor his professional identity would suggest that he would find in Skinnerian psychology a congenial set of explanatory principles for his own views of elementary social behavior. Homans explains his attraction to the Skinnerian orientation in terms of his own felt necessity to find higher-order propositions from which the empirical findings of small-group research, social anthropology and history (the three fields in which he has done research) could be derived. He uses the admittedly horrible term "ultimate psychological reductionism" to characterize his view that the ultimate explanatory principles in anthropology and sociology, and for that matter in history ... are psychological" (1962, p. 61). His selection of the Skinnerian system rather than some other psychological viewpoint is possibly a result of the accidental circumstance that Homans and Skinner were well-acquainted, both being members of the Harvard Society of Fellows. Oddly enough, though expressing his intellectual indebtedness to Skinner, he disregards Skinner's unique contributions to psychology (most notably, his studies of the effects of partial reinforcement) and utilizes, essentially, Thorndike's "Law of Effect" which is a premise underlying the work of Skinner and many other learning theorists. In any case, in swallowing Skinner's system, Homans seems to have chewed it beyond clear recognition.
Homan’s interest is in elementary social behavior: the face-to-face contact between individuals, in which the reward or punishment each gets from the behavior of the others is relatively direct and immediate. In his view, the most convenient locale for studying such behavior is in small groups and, thus, the data he draws upon are largely from observational and experimental studies of small groups. In The Human Group (HOMANS, 1950), he examined five detailed field studies of human groups to see what basic classes the observations could be divided into and what propositions could be inferred about the relations among the classes of variables. Four basic categories were employed: activity (a kind of behavior), sentiment (an activity that is a sign of attitudes and feelings), interaction (occurs when an activity of one person is rewarded or punished by an activity of another), and norm (a statement by group members of how members ought to behave in certain circumstances).

Homans employed his concepts to state a number of generalizations based upon the field studies. Three of his well-known propositions are cited below:

"... the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of friendship for one another are apt to be." (1950, p. 133).

"... persons who interact with one another frequently are more like one another in their activities than they are like other persons with whom they interact less frequently." (1950, p. 135)

"... the higher the rank of a person within a group, the more nearly his activities conform to the norms of the group." (1950, p. 141)
It is evident that these propositions like most in The Human Group, are consistent with much experimental evidence and with everyday experience. However, there would be no difficulty in citing exceptions and counterevidence to them. These empirical generalizations are, thus, not scientific laws but rather expressions of frequently observed relationships between variables; the contingent conditions determining the occurrence or non-occurrence of the expected relationship being unspecified. Quite aware of the limitations of his empirical generalizations in The Human Group, Homans searched for an underlying set of explanatory principles, finding them in behavioral psychology and elementary economics. He characterizes his fundamental premise in three words (1961, p. 13): "Briefly, behavioral psychology and elementary economics envisage human behavior as a function of its pay-off; in amount and kind it depends on the amount and kind of reward and punishment it fetches ... Thus the set of general propositions I shall use ... envisages social behavior as an exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons."

Homans enumerates five basic propositions from which he believes the empirical findings of social psychological research can be explained. These are:

1. "If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus situation has been the occasion on which a man's activity has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimulus situation is to the past one, the more likely he is to emit the activity, or some similar activity now." (1961, p. 53)
(2) "The more often within a given period of time a man's activity
rewards the activity of another, the more often the other will emit the
activity." (1961, p. 54)

(3) "The more valuable to a man a unit of the activity another
gives him, the more often he will emit activity rewarded by the activity
of the other. (1961, p. 55) ("Value" here refers to the degree of rein-
forcement that is received from a unit of another's activity. "Cost"
refers to the value obtainable through an alternate activity which is
foregone in emitting the present activity. Profit = Reward minus Cost.)

(4) "The more often a man has in the recent past received a reward-
ing activity from another, the less valuable any further unit of that activ-
ity becomes to him." (1961, p. 55)

(5) "The more to a man's disadvantage the rule of distributive jus-
tice fails of realization, the more likely he is to display the emotional
behavior we call anger." (1961, p. 75) (The "rule of distributive justice"
is stated so: "A man in an exchange relation with another will expect that
the rewards of each man be proportional to his costs - the greater the re-
wards, the greater the costs - and that the net rewards, or profits, of
each man be proportional to his investments - the greater the investments,
the greater the profit.")

The first four propositions of Homans are attempts to restate in
everyday language a Skinnerian viewpoint about the interrelated effects
of deprivation or satiation and of frequency and quality of reinforcement
upon the frequency and rate of a given behavior. The fifth is unadul-
terated Homans. (It is curious to note that the second proposition which
links frequency of emitted behavior to frequency of reward is inconsis-
tent with one of Skinner's most notable research contributions to psy-
chology - his demonstration of the more potent effects of intermittent
as compared with continuous reinforcement in delaying the extinction of a response.)

These propositions, collectively, are used to explain many aspects of social behavior. One gets the flavor of his analysis of social behavior as an exchange of valued activities by considering the reward-cost contingencies that are involved in an encounter between two people, "A" and "B." With regard to any act, it is relevant to think of its cost to the producer and its reward-value to its consumer. Thus, if "A" asks "B" for help, this act costs "A" a certain amount (by his admission of inadequacy or inferiority) and rewards "B" a certain amount (by the recognition of his superiority); if "B" supplies "A" with help, this will cost "B" (by his putting off some other potentially-rewarding activity while helping "A") and reward "A" (by being helped) certain amounts. From the basic propositions, one can infer plausibly that the exchange will not continue unless both are making profits from the interaction. (Homans does not suggest that the profits, jointly or individually, have to be maximized.) Moreover, his proposition about distributive justice (or fair exchange) implies that if the investments or social statuses of the interactors are equal, the profits should be equal; if the investments or social statuses (e.g., age, sex, seniority, acquired skill) are different, the profits of each should be proportional to his status. Thus, presumably, a boss should profit more than his subordinate in an interaction with his subordinate. Similarly, the ability and willingness to supply services for others that are in short supply (i.e., to supply valuable activities) will lead others to return high esteem; doing so, maintains a fair exchange. For high value received, men will return high esteem.
Homans indicates (1961, p. 264) that: "As a practical matter, distributive justice is realized when each of the various features of his investments and his activities, put into rank-order in comparison with those of other men, fall in the same place in all the different rank-orders. This condition which we call status congruence, is not only the condition of distributive justice but also that of social certitude: the status of a man in this condition is secure, established, unambiguous in the eyes of his fellows ... Congruence facilitates social ease in the interaction among men, and ... should encourage their joint efficiency."

Homans assumes that incongruence of status produces conflicting stimuli. For example, a father who acts as a buddy to his son presumably confuses the son and makes it likely that some of his responses to his father will be inappropriate; these inappropriate responses will, in turn, annoy or frustrate the father. Thus, status incongruence is a generator of social friction.

Homans applies his basic propositions to varied social phenomena by suggesting a wide range of activities which can be rewarding — e.g., approval, agreement, change of opinion to conform with the opinion of another, esteem, similarity, help, status congruence, cohesiveness. Thus, he interprets the research of Festinger and his co-workers on social influence as being supportive of his view of social behavior as exchange. Their finding that more cohesive groups can influence deviant group members to change their opinions more, he renders as "the more valuable the activities that members get, the more valuable that they must give."

That is, for the deviate to continue to receive the valuable sentiments and activities that relate to group cohesiveness, he must return the
rewarding activity of agreement. If the deviate fails to reinforce the others by changing his opinion so as to agree with them, they will withhold social approval and communication from him.

From the proposition that a person will emit an activity the more he is rewarded for it, Homans develops a number of corollaries about social interaction. If one assumes that the more people like one another the more likely they are to reward the acts of one another with approval, then - Homans points out - it follows that the more they like one another the more they will interact. Also, if receiving approval for an act leads one to give approval, then it also follows that the more a person interacts with another the more he likes him. Homans elaborates his hypotheses about interaction by assuming that men differ in their ability to reward others. A man who controls scarce resources (e.g., ability, experience, wealth) is able to provide more valuable rewards and will, thus, obtain high esteem. As a result, he is likely to receive more interactions directed to him than a man of lower esteem. Since, by definition, rare and valuable services are controlled by few, only few can come to be esteemed highly. Requests, esteem, obedience, and loyalty flow to the few from the many while advice, valuable services, orders, and emotional support go from the few to the many. The costs of giving and receiving orders, advice, etc. are such that they introduce ambivalence in the relationships between leader and follower, introducing a tendency to avoid interaction in the social sphere with people who differ in status in the public sphere of life (the sphere "in which esteem is won and lost").
The preceding summary of the central ideas in Homans's work does little justice to the sophistication and insightfulness of his writing. Interlaced among his systematic generalizations are perceptive comments and subtle elaborations and qualifications which shed much light on the intricacies of social life. Moreover, his delightful and elegant prose neatly conceals the rough and ragged edges of his theoretical formulations.

However, if we look at his theoretical statements per se, it is evident that they have a number of defects. As Homans points out his theory has two main variables: the value of a unit of activity and the number of such units received within a period of time. His theory implies that there is common currency or a single dimension to which the value of different experience (e.g., "getting a B+ on an exam," "being kissed by one's sweetheart," "hearing a Beethoven quartet," "being served a cold beer") can be coordinated so that the value of a "unit" of one such activity received can be compared with the value of another unit. If there is such a common currency of "value" it has not yet been identified nor have methods of unitizing activity been worked out (e.g., Is it the kiss or the date which is the unit? Is the symphony or the movement the unit?) Nor can Homans, without being circular, say that value is measured by the frequency of acts emitted after an act has been reinforced by rewarding a person with a given value. He cannot do this because he indicates that he has not tried to answer the question of how values are acquired or, in other words, what (apart from immediate deprivation or satiation) determines the value of an act. That is, without some conceptual and empirical definition of reinforcement, Homans is in the posi-
tion of defining a value as that which is valued, paralleling the Skinner-
ian circularity of a reinforcer as that which reinforces. Lacking any
clearcut definition of his basic terms, Homans employs them in their ev-
everyday meanings, stretching them to fit the particular research he cites.
As a result, there is an ad hoc quality to the research findings that he
uses as evidence supporting his basic propositions and their corollaries.

Let me illustrate. Homans cites, amongst others, my study of co-
operation and competition in groups (Deutsch, 1961) as support for one
of his main propositions: the more valuable the reward a man gets by
emitting a particular activity, the more often he will emit it. He writes:
(1961, p. 134) "In the cooperative groups, a member was to be rewarded for
any activity that contributed to the group's doing well; in the competi-
tive groups, each member was to be rewarded only for his own activity,
regardless of the success of his group. True, he did not get the reward
during the course of the experiment itself; it was to come later. But
it is much to the credit of American teachers that the occasions in the
past on which they have promised rewards have generally been occasions
on which the appropriate behavior on the part of their students has in
fact been rewarded - in short, they have kept their promises - and there-
fore their promises are apt to stimulate their students to appropriate
activity on the next occasion. It is, then, hardly surprising that mem-
bers of cooperative groups displayed much cooperative behavior and mem-
ers of competitive groups much competitive behavior."

Notice how Homans shifts the meaning of his basic terms in his
proposition. "The reward a man gets" is transformed into "a promised re-
ward" and then implicitly transformed further into "an expected reward";
similarly, "a particular activity" is transformed into a type of activity - cooperative or competitive - which may not have any particularized behavioral content. These are not trivial distinctions. His proposition has been altered so that it is no longer about the frequency with which a particular activity is emitted. Nor is it about the effects of the value of past rewards. Rather, it is a statement to the effect that at any given time, a man is more likely to engage in those activities (diverse as they may be in behavioral manifestation) which he expects will lead to a given consequence, the more he values the consequence. Such diverse cooperative activities as "listening intently to another", "modifying one's proposal to take into account another member's suggestion", etc. are similar to one another not in their behavioral manifestation but only in being aimed similarly at producing a given valued consequence (good group performance).

Homans's basic propositions have no clear-cut meaning when the activities necessary to being rewarded are not repetitive (as with the disc-pecking responses of pigeons or the bar-pressing responses of rats in Skinnerian experiments) or when the rewards being employed to affect behavior have not been specifically employed in conjunction with the occurrence of the particular behavior in the past. Homans is trapped in the particularities of the Skinner box and escapes from it only by altering its basic dimensions. By slipping away from the rhetoric of Skinnerian behaviorism and the experimental format of the Skinner box, he has lost contact with his basic propositions even as he has gained contact with the findings of social psychological research. Implicit in the altered meanings of his key terms is the recognition (a recognition not at all
Also, unlike most of the theories, his theory is based upon a fairly specific image: the image of a market transaction involving the exchange of commodities. Like most analogies that are not far-fetched, this one has had fruitful consequences: it gave rise to the concept of "distributive justice". Homans, in identifying this concept and in relating it to such other established phenomena as status congruence, has suggested one of the central conditions of group equilibrium. However, if the concept of distributive justice is to become more than a suggestive metaphor, the related concepts of "profit," "investment," "reward," and "cost" will have to be given more specific empirical and conceptual definitions.

We have suggested that the link between Homans's theory and behavioristic psychology is brittle. Although Skinnerians emphasize the role of reinforcement in controlling behavior, they would blanch at the way Homans freely uses such subjective words as "reward," "cost," "expect," "justice," etc. Homans not only abandons the methodology of behaviorism but he also abandons its rhetoric. Moreover, he neglects the central contribution of the Skinnerians, their fine-grained study of the effects of different contingencies of reinforcement - e.g., of different schedules of reinforcement. The only link between Homans and behavioristic psychology is the viewpoint of psychological hedonism which underlies both the law of effect and the doctrine of economic man.

The view that behavior can be explained in terms of rewards and punishments (or "pleasure" and "pain", to use the more old-fashioned terms) is, as Homans points out, one of the oldest theories of social behavior. However, as with people so with theories, age is no guarantee of wisdom.
Let me list some illustrative defects:

1. A "reward-punishment" or reinforcement theory does not account for the acquisition of novel responses except through a rather lengthy, shaping process. Thus, a reinforcement theory is unable to explain the acquisition of language or any other form of social behavior in which novel responses are made by a child immediately and successfully after observing someone else make the response. See Chomsky's (1959) review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* for a devastating critique of the reinforcement theory approach to understanding the acquisition of language. Many studies have, of course, demonstrated the ability of children to imitate complex novel behaviors of adult social models without any "shaping up" and without having experienced reward for such behavior.

2. The Thordikian dictum that "pleasure stamps in and pain stamps out" recast by Skinner and, then by Homans in his first proposition assumes some automatic process by which the stimulus, the response, and reward are bound together. This avoids the central question: What stimulus (of all the simultaneous events impinging upon the sensory organs), what activity (of all the environmentally-directed events, internal and external, which are occurring at any given time), and what aspects of the rewarding event (e.g., the physical sound, the words, the perceived intent of the speaker) are selected to be linked together and how are they so selected. This, if a four year old is praised for putting away his toys after playing with them, will the praise be connected with the activity of "submitting to an adult", "making mommy happy", putting away the toys", "doing something my younger brother doesn't have to do"? And what will be rewarding about the praise - the sense of recognized
personal achievement, mommy’s happiness, the implicit promise that Santa Claus will bring a desired toy? The notion of "similarity" has a similar far-reaching ambiguity: Is a stimulus similar to another because of its physical similarity or because of their common signification - e.g., a red light and a stop sign? These questions imply an active, organizing, interpreting, meaning-seeking organism rather than a passive receiver of stimulation and emitter of responses in which events are stamped together in some mechanical way as a result of "temporal contiguity" (sic). Even the pigeon, poor model of a human as it is because of its relatively primitive brain and its lack of language, when not semi-starved and imprisoned in a impoverished environment exhibits an active, exploratory interest in its surroundings.

3. There is an excessive abstractness in speaking of pleasure and pain or of reward and punishment as though they can have a completely arbitrary relationship to the activities to which they relate. For example, being rewarded by someone after one has done very poorly is, of course, quite different from a reward for an accomplishment. Reward and punishment are not simply positive and negative values to be attached arbitrarily to events; they signify and their significance must be consonant with the events to which they are attached or difficulties will ensue. Also, just as the pleasure of mastering a new golf stroke can not be equated simply with the pleasure of tasting a new food, so one reward (gifts) does not necessarily substitute for another (interested attention).

4. The economic conceptions of man, commonly view men as ego-centric: as Homans puts it, men are interested in what their behavior gets them. It seems unreasonably superficial to categorize together, indiscriminately,
"a man crossing a busy intersection so that he won't be hit by traffic" and "a man, going out of his way to help a blind man cross a busy intersection". To label these both as self-interested behavior surely misses an important distinction. The self can be centered on others as well as on itself. It can seek benefits for others at the cost of benefit for itself. The potential to be concerned with what happens outside the self has deep biological roots and is not simply a disguised or indirect expression of self-seeking.

To sum up, I find myself deeply puzzled by Homans. His writings—when he is writing about people in groups—are insightful, sophisticated, and offer novel and interesting empirical generalizations which fit diverse social situations. Reading his descriptive studies of groups can be as intellectually exciting and revealing as a good detective work. Moreover, his theorizing-in-the-small about social interaction is as good a small theory as exists in social psychology. Yet his theorizing-in-the-large falls apart even under superficial examination. Paradoxically, he takes Skinner's experimental work with pigeons as the foundation for his basic propositions but disregards Skinner's unique contributions. Surely, Homans is too sophisticated to have thrown away the methodology and findings of Skinner to be left only with the odd notion that the behavior of laboratory-reared, isolated, semi-starved, non-verbal pigeon in a drastically impoverished environment is an adequate model for the understanding of man's social behavior. Is Homans pulling our leg with the self-mocking notion that, for scientific purposes, the behavior of the pigeon and of man are much alike?
Bibliography


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