

Einzelbesprechung

Analytische Soziologie

Gianluca Manzo (Ed.), *Research Handbook on Analytical Sociology*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar 2021, 515 S., gb., 288,59 €

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The Handbook under review is edited by *Gianluca Manzo* – Professor of Sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris. It is intended to be a resource for “readers that are new to analytical sociology” (Manzo, ix). It has been published in the series “Research Handbooks in Sociology” edited by Hans-Peter Blossfeld.

Before beginning, I have to clarify what analytical sociology (AS) is. There are different understandings of what AS is. First, there is a wide notion of AS. “Wide AS” (as I call it) is not yet another variant of sociological theory. Instead, it is an umbrella for all kinds of sociology that share a common methodological core: analytical sociological work is characterized by (i) conceptual clarity and analytical rigor, it uses (ii) theory-guided (iii) empirical research, to produce (iv) cumulative knowledge growth about the social world that (v) exists independently of our minds and language. Arguably, this includes much current sociological work. But nevertheless, probably most current sociological work does not follow the methodological principles of wide AS (see Barone in Manzo, p. 123, Fn. 3). For instance, opaque sociological “theory”, or constructivist work that only aims for thick descriptions of subjective worlds would not fall under the umbrella of wide AS (however, see chapter 7 by Filippo Barbera in the Handbook for an appeal to a “wedding” of these traditions with AS).

Wide AS has meanwhile its own Handbook: “Handbook of Sociological Science: Contributions to Rigorous Sociology” (Gërkhani et al., 2022) published in the same series. Wide AS often refrains from the term “analytical sociology”, because this term has been “occupied” by *Manzo* and others (see below). Instead, the term “rigorous sociology” is used (or “population science” as John Goldthorpe does). In Germany, wide AS is institutionalized in the “Akademie für Soziologie” (there the term “analytisch-empirisch” is used for wide AS).

Second, there is a narrower notion of AS. It is closely connected with the work of Peter Hedström. I call this “narrow AS”, because it emphasizes all principles of wide AS, but in addition is particularly focused on explaining complex micro-macro processes. For this, narrow AS requires additional methodological principles. In particular: (vi) Explanation is done by social mechanisms, ideally in the form of macro-micro-macro explanations (Coleman’s Boat); (vii) As theory of action the desires-beliefs-opportunities (DBO) model should be used (not rational choice theory, RCT); (viii) Agent-based computational modeling should be used as a tool for generating complex macro-outcomes from individual behavior (and also to connect theory and data). Thus, narrow AS is a subgroup of analytical sociological research in the wide notion.

While most analytical sociologists will see narrow AS as a particular valuable endeavor (because narrow AS embodies the ideal of a sociological explanation), they nevertheless will insist that there are many other variants of analytical sociology that also produce valuable knowledge. For instance, social stratification research (SSR) comprises a large chunk of wide AS. In this field you seldomly will see references to social mechanisms, because the micro-macro link used is mostly a simple aggregation. Nevertheless, SSR shares the principles of wide AS and has produced valuable knowledge (see chapter 5 by *Carlo Barone* in the Handbook).

The Handbook under review might be (mis)perceived as a resource for narrow AS. However, as I will argue below many contributions in the Handbook are in fact also contributions to wide AS. And this is good so, as this makes the Handbook a valuable resource for a much wider audience.

The Handbook starts with an introductory chapter by the editor. It ends with a chapter called “Coda” by *Peter Hedström*. The main part of the Handbook consists of 25 chapters divided in three parts: Part I “Theoretical Conversations” is on conceptual and programmatic issues, Part II “Pivotal Concepts and Mechanisms” discusses the basic building blocks of AS, and Part III “Pivotal Methods” presents some methods used in AS. In the following I will review some of the chapters of the Handbook. It is obvious that due to space restrictions I will not be able to do so for all chapters.

Introduction

In the introductory chapter *Gianluca Manzo* provides an overview of the development of narrow AS. He describes how narrow AS’s manifestos (!) evolved in reaction to diverse critics. Then – in the main part of the chapter – he presents a detailed content analysis of the papers that have received the “Robert K. Merton

Award” for the best paper in AS (the prize is awarded by the International Network of Analytical Sociology since 2013).

Part I “Theoretical Conversations”

Chapter 1 by *Petri Ylikoski* is about the Coleman Boat, i.e., about the icon of AS. It includes a helpful exposition and discussion of the diagram. However, the German reader will note that *Ylikoski* does not include a single reference to Hartmut Esser, who popularized Coleman’s Boat in Germany in the 1990ies long before narrow AS did so (so much that it is known in Germany as “Esser’s Badewanne”).

The rest of Part I contains seven programmatic chapters. There are chapters on commonalities between (narrow) AS and (2) analytic philosophy, (3) structural individualism, (4) complexity research, (5) social stratification research, (6) critical realism, (7) cultural sociology, and (8) pragmatism.

In chapter 3 *Werner Raub* explicates that AS has antecedents in structural individualism that was practiced by sociologists in the 1970s and 1980s mainly in Germany and the Netherlands. He argues that structural individualism was a broad, pluralistic research program very similar to wide AS. He regrets that Hedström seems to prefer a much narrower version of AS: Hedström and his followers accentuate “the differences between mechanism-based explanations and explanations in Hempel’s sense”, they see “rational choice theories and learning theories as alternatives to rather than special cases of DBO theory”, and they “conceive of computational simulation models as a key building block [...] sometimes suggesting that employing analytical models is excluded when doing analytical sociology” (Raub in Manzo, p. 95). In his opinion, a more pluralistic AS would benefit the growth of knowledge.

In chapter 4 *Michael Mäs* sees basic overlaps of complexity research and analytical sociology. He even defines sociology as the discipline that is chiefly occupied with the micro-macro problem as is complexity research. Nevertheless, from the perspective of complexity research he proposes several provocative suggestions for analytical sociology. Amongst others: “avoid the Coleman Boat” and “strive for general theories” (Mäs in Manzo, p. 110; p. 114). Interestingly, his criticism of the Coleman Boat (“the assumption that individuals act in isolation”, p. 110) is dealt with extensively in chapter 1 by *Petri Ylikoski*, who presents a modified version of the Coleman Boat to counter this criticism.

In chapter 5 *Carlo Barone* argues that social stratification research (SSR) as institutionalized in RC28 shares huge commonalities with wide AS. Further, he argues that SSR differs in some respects from narrow AS. (1) SSR emphasizes the importance of solid descriptive work, because only well-established empirical

phenomena are sensible explananda. (2) SSR is often built on survey data and regression models. This research strategy is often denounced as “variable sociology” by narrow AS. (3) SSR often uses (a wide version of) RCT for explanatory purposes. As already mentioned, narrow AS rejects the use of RCT for sociological explanations. Overall, *Barone’s* argumentation implies that insisting on the manifestos of narrow AS excludes the many sociologists who do SSR. This leads to an unnecessary fragmentation of analytical sociology.

Part II “Pivotal Concepts and Mechanisms”

Part II leaves the swampy ground of programmatic discussions and provides nine chapters on the basic building blocks of (both notions of) AS: (9) Action, (10) Interaction, (11) Structure, (12) Norms, (13) Coupled Contexts, (14) Contingency, (15) Cumulative Advantage, (16) Network Amplification, (17) Complex Contagions. Chapters 9, 10, 15, 16, and 17 give a substantive, concise introduction to the respective field. These chapters may be helpful for teaching and also as introductory texts for researchers. Other chapters (11, 12, 13, 14) are mainly of a conceptual nature.

To comment only on one chapter in Part II: In chapter 9 *Clemens Kroneberg* and *Andreas Tutic* give a concise statement of RCT including wider versions of RCT such as dual-process theory. This is a very helpful resource for getting a quick overview on the state of the art.

Part III “Pivotal Methods”

Part III presents in eight chapters important methods for any version of AS: (18) Archival Data, (19) Digital Data, (20) Mediation Analysis, (21) Experiments, (22) Game-Theoretic Models, (23) Network Models, (24) Computational Models, and (25) the Many Models Approach. Virtually all chapters of this Part are valuable introductions to the respective field and might be used for teaching purposes. It should be noted that chapter 20 by *Kinga Makovi* and *Christopher Winship* gives a full-fledged introduction to the potential outcomes approach to causal analysis (it is much broader than the title “Mediation Analysis” suggests). Chapter 24 by *Andreas Flache* and *Carlos de Matos Fernandes* gives a hands-on introduction to agent-based computational modeling (the text is open access; the code is available online).

The final chapter “Coda – The past and future of analytical sociology” is by *Peter Hedström* himself. In this chapter he comments from his perspective on so-

me of the Handbook's chapters. In addition, he presents his current views on some aspects of narrow AS. Interestingly, *Hedström* seems to have changed his mind on some principles. He no longer sees social mechanisms as the workhorse of sociological explanations (principle vi), but social processes take now this place: social processes are the dynamic version of social mechanisms. More consequential is his giving up of principle vii: we no longer should use intentional action theories (like DBO or RCT), because in most instances we do not have data on the mental states of the actors. Theories that cannot be tested by data ("just-so" or "as-if" narratives) run counter to the realistic view *Hedström* adheres to since long. Instead of intentional action theories we should simply assume what the actors are doing (not why they are doing that). This is what *Kroneberg* and *Tutic* term the "weak program" of action theory in AS (Kroneberg & Tutic in Manzo, p. 187). Instead of intentional action theories, *Hedström* meanwhile favors "influence-response functions" (models of interaction, see chapter 10 by *Michael Mäs*) as the main theoretical workhorse for micro-macro explanations.

While this seems to be a sensible approach for solving micro-macro problems, it certainly is not the only sensible approach. Narrow AS's manifestos often breathe the spirit of an authoritative statement, which provokes pluralistically minded sociologist to oppose. A narrow "AS-cult" may not be the way towards a productive future for analytical sociology.

To conclude: The Handbook on Analytical Sociology contains several very useful chapters for all analytical sociologists. The editor has to be applauded for his pluralistic approach when compiling the chapters. The reviewer hopes that this is an indication that analytical sociologists are tired of unproductive demarcation fights. We all could then start with what we are aiming for: generating knowledge about the social world by doing theory-guided empirical research, in an intellectual style that is characterized by "conceptual clarity, argumentative rigor and analytical precision" (Little in Manzo, p. 64). We all are analytical sociologists!

References

- Gërxhani, K., de Graaf, N. D. & Raub, W. (Hrsg.) (2022). *Handbook of Sociological Science: Contributions to Rigorous Sociology*. Edward Elgar. Open Access: <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/book/9781789909432/9781789909432.xml>