

Generalization by Mechanism: Thin Rationality and Ideal-type Analysis in Case Study Research

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Abstract

Drawing general inferences on the basis of single-case and small-*n* studies is often seen as problematic. This article suggests a logic of generalization based on thinly rationalistic social mechanisms. Ideal-type mechanisms can be derived from empirical observations in one case and, based on the assumption of thin rationality, used as a generalizing bridge to other contexts with similar actor constellations. Thus, the “portability” builds on expectations about similar mechanisms operating in similar contexts. We present the general logic behind such “rationalistic generalization” and relate it to other ideas about generalization from single-case studies.

Keywords

case studies, social mechanisms, generalization, rationality, ideal types

1. Introduction

John Gerring has defined “‘case study’ as an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Gerring 2004, 342). Nevertheless, despite the current wave of innovative work on

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qualitative methods, drawing more general inferences on the basis of observations from single-case and small-*n* studies is still seen as problematic in “process tracing” and qualitative social research more generally. Authors such as King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 208-12) even claim that generalization without more than one case (or “observation”) is impossible, and as a solution they suggest increasing the number of observations. In more qualitatively oriented research, however, this move is seldom possible without mutating the research question.

Recently, it has been suggested that portability from one empirical case to others can be achieved through analysis based on *causal mechanisms with deterministic properties* (e.g., Falleti and Lynch 2009; Goertz and Mahoney 2012, Chap. 15; Mahoney 2001). The approach to generalization from single-case studies presented here relates to these authors; however, we see deterministic assumptions as often being too demanding in the social sciences (see the following text).

Other approaches have been suggested, for example, related to concepts like Sartori’s “ladder of abstraction” (Sartori 1970), Yin’s “analytical generalization” (Yin [1984] 2009), and Flyvbjerg’s “paradigmatic cases” (Flyvbjerg 2001). However, the more precise rationales behind these concepts are not always clear. For lack of a convincing logic of generalization, qualitative studies of social and political processes are often modestly framed as “explorative” or “pilot studies” or as “plausibility probes” (Eckstein 1975) aimed at generating hypotheses for subsequent, and allegedly more conclusive, large-*n* studies.

This article suggests a logic of generalization based on *thinly rationalistic social mechanisms*. Assuming “thin rationality” (roughly that actors in most cases do things for a reason), we can derive ideal-type social mechanisms from empirical observations of social action and interaction in one single-case study. Based on this assumption, we can expect the same ideal-type mechanisms to be applicable also in similar actor constellations in other contexts, and thus such mechanisms can be used as a generalizing bridge between contexts. In this perspective, generalization from single-case studies is based neither on determinism nor on probability, but on expectations about similar patterns of thinly rational action and interaction in similar contexts.

1.1 Outline of the Article

In the first part of the article, we introduce four different understandings of mechanisms in the social sciences (“intervening variable,” “causal pathway,” “deterministic relation,” and “micro-level causal link”) and discuss to what extent each understanding would allow us to draw general conclusions based on single-case observations. In the next step, we develop one of these understandings, the “micro-level causal link,” into an ideal-type logic of rationalistic

generalization that promises the *portability* between contexts that is crucial if we wish to use mechanisms for generalization. More precisely, if we see social mechanisms as thinly rationalistic ideal-type patterns of action and interaction, they can be used for making empirical findings obtained in one context portable to other contexts.

In the second part of the article, we elaborate on that understanding and relate it to Popper's "rationality principle," Elster's "thin rationality" and other notions of rationality. We also expand on the implications of our ideal-type approach and relate it to the mechanism logic that has been suggested by Hedström and Swedberg. We illustrate our approach with two empirical examples and conclude by contrasting it with some other often cited suggestions about generalization from single cases.

2. Mechanisms—A Jack of All Trades for the Social Sciences?

In recent years, social scientists have shown an increasing interest in mechanism-based approaches. Gerring (2010, 1499) even sees mechanism-centered explanation as an "article of faith" within the social sciences, uniting researchers from a wide variety of methodological traditions.

One important background to the growing interest (or faith) in mechanisms may be a correspondingly decreasing trust in explanations and inferences based on quasi-experimental designs in accordance with Mill's "method of difference" and "method of agreement" (Mill [1843] 1967) or Przeworski and Teune's "most different systems design" and "most similar systems design" (Przeworski and Teune 1970). As Lieberman has convincingly demonstrated, "application of Mill's methods to small-*N* situations does not allow for probabilistic theories, interaction effects, measurement errors, or even the presence of more than one cause" (Lieberman 1992, 177). If generalizing from complex cases by "controlling" for one or two variables meets with severe problems, identifying generalizable mechanisms may appear to be a more promising option.

If we move beyond terminology, there is a strong diversion both in terms of how mechanisms are defined and perceived and in terms of how they are applied empirically. In a review article, Gerring (2008) listed nine distinct meanings of the term "causal mechanism," while Mahoney in an earlier article discovered as many as 24 different definitions of causal or social mechanisms (Mahoney 2001, Table 1; cf. also Gross 2009).¹

¹Some authors use the expression "causal mechanism," whereas others prefer the term "social mechanism." In the following elaboration of our perspective, we use the term *social* mechanism, simply because our analytical assumption of thin rationality is relevant only in the *social* sciences.

Like several other authors before us, we refrain from proposing a precise definition of social or causal mechanism. In general terms, mechanisms are *regular patterns* of specific kinds of actions and interactions, patterns that are *causally productive*, meaning that they bring about certain outcomes. To be *generalizable*, a mechanism implies *portability*, that the pattern discovered in one context can be identified in others (cf. Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2011).

3. Four Understandings of Mechanisms and How They Can Contribute to Generalization

From a methodological standpoint, we can identify four distinct understandings of mechanisms that are of interest if we wish to discuss how they can contribute to generalization: (1) an *intervening probabilistic variable* between independent variable A and dependent variable B, (2) a *causal chain of probabilistic variables* leading from independent variable A to dependent variable B, (3) a *deterministic variable or chain of variables* leading from situation A to situation B, and (4) a *micro-level causal link* between macro-level variable A and macro-level variable B.

Some writers see a mechanism simply as an *intervening variable* in a variable-based *probabilistic* correlation (e.g., King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 85-87). However, this definition is not very helpful for generalizing from individual cases. If we see a mechanism as an intervening (probabilistic) variable, we would in principle not have any means of identifying and measuring it besides a statistical or pseudostatistical analysis similar to the one that supported the original correlation between A and B. And, in consequence, conceptualizing mechanisms as intervening variables does not offer a solution to the generalization problem in *single-case* studies.²

Moreover, there should also be some terminological concern here. It would be a waste of good social science terms to define the increasingly topical concept “mechanism” as being just a hotter synonym of the traditional and well-established “intervening variable.”

In his review of different meanings of “mechanism,” Gerring suggested the common denominator “the pathway or process by which an effect is produced or a purpose is accomplished” (Gerring 2008, 178). The understanding of mechanisms as *causal pathways*—in contrast to the “intervening variable”

²Nor in *small-n studies* that are not based on a quasi-experimental comparative logic. As mentioned, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 219-23) suggest cutting up one historical case into thinner slices to get more observations. This, however, avoids the problem rather than solving it. In practice, such a move often means a reformulation of the research question, for example, from one of dynamic change over time to another about static variation between time periods.

alternative—has a strong following among authors who actually apply mechanism analysis themselves. Along this line, Chandra (2006) stresses the degree of fineness of the analysis and the focus on micro-correlations as the defining quality of mechanisms (see Gerring 2008, for other versions).

In *process tracing* approaches (Brady 2010; Collier 2011; George and Bennett 2005), the pathway understanding of mechanism is often implied. Process tracing can be seen as an attempt to describe in detail a social process of action and interaction—the “who knew what, when, and what they did in response” (Bennett 2010, 209)—that sequentially evolves in a causal chain between A and B. Several writers recommend mechanism analysis as part of a design that combines statistical or quasi-experimental “between-case analysis” with process tracing or other variations of “within-case analysis” in the spirit of examining the black box between A and B (e.g., Chandra 2006; Gerring 2008; Goertz and Mahoney 2010).³

Although we side with the idea that social mechanisms are often pathways connecting different steps in a process, the problem of generalizing from the conclusions of a single case of process tracing remains unsolved. The causal pathways logic alone would not put us in a position to draw any general conclusions based on the study of one single process.

However useful the probabilistic notion of mechanisms as intervening variables or pathways may be in the quantitative analysis of a defined population, it is insufficient for drawing general conclusions based on single cases. Here the crucial quality is *portability* (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1147) or *exportability* (Chandra 2006).⁴ What is observed in one singular event or trajectory of events needs to be somehow translated to other contexts.

One way to think about portability that has been suggested in the process-tracing literature is *determinism* (cf. Waldner 2010, 31, who claims that mechanisms, unlike variables, crucially embody *invariance*). For instance, Mahoney (2001, 580-81) stipulates that a causal mechanism, unlike a variable, has a deterministic character and thus will always produce a certain outcome when operating. In more recent work, he elaborates on this notion in relation to necessary and sufficient conditions *ex post* in individual cases and in relation to combinations of such conditions to estimate expectations *ex ante* (Mahoney 2008, 415-18; 2010, 134-35; cf. Bennett 2010; Collier 2011).

³The “intervening variable” approach and the deterministic understanding of mechanisms are also sometimes described as “opening the black box.”

⁴Falleti and Lynch actually define causal mechanisms in terms of their portability, as “relatively abstract concepts or patterns of action that can travel from one specific instance or ‘episode’ (Tilly, 2001, 26), of causation to another and that explain how a hypothesized cause creates a particular outcome in a given context” (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1145).

Falleti and Lynch agree with Mahoney that causal mechanisms cannot be reduced to intervening variables, but they part company with him when it comes to the deterministic properties of mechanisms. Because mechanisms operate in different contexts, “the outcomes of the process cannot be determined a priori by knowing the type of mechanism that is at work,” they claim (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1149). Instead they refer to Elster’s definition of mechanisms as “frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences” (Elster 1998, 45). To Falleti and Lynch, the indeterminacy lies in the *context*, which means that the same mechanism may lead to different outcomes in different contexts (Falleti and Lynch 2009, 1151). As far as we understand, this implies that mechanisms would still be deterministic when operating within an identical or similar context. Hence, it is not clear whether this view actually departs from Mahoney’s position.

Obviously, “portability by determinism” *à la* Mahoney (and in effect Falleti and Lynch) would make a mechanism something more specific than an intervening variable or a causal pathway. As we see it, however, this move only solves the problem of portability by definition. We accept very few deterministic patterns in the social sciences, with their inherent elements of irregular human behavior, action, and interaction. In particular, we should look with skepticism on claims about determinism in the agency-based type of relations that are often at the heart of mechanism analysis.⁵

Although we agree with Falleti and Lynch that mechanisms operate in social, political, and cultural contexts, and that the outcome of their operation depends on this context, we find the deterministic interpretation of mechanisms unrealistic—and thus unconvincing. Claiming determinacy in an individual case *ex post* does not help us in generalizing to other cases.⁶

In contrast to the understandings of mechanisms discussed so far, Hedström and Swedberg take their point of departure from actors with intentions. They

⁵We might accept determinism—if nothing else for the sake of the argument—in a case where both the mechanism and the context are defined in great detail. But then the portability would be limited to almost identical cases—and not very useful for the purpose of generalization.

⁶Actually, commenting on Ragin’s “fuzzy-set social science,” Mahoney argues that “researchers can assess whether a given cause is necessary at alternative benchmarks,” admitting that this may be seen by some as watering down the concept of a necessary cause (Mahoney 2010, 134; cf. Ragin 2008). We side with those potential skeptics. If nothing else, this move to subjective probability weakens the portability that we see as the main possible strength of assuming determinism in mechanisms.

relate their discussion to James Coleman's "macro–micro–macro" model of collective action that, in the spirit of methodological individualism, connects macro-level structural explanation to micro-level individual agency. On the basis of Coleman's model, Hedström and Swedberg present a typology of mechanisms with three different variations: (1) from societal macro-conditions to actors' perceptions ("situational mechanism"), for example, a change in perceptions and values; (2) from actors' perceptions to their individual action ("action formation mechanism"), typically a formal or informal "calculus"; and (3) from individual action to changes on the macro-level ("transformational mechanism"), for example, a certain game between actors (Hedström and Swedberg 1998; cf. Coleman 1990, Chap. 1).

Hedström and Swedberg illustrate their argument with a general belief-formation mechanism, whereby the number of individuals performing a certain act signals to other individuals the likely value of that act and thus influences their choice of action. As they demonstrate, this is the common mechanism behind Merton's concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, Coleman's thesis on diffusion of innovations via networks, and Granovetter's threshold theory of collective action (Hedström and Swedberg 1998). These examples display social mechanisms as regular patterns of social interaction that are "triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences"—to quote from Elster's definition.

Hedström and Swedberg's approach is mainly deductive, which makes it difficult to apply in more narrative case studies. Their mechanisms are explicitly or implicitly rationalistic, and the connection to the Coleman model also implies an emphasis on the micro-level. However, it is not clear whether Hedström and Swedberg see their approach as allowing generalization from single-case studies, and as far as we can see, they have not presented any such logic.

Like Hedström and Swedberg's model, our approach presented below takes its point of departure in the notion of *micro-level links*, but we go further in developing a logic explicitly based on thin rationality and ideal-type analysis. We will argue that ideal-type analysis of mechanisms based on an assumption of thin rationality allows a particular form of portability and generalization in terms of reasonable expectations of similar mechanisms operating in similar contexts.⁷

⁷In earlier work, Hedström and Swedberg related their approach to rational choice theory as an ideal-typical action mechanism (e.g., Hedström and Swedberg 1996). Recently, however, Hedström asserted that the implausible assumptions of rational choice theory make it unacceptable for mechanism-based explanation (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010, 60). In contrast, our approach elaborates on the ideal-type analysis of mechanisms and relates it to *thin versions of rationality*.

Our approach to generalization through mechanisms combines two general ideas, one concerning the universality of thin rationality in understanding human behaviour, the other concerning ideal types as analytical links between empirical contexts. In the next two sections of the article, we will discuss the implications for the generalization of the assumption of thin rationality and ideal-type analysis in turn.

4. Mechanisms and the Rationality Principle

The first general idea of our approach to generalization through mechanisms is an assumption of rationality in a *wide* sense, that is, that actors typically do things for a reason. In process tracing and case study research more generally, such rationalistic conceptualization of mechanisms allows a kind of generalization that depends neither on probability and statistical methods nor on determinism. A wide notion of rationality, we argue, is an analytical element that elucidates why we gain a *sense of generalized understanding* when identifying mechanisms in individual cases. Making this methodological idea more explicit in qualitative analysis also makes the logic of generalization from single-case studies more convincing.

This point of departure, we argue, is less controversial than it might seem at a first glance. An implicit assumption about some type of rationality actually seems to underlie most causal or social mechanisms proposed by authors in the field, although it is not used as a methodological strategy for generalization. Even mechanisms that are expressed in more structural terms, for example, power dependencies, network relations, and social norms, can often be deduced from assumptions about—more or less—rational actors who are trying to reach their goals within the limits of their perceived scope of action. Thus our approach is based on a “weak”—or “structural” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010, 60)—methodological individualism, where not only individual agents but also relations and relational structures are emphasized.

Hence, unlike Falleti and Lynch (2009, 8) who see rationality as *one* type of mechanism among others—together with “belief formation,” “brokerage,” “framing,” and so forth—we conceptualize rationality in a wide sense as the fundamental logic of action behind *all* social mechanisms. The rationality postulate, we argue, is the closest we can get to the law of gravity within the social sciences—not because it is always true or relevant but because we—as analysts as well as real-world actors—presume that it is to some extent true or relevant as long as we have no indication of the opposite in the individual case.

The assumption that our fellow beings are largely rational and do things for a reason is absolutely basic to our orientation in society and everyday life.

For instance, thinly rationalistic mechanisms seem to be what we have in mind when we believe, rightly or wrongly, that we can learn from history (cf. Davidson 1984; Ferejohn and Satz 1996). This general presumption of (thin) rationality puts the burden of proof on those who claim that it is not valid precisely in social research.

Our notion of rationality is an element in an interpretive approach based on ideal-type analysis. Rather than being a “positive theory” or an empirical hypothesis to be tested, it is an *analytic idea* and methodological device which allows a systematic and analytic reconstruction of meanings, beliefs, and preferences (cf. Johnson 1991). In such a perspective, the rationality assumption is defended in terms of its analytic value and not its correspondence to reality; testing the realism of different rationalities is a completely different type of—psychological—study (Tversky and Kahneman 1981).⁸ Still, to be useful as an analytical strategy, our rationalistic mechanism analysis postulates neither that actors are *perfectly rational*, nor that they are *self-serving egoists*—although such an “economic straw man” is regularly used to accuse rationalistic researchers of making unrealistic assumptions and presenting tautological explanations (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994).⁹

Conceptualizing (thin) rationality as a fundamental logic of action is close to Karl Popper’s “situation analysis” and “rationality principle” (Popper [1967] 1985). Popper’s rationality principle is a methodological device, an almost empty principle that only assumes that actors *behave in accordance with the situation and its logic* and nothing else. It is seen as an *integral part* of every theory about society rather than as an empirical hypothesis to be tested. If a theory is falsified or incapable of describing the logic of an empirical situation, it is sound methodological practice, according to Popper, not to revise the rationality principle as such, but instead the other elements of the situational model. It is our conception of how actors understand their context that is false or misleading, not the rationality assumption.

Popper is not explicit about generalization. However, following his general argument, we suggest rationality as a necessary analytical assumption if we wish to use social mechanisms for generalization. This perspective also makes our notion of rationality resistant to the “tautology critique” of being impossible to falsify; on the analytical level, tautology is rather a quality

⁸In our perspective, even action based on individuals’ “erroneous” reasoning may be seen as thinly rationalistic—as long as it follows some general logic. One example is the individual action behind Merton’s self-fulfilling prophecies.

⁹We also regard Herbert Simon’s, more realistic, concept of *bounded rationality* (Simon 1955) as a “positive theory” about individual actors rather than a postulate for analytic reconstruction.

(Tsebelis 1990, 42; cf. Johnson 1991)—and indeed an expression of the analytic consistency of the model. A wide notion of rationality is a methodological device that should be evaluated not in terms of falsifiability but in terms of methodological gains. Perhaps the most important of such gains, we argue, is that rationality, as a defining characteristic of mechanisms, renders portability between contexts.¹⁰

Although our approach is certainly not limited to game theory, we see “Prisoners’ dilemma,” “Chicken,” and the other formal type games of game theory as *prototypes* of rationalistic mechanisms. This version of game theory is strikingly effective in allowing parallels between completely different social contexts and phenomena. A game like Prisoners’ dilemma allows us to understand and analyze both the division of power in a family and global ecological problems. The analytical fundament of our mechanism logic, however, need not be formally sophisticated, but only assume that actors largely behave in ways that *they see as productive* for achieving their goals or preferences, regardless of the character of these preferences, for example, of whether they are egoistic or altruistic, utilitarian or norm-based. Such a version of Elster’s *thin rationality* (Elster 1983) makes it possible to interpret less clear-cut and more contextualized mechanisms in terms of some form of rationality, for example, Merton’s, Coleman’s, and Granovetter’s belief formation mechanisms, to which Hedström and Swedberg refer.

Rationalistic mechanisms may also include isolated elements of (systematic) irrationality, for example, wishful thinking, self-suggestion, or prestige, phenomena that may often be best understood against a general background of rationality (Elster 1983; 1989a). Mechanism analysis may also consider preferences based on false perceptions (cf. Boudon 1998). As long as thinly rational actors choose alternatives they prefer, they need not be particularly well informed or well reasoned in other respects. This means importantly that social norms can be integrated into a rationalistic analysis. Unlike Elster (1989b), who contrasts rationality and social norms, we also include intuitive, routine, and norm-based action in our concept of thin rationality (cf. Hay 2002, for a similar idea).

This wide rationality perspective fits nicely with Popper’s claim that we need to reconstruct situations and actors “in such a way that we can see how and why the situation *as they saw it*, led them to act as they did” (Popper [1957] 1985, 362, our italics). What it means to be rational is context-specific

¹⁰It also renders “interchangeability” between actors and observers resting on *analytic recognition* and *generalizable understanding* beyond our direct experience and capacity for introspective empathy (cf. Tsebelis 1990, 43–44).

and not simply determined by material circumstances (cf. Johnson 1991, for a related discussion about “rational choice as a reconstructive theory”).

In consequence, the specifications of the rationality assumption must start from the research question and the situation to be analyzed. A certain amount of openness about actors’ perceptions and preferences is often to be recommended in process studies, which implies that mechanism tracing may sometimes be a rather *inductive* enterprise. As a matter of fact, the assumption of thin rationality may often provide structure and robustness to inductive approaches to case study research, starting from empirical puzzles or other observed outcomes. In other more deductive studies, the character of the rationality assumption is part of a specific ideal-type model. With some types of actors in some contexts, this may seem obvious, for example, obtaining security or power (Levi 1997, 24–25). Other situations are more uncertain and complex as regards actors’ perceptions, aims, and strategies (cf. Ostrom 2005, 103).

In sum, we understand social mechanisms as consisting of intentionality-based patterns of individual action and interaction that are rational in a “thin” sense. Individual actors are assumed to have some logical consistency in the pursuit of their goals, whereas the nature of those goals (the preferences of the actors, including the social norms they adhere to) is not necessarily assumed a priori, but may be open to empirical investigation—where the social and institutional context is of crucial importance.

5. Rationalistic Mechanisms Are Ideal Types

Hedström and Swedberg (1998) argue that mechanisms “usually are unobserved analytical constructs” (p. 13). We take this argument further: To be productive for generalization, social mechanisms are best defined as analytical constructs—and more precisely as Weberian ideal types. This is the second general idea of our approach to generalizing from single-case studies. Portability between contexts is not based on empirical generalization from one case to other cases, but on the use of ideal-type analysis as a *bridge* between empirical settings.

An ideal-type mechanism belongs on another conceptual level than empirical variables. Ideal types are *analytical* models that accentuate certain “rational” characteristics of a given social phenomenon. They are abstract simplifications and do not claim to be true in an empirical sense, but if adequately constructed they can be productive in interpreting or reconstructing the logic of social interaction in a certain context; rationalistic ideal types provide recognition based on a universal idea of rationality rather than on personal experience and identification (cf. Weber 1903–1917, 90; Aronovitch 2012; George and Bennett 2005, Chap. 11). Ideal-type mechanisms generate portability by distilling how actors of different kinds perceived their situations

so their intentions and actions become reasonable through the application of an analytic framework.

To stress that mechanisms, to be productive for generalization, are analytic ideal types is not to say that there are no mechanisms operating “out there”—including in people’s minds. However, the generative mechanisms of the world out there seldom present themselves to us directly “as they really are,” and so, we argue, mechanisms must be understood as analytical and ideal-type constructs to be useful as generalizing bridges between empirical contexts.

To be more precise, our approach to generalization applies ideal-type analysis on two levels. The idea about rational action—the rationality principle—is a meta-level ideal type in itself, and based on this fundament, we may establish more specific ideal-type mechanisms, for example, different types of social norms, games, and so forth.

More specifically, the form of generalization provided by our approach is that we can expect that a certain mechanism observed in one setting *may* be operative in other similar (types of) contexts with a similar constellation of, thinly rational, actors. But we cannot predict it with certainty, or with some, more or less precise, probability. So Elster’s formulation “if p then sometimes q” (Elster 1989a, 10) may actually be of relevance here. One way of describing this form of generalization is that identifying a certain mechanism in one context generates “reasonable expectations of finding a similar mechanism in other similar settings” (cf. Somerville and Bengtsson 2002; Bengtsson and Ruonavaara 2011). Or, in other words, a relevant rationalistic mechanism generates a reasonable expectation of what it means to be rational in a certain type of incentive and opportunity structure (Hertting 2007, 46).¹¹

6. Abstraction and Inference

In principle, this ideal-type generalization from one case to others consists of two different steps: abstraction and inference. In the first step, empirical observations are *abstracted* in terms of an ideal-type mechanism or a combination of mechanisms (e.g., a type game, a social norm, or a variation of Hedström and Swedberg’s belief-formation mechanism). In the second step, the ideal-type abstraction of the empirical observations is *inferred* to other similar contexts.¹²

Typically, and in contrast to deterministic or probabilistic generalization, this inference is not made to a defined “population” of processes but as

¹¹This is more than only being *in principle* translatable to the analysis of other situations in terms of common analytic perspective, language, and concepts.

¹²A similar two-step logic of abstraction and inference would be implied if we assume deterministic mechanisms *à la* Falleti and Lynch.

expectations in similar types of settings. In the specific case, making such a generalization through rationalistic expectations may be more or less *fruitful* or *productive*, given the details of the empirical context. But again, being ideal types, they cannot be verified or falsified.

We can compare this ideal-type logic with the intervening variable approach and with Mahoney's (and Falleti and Lynch's) deterministic mechanisms. If ideal types are analytical tools and not empirical arguments, it would be irrelevant to evaluate them in terms of probabilistic versus deterministic—or even as “true” or “false.”¹³ If we find an ideal-type rationalistic mechanism to be fruitful for interpreting, understanding or explaining one observed case, we can reasonably expect it to be of relevance for interpreting, understanding, or explaining other similar cases as well. Again we cannot be certain of its relevance *ex ante*, as we would have been in the implausible case of deterministic mechanisms. But we would definitely be wiser than if we had made one single observation of a hypothesized nondeterministic intervening variable or chain of variables. And this is due to the analytical accentuation and abstract generalization that Weberian ideal-type concepts allow.

In conclusion, if we see social mechanisms as “thinly rationalistic ideal-type patterns of action and interaction,” they can be used for making empirical findings obtained in one context portable to other contexts.

This view does not presuppose that mechanisms are either “frequently occurring and easily recognizable” (Elster) or “hidden,” “underlying,” or “unobserved” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010, 56).¹⁴ Although we certainly believe that to be of general academic interest a social mechanism should not be too obscure and opaque, our approach only implies that “generalizing” mechanisms” should be easily recognizable *once identified*. Then they should provide a logical and accessible understanding of how and why certain actions or outcomes came about.

7. Rationalistic Generalization—Two Empirical Illustrations

Sometimes rationalistically oriented researchers are accused, with some reason, of drawing empirical conclusions on the basis of their universal models, not considering narrative or other case material. A perspective of thinly

¹³Criticizing an ideal type for its lack of realism is an example of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Whitehead 1929).

¹⁴Some authors even *define* mechanisms as unobserved (Mahoney 2001, 580) or unobservable (Johnson 2006, 247). Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, 51) find that unnecessary, while we find it problematic. It is not clear why it would be easier to observe abstract and complex theoretical *variables* like power and democracy.

rationalistic mechanisms, we argue, indicates a way toward a balance between thorough contextualization and theoretically informed generalizability. We need context not only to interpret actors' perceptions and preferences, but also to help the reader to evaluate these interpretations, as well as relevant alternative readings. However, we also need the rationalistic framework to move beyond the specific case (cf. Levi 1997, 30-31).

In the following sections, we illustrate our approach with two local-level case studies. The first example is a study of collective action among residents in Sweden. The second is a study on network governance in Swedish urban renewal. The two studies illustrate how rationalistic generalization can be carried out using more deductive as well as more inductive approaches.

7.1. Solving the Tenants' Dilemma

Advocates of residents' involvement in housing management are often disappointed about the modest level of participation of real-world tenants. Bengtsson (1998, 2000) has interpreted the difficulties to involve residents in housing management in terms of Mancur Olson's free-rider problem. The collective resources produced by such collective participation will benefit all residents, not just those who have participated. Hence, it would not be strictly rational for the individual resident to initiate or take part in such cooperation instead of hoping for a free ride. Consequently, the free-rider theorem provides a mechanism of the strategic situation in which tenants refrain from participation.

Starting from such an interpretation of the "tenants' dilemma," Bengtsson argues that instead of being disappointed, we should focus on successful cases of collective action and try to understand (and theorize) deviations from the free-rider expectation. How has the free-rider problem been handled? How has the *Prisoners' dilemma* been turned into an *assurance game*, where the actors value mutual cooperation more than free riding? To understand this, we need to point out some specific thinly rationalistic mechanism that has helped to solve the tenants' dilemma (Bengtsson 2000).

One basic idea of Bengtsson's approach is that a solution of the collective action dilemma does not necessarily mean a change in the situation in any objective sense. What is needed is rather some sort of "social reconstruction." This might be done through a specific kind of thinly rationalistic mechanism, namely, "norms of cooperation." Following Jon Elster (1989b), a framework of ideal-type social norms of cooperation is constructed and used to interpret 21 cases of resilient tenant cooperation: the norm of everyday Kantianism, the norm of reciprocity, and the norm of local utilitarianism. The norm of everyday Kantianism says, "If I don't co-operate, why should anyone else?"

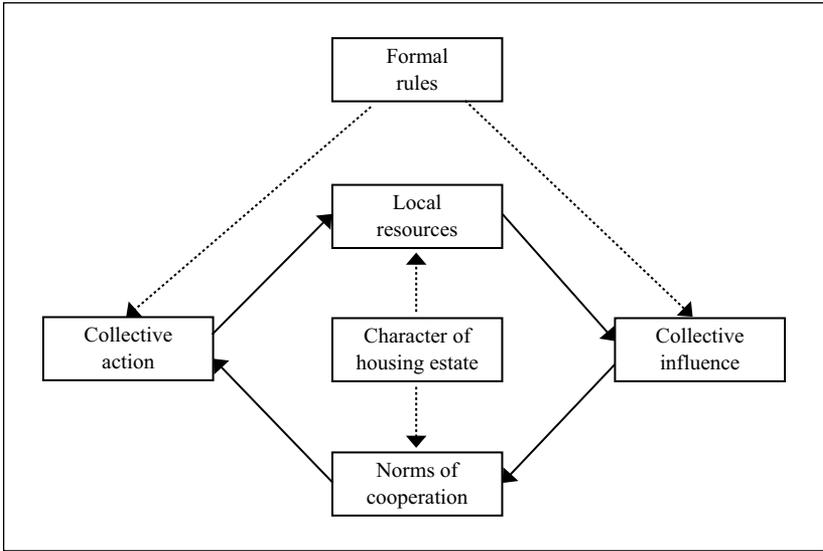


Figure 1. A Model of Collective Action in Housing Estates (from Bengtsson 2000).

The norm of reciprocity says, “If others co-operate, why shouldn’t I?” Finally, the prescription from the norm of local utilitarianism reads, “I take part if it is needed and if I can contribute to the collective good in my estate” (Bengtsson 2000, 181). The three norms provide three ideal-type alternatives to the free-rider imperative concerning how to act in collective action situations. Reinforced by the utility experienced from the “collective good” (tenants’ joint influence on the physical, economic, social, symbolic, etc., conditions of the housing estate) produced with the resources created by cooperation, the social norms of cooperation may function as the driving force in a self-reinforcing cooperative circle. The strength and precise pattern of this circle are related to variables concerning the character of the estate (size, social structure, etc.) and the formal rules of cooperation and influence (cf. Figure 1).

Bengtsson’s analysis of the 21 cases is not quantitative, but it is characterized as a “rationalistic variation of process tracing” that aims “to identify mechanisms rather than count cases” (Bengtsson 2000, 179). Following such an approach, the empirical processes are analyzed using ideal-type norms in a counterfactual and thinly rationalistic pattern matching argument. Inferences about how the tenants perceive the situation and the social norms within it are drawn from empirical data on participation in different phases.

In most cases, “the crucial mechanism behind institutionalization (of participation) seems to have been the development of norms of local utilitarianism.” The rationalistic interpretation of the processes provides support for the conclusion that this norm was more important than the other two, and more important than selective economic incentives and prospects of self-realization.¹⁵ Though it is noticed that similar mechanisms seem to prevail, in most cases, the character of the analysis is within-case process tracing rather than a comparative quasi-experimental one.

In a final analytical step, some specific characteristics of participation in housing estates as a more general “situation for collective action” are analyzed: the spatial concentration, the moderate group size, the long-run relations, and the limited significance of collective action in this particular type of context.

The generalization of the findings is based on this contextualization. Through this inference, we would expect that the mechanisms of local utilitarianism may solve collective action problems not only in other housing estates but also in other “dense” but relatively “cool” arenas of collective action (Bengtsson 2000, 186). Thus, in contrast to Elster, we may see this type of consistent norm-based action as a form of thin rationality—and consequently as a possible element in a rationalistic logic of generalization. Furthermore, Bengtsson’s analysis demonstrates that the rationalistic mechanism framework allows us to consider not only social norms, but also more fundamental social structures, such as group size and interaction density. This analytical step also indicates that rationalistic case studies often combine more deductive and more inductive elements.

7.2. Network Governance as Collaboration in Repeated Frustration

The quest for partnership, collaboration, and network governance across formal jurisdictions and between public and private spheres of society is ever-present in contemporary discussions of public policy and governance (Sørensen and Torfing 2007). However, despite a widespread and shared belief in the strategy, it seems that the “collaborative advantage” is difficult to achieve (Huxham 2003; cf. Ansell and Gash 2008).

Starting from an observation of a puzzling pattern of collaboration in Swedish urban renewal, Hertting (2003, 2007) has analyzed how collaborative

¹⁵Bengtsson’s analysis was carried out mainly on the collective level of local communities. Recently, Adriaanse (2011) has applied Elster’s models in an analysis of cooperation in housing estates using data on the individual level.

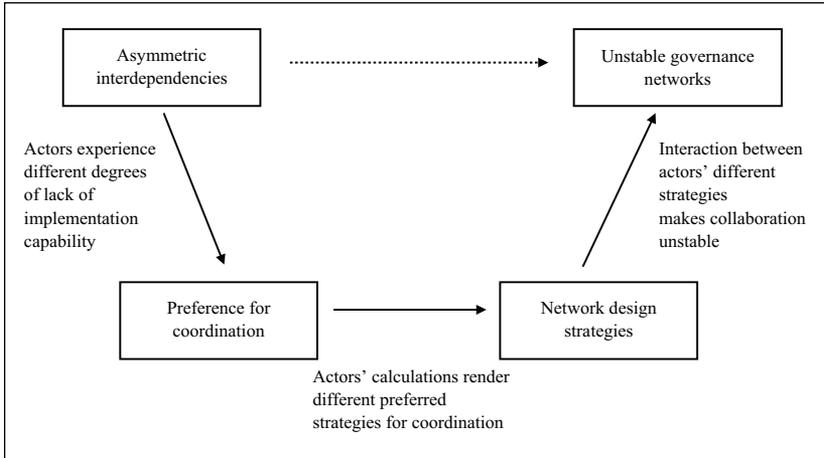


Figure 2. Understanding Network Governance as Repeated Collaboration in Frustration (cf. Hertting 2007).

governance arrangements work in practice. Based on four different cases, he shows how cooperation between social authorities, housing companies, and nonprofit organizations repeatedly ends up in frustration. Nevertheless, new cooperation efforts are continually implemented, and Swedish urban renewal therefore seems to be a case of “collaboration in repeated frustration.”

In the primary case study, Hertting traces the collaboration between roughly the same actors in the same neighborhood over almost 20 years to explore the inherent logic of the process and identify and abstract the social mechanisms behind it. A crucial observation—confirmed in the three follow-up cases—is that, although all key actors have a preference for increased horizontal collaboration across formal organizational borders, the cases are characterized by an endless search for specific institutional modes for such collaboration. Thus, the preoccupation with institutional design seems to undermine the holistic operative problem solving that is the very justification of network governance.

Hertting interprets his detailed material on motives and experiences over time in the light of James Coleman’s macro–micro–macro framework and Hedström and Swedberg’s related typology (see Figure 2). He identifies a set of interlinked network governance mechanisms: (1) a macro–micro mechanism that produces a perception of interdependencies and incentives for collaboration with other actors, (2) an internal micro–micro strategic calculus concerning which coordination strategies are optimal to the individual actor/organization¹⁶ in terms of balancing coordination and autonomy, and (3) a

micro–macro game mechanism whereby the strategies of the interdependent actors produce new coordination arrangements. Hence, the interpretation links three distinct mechanisms to form a rationalistic argument of understanding and explanation.

The asymmetries between local actors in perceived interdependencies (macro–micro mechanism) generate different preferences concerning the degree of formalization in the design of the collaborative institution (micro–micro), which eventually creates a sort of *generosity problem* in the production of new institutional structures (micro–macro). This could be interpreted as a “battle of the sexes” game with two different cooperative equilibriums and a conflict between actors over which of these to choose. Although the actors agree that they will benefit from a cooperative multiorganizational institution, they disagree about its specific form, its *modus operandi*. Hence, taking into account structurally founded differences in perceived interdependencies and power relations, it was possible to understand why collaboration in repeated frustration was the actual output of actions appropriate to the perceived situation.

The generalizing conclusion and inference based on Hertting’s study is that we should not expect informal network governance to attain a stable equilibrium in policy process situations where interdependencies are asymmetrical and where some actors perceive themselves to be “more dependent” than others and thus prefer a more formalized coordination structure. In such structural situations—which may be quite common in collaborative network governance—the pattern of collaboration in repeated frustration appears to be a logical product of thinly rational actors’ strategies.

7.3. Methodological Implications

We argue that many single-case studies are best understood within the logic outlined earlier. When we do get a sense of universal knowledge from individual cases, this is often due to an implicit idea about rationality as a bridge for portability. In contrast, our two examples are *explicitly* designed from this logic and thus illustrate some methodological implications of the approach.

First, the examples demonstrate the importance of analytically recognizing the temporal, spatial, and institutional context to understand the rationality of actors. The actors’ own understanding of the situation is of particular

¹⁶In political science, collectives like states and political parties are often treated as actors with intentions. Although this is a simplification that calls for justification in each particular case, collective or composite actors can in principle be included in our approach (cf. Scharpf 1997, 51ff.).

significance, and mechanisms must be constructed and reconstructed to account for the context that actors perceive and access. The “battle of the sexes” logic of negotiations is found in cooperative institutional design processes embedded in a context of asymmetrical interdependency relations, and the norm of local utilitarianism seems to be a reasonable outcome in a type of context where interaction is repeated, but collective action is less than imperative.

The second point is that our approach can be conducted more or less deductively or inductively, and in both cases it includes a combination of interpretation based on thin rationality and contextualization informed by ideal-type theory. Identifying the rationality of the situation and abstracting the mechanism may sometimes take the form of tracing, matching, and nesting, starting from predefined mechanisms. The study of collective action in housing estates took its point of departure from specified hypotheses about mechanisms to overcome the free-rider dilemma. In other cases, the situation is too complex to generate such clear links *ex ante*, and the mechanism generalization comes closer to the reconstruction of “analytic narratives” (cf. Bates et al. 1998), where the links between mechanisms are more narratory. In the study of collaborative governance, the starting point was an empirical puzzle—collaboration in repeated frustration—and the explanation was searched for within a general analytical framework. While an *ex ante* organized “mechanism bank” of ideal-type models might be helpful in many cases, it is not necessary for conducting case study research in accordance with our general logic. However, even in the more inductive *ex post* version, the thin rationality assumption is crucial, as is the ideal-type mode of interpreting and constructing mechanisms.

Third, the two examples demonstrate that our approach to mechanism-oriented case studies is not restricted to a *narrow* analysis of *actors*. They demonstrate how a rationalistic mechanism approach, based on methodological individualism, can take into account structural dimensions, such as social norms and asymmetrical power relations. Methodological individualism does not imply theoretical individualism, only that structural consequences are somehow experienced and expressed by individuals and hence analyzed from the *perspective* of their perceptions.

Finally, the examples illustrate the two-step logic of (1) abstraction of mechanisms from observations of the case and (2) inference to similar types of contexts. In both cases, this inference is expressed in general and theory-driven terms rather than to a predetermined “population.” Hence, generalization takes the form of conceptualizing types of situations and analytically distilling what it means to be rational within such typified settings.

8. Social Mechanisms and Single-Case Study Research—Concluding Discussion

Recently, we have witnessed a new momentum of innovative and inspiring approaches to qualitative and single case studies (Bennett 2010; Brady and Collier 2010; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007; Goertz and Mahoney 2012). With the exception of Falleti and Lynch (2009) and Goertz and Mahoney (2012), however, few seem to have addressed the generalization issue explicitly. In the present article, we have argued that if we conceptualize social mechanisms as “thinly rationalistic ideal-type patterns of action and interaction,” they can be productive in making empirical findings obtained in one context portable to other contexts. This portability between contexts is not based on empirical generalization in probabilistic or deterministic terms from one case to others, but on the use of Weberian ideal types as a conceptual bridge between empirical settings; such a generalization is not made in terms of a deterministic or probabilistic argument about a specified population, but as an expectation about what it means to be rational in a similar situation.

Our approach to generalization applies ideal-type analysis on two different theoretical levels. The idea of thin rationality—the rationality principle—is a fundamental ideal type in itself, and based on this fundament, we construct more specific ideal-type mechanisms. The form of generalization provided by our approach is that identifying a certain mechanism in one context generates reasonable expectations of finding a similar mechanism at work in other similar settings.

As indicated by our empirical illustrations, generalization via rationalistic mechanisms can be used deductively, starting from more or less precise and well-established social mechanisms, but also more inductively, based on the general assumption of thin rationality and a broad understanding of the empirical context.

Our approach may also be related to other often cited ideas about generalizing from single-case studies. Case study researchers frequently refer to Yin’s distinction between empirical and *analytic generalization*, and claim to be doing the latter. It is not always clear, however, what they actually allege to do, and unfortunately Yin is not particularly clear about the logic either. He claims that case studies cannot be used to generalize to populations, but only to theoretical propositions, in terms of “how” and “why,” which seems to indicate some type of mechanism thinking. However, the rationale behind his approach remains largely undefined (Yin [1984] 2009, 38-39). We see our mechanism approach as a way to generalize in terms of “how” and “why” to other empirical settings—and not only to theoretical propositions.

Sartori's well-known *ladder of abstraction* has also been used as an instrument for drawing more general conclusions based on individual case studies (Sartori 1970). The general idea is that empirical findings in one case may be relevant also on a higher level of abstraction ("moving up the ladder of abstraction"). This use of Sartori's ladder of abstraction (or "ladder of generality") has been discussed, for example, by Collier and Mahon (1993) and Mahoney (2010).

As with our approach, such generalization is not claimed to be valid for any specific empirically existing population, but at most to an imagined "population" of similar patterns in similar contexts. We see the ladder of abstraction logic as one variation of rationalistic generalization; it is not clear how such conceptual climbing could be carried out without implicit or explicit reference to ideal-type mechanisms based on thin rationality.

Flyvbjerg has achieved international fame for his exemplary case study of rationality and power in urban planning in the Danish city of Aalborg (Flyvbjerg 1998) as well as for his writings on the role of case studies in the development of knowledge (e.g., Flyvbjerg 2001, 2006). He describes his case in terms like "metaphorical," "prototypical," and "paradigmatic," implying that Aalborg provides an image ("metaphor") of modern politics, bureaucracy, and planning, and of modernity in general (Flyvbjerg 1998, 225; 2001, 79-81). Such a case could serve as a point of reference for other situations, much like an ideal type.

Flyvbjerg obviously has generalizing ambitions and, judging from his argument, an important element of this generalization is the reader's *recognition*. But if recognition is enough, what does the case add that we did not know before? What actually makes Flyvbjerg's study of local politics in Aalborg so elucidating is that we find *ex post* that stakeholders have acted in a plausible way, given their goals and conditions. So "recognizing" the case of Aalborg means that we believe that thinly rational actors involved in comparable power games in other contexts would act and interact in much the same way. And this would again be a case of rationalistic generalization.

We see our approach—like Yin's, Sartori's, and Flyvbjerg's, if generously interpreted—as a theoretically founded form of "moderatum generalization" (cf. Payne and Williams 2005). This means that our approach is less original—and hopefully less controversial—than it may appear at first glance. Many social scientists base their generalizing ambitions on ideas about rationalistic social mechanisms—although largely implicitly. (Actually this is also true for quantitative studies when we make inferences from a certain population to other populations and contexts. For instance, to learn something about voters in general from a quantitative study of American voters in a certain

election, we need an ideal-type analysis of social mechanisms rather than statistical inference.)

Results from single-case studies—from Michels to Putnam—are often referred to without any great concerns about problems of generalization, which indicates some underlying consensus—implicitly, we claim, on the general applicability of thin rationality. We believe that case study researchers would gain from taking thin rationality seriously and more explicitly analyzing their cases in terms of social mechanisms. This would make it easier to scrutinize and discuss their findings—and to make them portable to other contexts.

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