In the social sciences, Micro and Macro are two common terms. Yet, few specify how they interact.

Before we begin, we should ask: Who cares? Why bother addressing this problem?

Some valid reasons:

1. It forces us to conceptually define what we mean by “context” and “macro.”
2. It forces us to acknowledge and explore the black box that lies between inputs and outputs.
3. For some research problems, it improves our explanations.

A valid reason not to:

1. For some research questions, to find an intellectually satisfying answer it is not necessary to specify the micro-macro link.

The radical notion of the social sciences is that the social context matters: it influences how we think and act. Implicit in “context” is a level beyond – a macro. This is, in Murray Davis’ terms, “uninteresting,” because it does not challenge our assumption ground. What is interesting is the question: what created the macro? The common answer is: micro created the macro. Then, the next question is, how did micro create macro?

We will spend more time on micro-macro, than on macro-micro.

III. Simple Statement about Micro-Macro

(1) Macro is an emergent phenomenon built from relationships between relevant parts properly put together.

(2) Macro properties are different from properties of the micro elements that created it.

(3) Micro-interactions are paramount: Macro properties are not reducible to properties of individual micro-actors.

(4) Macro impacts micro.

Let’s explain each part:

What is an emergent phenomenon? It is something that (a) has properties that are different from the properties of its constituent elements and (b) is not reducible to any particular element.

Take a train: a train is an emergent phenomenon. For the sake of simple argument, let’s say it is comprised of electricity, engine and wheels (putting aside other possibilities, like steam engines, or magnets instead of wheels, or whatever). Electricity excites the engine which turn the wheels. In other words:
Macro [train] is an emergent phenomenon built from relationships [moving together] between relevant parts [electricity, engine and wheels] properly put together [electricity excites the engine which turn the wheels].

[whether meso is something worth using is a good question but does not influence this part of the lecture]

Why is the train an emergent phenomenon?

(a) A train implies certain things: it moves. A train must be able to move for it to be a train as we understand it.

(b) If the train is missing one of the parts, or if the parts do not fit together properly, it is not a “train” as we expect it to be. It can be the representation of a train, or whatever we want to call it, but it is not a train.

The same can be said for social phenomena, such as inequality: economic inequality, political inequality, gender inequality, health inequality and so on.

Let’s look at income inequality: Income inequality is an emergent phenomenon built from interactions between micro-level actors.

What are the emergent properties of income inequality?

(a) It is a situation in which some have more income and some have less.
(b) The distance between more and less is measurable.
(c) We can distinguish between perfect equality from less than perfect equality, e.g. inequality.

Income inequality is measured via meaningful aggregation of incomes within a society (or nation or whatever). The units of analysis are usually people, but can also be households. There are many measures of [income] inequality – gini, Theil, ratio of high/low, index of dissimilarity -- and each measure has its own properties (Allison 1979): scale invariance, principle of transfers, sensitivity to transfers, upper and lower bounds.

Micro actors must interact in very specific way, and under very specific constraints, to produce a specific macro-level inequality.

Some turn to Giddens’ Structuration: It assumes that macro-structures are created by micro-interactions, and that both feed on each other. Embedded in the interaction between micro and macro are the means to change micro and macro.

The key to micro-macro relations is the interaction between micro-level actors: We cannot reduce macro-inequality to any particular property of the micro-level actor. To explain gender inequality, we cannot look solely to properties of men, or of women. It is the interaction between men and women that produce gender inequality.

IV. Micro-Macro Problems in Inequality

A. We need to address the form, duration and magnitude of inequality.

1. What is the origin of the inequality?
   Need to know: What inequality? Where? When?

2. How do inequalities become social structures?

3. What maintains inequality (or, how is inequality perpetuated and reproduced time and time again)?
4. How does inequality change?

B. How did the interaction between [units of analysis] at the micro-level become macro-level inequality?

1. What characterizes the specific relationships?
2. What are the relevant parts for the particular kind of inequality?
3. How do these parts fit together?

C. Groups as Emergent Phenomena

1. Intersectionality

In general, the common principles of intersectionality theory are the following: individuals belong to multiple demographic categories, so that the same individual has a specific gender, an ethnicity, and a social class position, among others; some categories provide advantages and some disadvantages, with each having roots in social stratification structure; not only each of these disadvantaged categories has its separate attitudinal and behavioral consequences but also jointly (Steinbugler et al 2006; Warner 2008). While most analyses of the influence of demographics on attitudes and behavior focus on the additive effect of categories, intersectionality theory focuses on the effect of categorical intersection above and beyond the effects of its components. In other words, in intersectionality approach, demographic groups are an emergent phenomenon.

V. How have “micro to macro” and “macro to micro” problems been addressed?

1. Ignoring it. This is the dominant reaction.
2. There is no Macro; there is only Micro.
3. Multi-level or hierarchical models [macro to micro]
4. Market analogies (e.g. political market) [micro to macro]
5. Searching for mechanisms [both “micro to macro” and “macro to micro”]
6. Experiments and simulations of artificial societies [both “micro to macro” and “macro to micro”]

THERE IS NO MACRO

Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality

Sociologists typically cite Weber in defining power as the capacity a person or a group has to realize their will despite the resistance of others (Weber 1946). Whether power is a capacity of one actor to change the behavior of another (Dahl 1961) or is a relationship in which one actor is disproportionately able to avoid negative sanctions (Rossi 1957: 425), in all definitions, power in every-day situations is often seen in micro-level interactions.

How do symbolic interactionists define power? In the interactionist sense, power is something that is negotiated and renegotiated between actors with different capacities and different interests (Dennis and Martin 2005; Hall 1972). Thus, power is best seen as relational (Dennis and Martin 2005). According to Hall (1972), “Power…is achieved by controlling, influencing, and sustaining your definition of the situation” (51). In this sense, inequality is constructed through differential abilities of involved actors to define the situation (Schwalbe et al 2000).

There is no micro-macro. There is only a negotiated order on the level of interpersonal relationships. Structure is “a metaphor for recurrent patterns of action involving large numbers of people” (439). “What is it … that exists beyond a setting and constrains action within it? It can only be the actual or anticipated action of people elsewhere, enabled by the resource available to them” (440). Structure is simply the link
between settings that have aspects in common… knowing what to do and how to behave in one place and repeating it in another… your actions can be praised or denigrated based on the appropriateness of your interpretation of the symbols of the setting. Inequality is “accomplished by the use of symbols to differentiate groups, construct identities and mobilize collective action” (420) and ultimately depends on face-to-face interaction.

MARKET ANALOGIES

Market language of supply and demand has been used to explain social phenomena such as occupational attainment (Kaufman 2002), marriage (Cherlin 1992), religion (Gill 2001), and crime (Becker 1976). Economists examining political processes in the context of public choice theory are most likely to use the term political market, but few discuss it substantively (Wittman 1995: 1).

The market analogy is attractive, most likely because the assumptions of market dynamics are well known and well tested in other areas of research. When applied to things other than an economic market, the market is often used as analogy and metaphor rather than theory.

Let’s take the analogy of a “political market.” [based on my dissertation 2006]. The analogy of a political market has been used to explain unequal representation of disadvantaged groups. Political markets link micro-level behavior and macro-level outcomes. The goal is to understand how micro-level political market dynamics produces a given state of representation.

A market can be defined as an institution that governs distribution of resources. A political market is an institution that governs the distribution of representation and other political goods using the concepts of supply and demand.

In the political market analogy, unequal representation of disadvantaged groups is the emergent phenomenon. It is built through the relationships between voters and parties. Voters and parties react to each other through simple laws of supply and demand.

How does this work? Conceptions of the political market are similar to the more well-known labor market. In studies of the labor market, the supply side consists of job aspirants. Demand side consists of the employers who seek types of job aspirants.

There are various conceptions of supply and demand in political markets. In one conception, the supply side consists of candidate aspirants; the demand side consists of the parties who seek types of candidates. In explaining descriptive representation in the European Parliament, Norris and Franklin (1997) conceive of a “political market-place;” the supply side are candidates and their characteristics, including motivations and political capital, and the demand side are attitudes of political gatekeepers and party rules.

In another conception based on voters and parties, the supply side consists of candidate aspirants; the demand side consists of the voters who seek types of candidates. Here, voters demand representation of disadvantaged groups and political leaders control the supply of demographic types of candidates. The interaction between the two produces the level of unequal representation.

A critical question is who – which disadvantaged groups -- is in the market? Women only? Or class and age groups?

Certain assumptions are inherent in market analogies. Chief among them is market rationality.

Market Rationality
Market language as used in explaining socio-political phenomena has its roots in sociological rational choice theory (RCT), economics’ public choice theory and the assumption of economic rationality in actors’ approach to political decisions (Buchanan 1968; Downs 1957; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997; Kiser and Bauldry 2005). As a multilevel theory, RCT assumes that individuals are the starting point, though influenced by macro-level conditions (see also Coleman 1990: 5). In essence, RCT assumes Becker’s (1976) *homo economicus*, where individuals engage in utility maximization, selfishly seeking to increase benefits and minimize costs in any exchange situation. Thus, rational action is that which provides the greatest personal good with the least bit of bad.

**Dynamics of Supply and Demand**

Dynamics of supply and demand should function such that if voters signal demand, parties would furnish supply proportional to the demand. Thus, supply of demographic types of candidates should be directly related to demand for those candidates.

If parties are rational, then they seek to maximize seat allotments. If vote outcomes are the sum of rational decisions, then party reactions are also the sum of rational decisions. Assuming parties know how voters vote, which is likely considering the extent to which exit polls are taken in modern industrialized nations, parties are aware of which demographic types are voting for them (or not). Thus, demand increases from a particular voting demographic should lead to supply increases for that demographic’s type of candidates.

How demand influences supply is a theoretically thorny problem. Some previous researchers consider voter demand to be an inadequate way of influencing supply. Demand for women representatives as expressed by the voting public, for example, has been referred to as unorganized, diffused and as a general function of attitudes toward the role of women (Wilcox et al. 2003: 43). Also, candidate selection by parties is largely secretive and political leaders can exercise prejudice against certain types of candidates.

**MECHANISMS AND PROCESSES**

Mechanisms connect inputs to outputs.

Example 1, class influences political participation: Unskilled manual workers are less likely to politically participate than professionals and managers. The input is social class position, the output in political participation. What is the mechanism? Some argue it is class consciousness of political interests: Low levels of class consciousness leads to low political participation. Unskilled manual workers have lower class consciousness of political interests than professionals and managers, and hence lower probability of politically participating. What connects class consciousness to political participation? Some argue it is situational: when political conflict is defined as a class conflict, people will think in terms of their social class, which in turn triggers their class consciousness of their political interests. In this situation, lower class workers will strike, or vote based on their class position, or do some other class action based on their consciousness of their political interests.

Processes are a related group of mechanisms. The process above is the link between situation – when class conflict is seen by relevant actors as political conflict -- and class consciousness of political interests.

Example 2, SES influences political participation: people from low SES position are less likely to politically participate than people from high SES. The input is SES, the output in political participation. What is the mechanism? Some argue it is resources available to pursue political interests, such as time, money and organizational skills. Some argue it is self-efficacy, that lower SES feel that the rules of the political game are beyond their ability to change, and hence they disengage from political activity.

What is the mechanism that connects micro relations to macro level phenomenon? What is the mechanism that triggers inequality?
To search for mechanisms, let’s go back to our discussion of income inequality:

Income inequality is an emergent phenomenon built from interactions between micro-level actors. Income inequality is measured via meaningful aggregation of incomes within a country. We can distinguish between perfect equality from less than perfect equality, e.g. inequality. Note that we need to specify what income is (before taxes and transfers or after taxes and transfers).

Q: Who are the relevant actors?

A: All involved in income production and distribution.

Q: How do these actors interact in such a way as to create income inequality? In other words, what is the mechanism?

A: We are guided by theory. We explain income inequality through the interactions between unequal actors in the labor market. In Marxist-inspired theory, the mechanism is in the class exploitation by the bourgeoisie of the proletariat. In social-welfare inspired theory, the mechanism is in the welfare policies of the government that influence income distribution. If we consider disadvantaged groups, we need to consider how gender, race and ethnic relations influence actors’ decisions.

Actors, then, could be buyers and sellers of labor, racial and ethnic groups, men and women. Mechanisms can be found by examining economic regime (capitalist or centrally-planned), other aspects of government’s economic policy, and class, gender, race and ethnic relations.

Remember: These actors must interact in very specific way, and under very specific constraints, to produce a specific macro-level inequality. Any changes in interactions at the micro-level, then, should change the macro-level phenomenon.

The mechanism through which macro context influences micro actors can be:

(a) psychological – influences how people think, or the range of thoughts they can have;

(b) social interactions – influences how people interact, by placing constraints on the range of actions.

Macro-level inequality influences micro-level behavior. Solt (2008) found that economic inequality (income inequality as measured by gini) depresses political engagement, including “political interest, the frequency of political discussion, and participation in elections among all but the most affluent citizens.”