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Chapter 1
Introduction

Man is a mediocre egoist; even the most cunning thinks his habits more important than his advantage.

Friedrich Nietzsche

"Life is what you make it." Although we probably often feel creatures of circumstances, this proverb contains an important insight into the human condition: humans have agency, humans can make decisions about their actions. But how do humans make decisions? What motivates them? Why do different people make different decisions in very similar circumstances? And why do people make similar decisions in vastly different circumstances? These questions about human motivations, decisions and behaviours, and the role of circumstances, lie at the heart of the social and behavioural sciences.

The research question "Why do some people commit crimes?" asks why some people break the rules of their own society. Asking this question seems to suggest that non-criminal behaviour is a kind of default that needs no explanation. The question "Why do people cooperate?" asks why people behave in a way that might be detrimental for themselves but beneficial for society. The question seems just as legitimate as the question about crime but suggests that defection, or criminal behaviour, is the default. Which is the right question to ask? Which behaviour is the default? The answer is 'neither'. Both questions are perfectly legitimate. The interesting thing about human behaviour is that *all* behaviour needs to be explained. What is seen as default behaviour and what as explanandum depends solely on the vantage point of the research(er).

Both vantage points above relate to the topic of social norms or normative behaviour. Why people commit crimes, i.e. contravene social norms, is a question of criminology. Why people adhere to norms is a question of sociology/social psychology. In the end these two questions can be combined into one: the question of human behaviour in relation to *social norms*, i.e. either adhering to them or contravening them. This overarching question lies at the heart of the social sciences and is called *inter alia* the structure-agency problem, the micro-macro problem or

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the individual-collective behaviour problem. We look at the question of social norms from both sides, discussing theories and models of cooperation in Chap. 2 and crime in Chap. 3.

But first of all we introduce social norms, run through some methodological issues around studying micro and macro phenomena in the social sciences and discuss the possibility of analytical social science.

1.1 Social Norms

Social norms govern most of our life. Although we might be conscious of some norms, like queuing politely for the bus in England, most of our behaviour is relatively automatic, like getting dressed before leaving the house. We would not think of transgressing certain norms, whilst we delight in transgressing others. We would not spit into a stranger's face unprovoked or wear our underpants on our head. But we might delight in crossing a red pedestrian light in Germany where it is the norm to wait at the lights, even if there is no car in sight. So, why do we do what we do? And what are the consequences of many people doing as they do?

This is what this book is about. We will look at questions of deliberate action, social influence, conformity, obedience and compliance and how individual behaviours affect social outcomes and vice versa. We will discuss these questions first from a theoretical perspective in Chaps. 2 and 3, introduce the method of agent-based modelling in Chap. 4 and spend the remainder of the book looking at models explaining different aspects of normative behaviour.

Why do people do what they do? The first answer to this question is usually, 'because they want to'. Although this might sound a little flippant, this answer is a serious contender as an explanation. It is the explanation favoured by individualism, although it is usually phrased in rather more formal terms. Individualist approaches to the question of human behaviour start from two premises: (a) individuals have preferences and (b) individuals try to maximise their own utility. Preferences are simply preferences for certain states of the world over other states. I prefer to have cake to being hungry. I also prefer cake to an apple although I prefer the apple to being hungry. Given these preferences I will act in such a way as to get the cake. If cake is impossible I will try to get the apple. Individualism asserts that agents will do whatever guarantees the best outcome for themselves, they are selfish utility-maximisers. Intuitively this makes sense and it can explain a lot of human behaviour, particularly the bad bits. However, some behaviour is rather more tricky to explain within this framework. Let's try out some examples:

Why do people pay on public transport? On many public transport systems one can get away without buying a ticket. Ticket inspections are relatively rare so that paying the fine if one is caught usually amounts to less than paying every time one takes a ride. Buying a ticket is detrimental to an agent's utility and yet, most people buy tickets.

Why do people give money to charity? Charitable organisations receive a lot of donations from all strata of society. Whilst we might say that rich people can easily give some money away, poor people also donate despite it costing them a lot more in relative terms. There is usually no public recognition for the donation nor any direct benefit to the donator. Donating to charity is detrimental to an agent's utility and yet, many people donate.

Why do people join a trade union? Joining a trade union means paying a membership fee. Trade unions bring advantages such as negotiated pay and work conditions. But workers that are not members of a trade union also benefit from the negotiated pay and work conditions. So, although trade unions provide a benefit for their members, non-members benefit from the trade union negotiations and do not have to pay a membership fee. Thus joining a union is detrimental to an agent's utility and yet, many people join unions.

People seem to do things although they are detrimental to their personal utility. Different explanations are put forward as to why they do. People might buy a transport ticket as it is embarrassing to be caught without. People might donate to charity as it makes them 'feel good'. People might join the trade union because they feel the duty to contribute rather than free-ride. These sentiments are not explicable by individualism.

So people might still do what they want to do but what they want to do seems to be more complicated than simple personal preferences and utility maximisation. An alternative explanation of human behaviour is a structuralist approach in which human action is explained by the social structures in which it occurs. The embarrassment we feel being caught, the joy we feel helping others, the duty we feel to contribute, come from the social structures we live in and we have been socialised into. This structuralist approach, although explaining a lot of social behaviour, has a terrible side-effect: Suddenly people no longer do what they want to do but they are made to act by structures. People lose their agency in the mire of social structures that constrain behaviour. This can be called the *Paradox of Agency*, that on the one hand, individual preferences are not enough to explain the range of behaviours found in the world but social structures seem too coercive, leaving no space for any individual agency.

Our second question was, what are the consequences of many people doing as they do? If all your colleagues are members of the union, you might be more inclined also to join the union. If everybody cancelled their membership of the union, the union would cease to exist. The old slogan 'Imagine There Is a War and No One Turns Up!' comes to mind. Many people behaving in the same or similar way brings about social phenomena such as social institutions (trade unions, war), fashions and fads (suits and ties), traditions (Easter egg hunts, birthday parties, Sunday roasts), conventions (driving on the right side of the road) and even new objects (money, wedding rings, crowns). These behavioural regularities are often called 'social norms'.

We will encounter many definitions of a social norm in the following chapters. We will see that all the definitions capture something relevant about social norms but we will also see in Chap. 10 that each definition fails to cover certain other aspects.