

# **On the Multidimensional Foundations of Meaning in Social Life: An Invitation to the Series *Interpretive Lenses in Sociology***

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Sociology is an interpretive endeavor. Whatever the approach taken to study and explain an aspect of social life – qualitative or quantitative, micro or macro – sociologists work to interpret their data to reveal previously unseen, or to clarify previously misunderstood, social forces. However, within the broad field of sociology, and under the purview of its kindred disciplines, there are many scholars who work to unpack the deep structures and processes that underlie the *meanings* of social life. These interpretive scholars focus on the ways that social meanings constitute the core structures of self and identity, the ways that individuals negotiate meanings to define their shared situations, and the collective meanings that bind people together into communities while also setting any given group or context apart from others. From this perspective, meaning underscores social mindsets and personal orientations in the world, as well as the solidarities and divisions that define the dynamics and mark the boundaries of our social standpoints and relationships. Furthermore, such scholars are concerned not only with how the individuals and groups they study actively make and remake the definitions that are central to their lives, as well as how those understandings influence their behaviors, but also how they seek to impact

the world with their meaning-making processes. In this regard, meaning is of paramount significance to both the extraordinary moments and the routine circumstances of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

In their efforts to illuminate the deep social foundations of meaning, and to detail the very real social, political, and moral consequences that stem from the ways people define and know the world around them, interpretive scholars explore the semiotic significance of social actions and interactions, narratives and discourses, experiences and events. In contrast to those who take a positivist or realist perspective and see the world – or, more precisely, argue that the world can be known – in a more direct or literal light,<sup>2</sup> they use various approaches and draw on different interpretive traditions to decipher their cases in order to better understand the deep social, cultural, and psychic foundations of the phenomena they study. From such interpretive perspectives, a fundamental part of any social phenomenon is not directly evident or visible. Rather, the core foundations of meaning underlying the cases scholars study need to be unpacked, analyzed, and interpreted – and then rearticulated – to comprehend their deeper essences.<sup>3</sup> And they do this work of interpretation from various angles and perspectives, using different “lenses.” It is with such interpretive lenses, in sociology and beyond, that we concern ourselves here. How do the people we study make sense of the world? How do they cooperate with others to construct shared understandings, and how do such actors define their situations for various audiences? Furthermore, how do scholars understand their sense-making processes and interpret their actions and experiences? How do they get at the deep social forces, culture structures, and relationships underlying the topics and themes they study?<sup>4</sup> Finally, how do their interpretations allow scholars to construct new and powerful explanations of social phenomena? How do they “possess explanatory torque” with regard to various topics of widespread significance (Reed, 2011: p. 11; see also: Garland, 2006: pp. 437–8)?

Since the dawn of the discipline, many of our most influential thinkers have put forward theoretical paradigms and designed methodological programs to reveal and explain these hidden dimensions of human relationships and experiences. They have worked to unpack and interpret the social logic of our thoughts, ideas, and mental processes, our individual feelings and collective emotions, and the motives that underlie our individual actions and collective behaviors. As the discipline of sociology developed and broadened in scope, our symbolic and interpretive theories and programs fractured and diversified.<sup>5</sup> As emerging camps each laid claim to their own intellectual origins and foundational influences, their most vocal proponents often established, defined, and defended their particular mode of interpreting the various phenomena of social life by pitting their program against other theories and programs. Yet, despite their differences, these various camps retained an interpretive agenda that involves a primary concern with

decoding the semiotic or distinctly symbolic dimensions of their cases. Today, just about every topical area of sociological analysis includes a diverse lot of interpretive scholars who approach that topic from different focal perspectives, drawing on different theoretical and methodological traditions to interpret and explain the general phenomenon at hand.

For example, different scholars within the field of social memory studies might approach the same topic or case by focusing on personal memories and autobiographical accounts, micro-level dynamics and shared memories that emerge via interpersonal and small-group interactions, or macro-level commemorative rituals and national histories. They might also variously focus on the tensions or harmonies between actors within a particular mnemonic landscape or community, or between official and default memories, on the one hand, and marginalized or silenced visions of the past, on the other hand. Despite such significantly different ways of focusing on the topic, all such scholars typically work to unpack the social and cultural foundations of memory in order to better understand the meanings of human experiences and situations.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, as Erin F. Johnston and Vikash Singh (2022) make evident with the inaugural volume in this series, those who study religion might focus on deeply engrained culture structures (as manifest in collective stories of good and evil or in rituals separating the sacred from the profane) that bind adherents together into a collective unit, or they might view religious meaning as emergent in smaller groups, such as families or local parishes, or as fundamentally arising from lived and embodied practices that give significance to religious lives and religious selves. They might highlight the nuances of daily religious lives or the significance of religious meaning across generations. They might also variously see religion as primarily an ideological system that powerful actors use to dominate others and enforce social exclusion, or alternatively as a vital means of resistance to domination, depending on the angles from which they approach their cases. Whatever the topic of analysis may be – whether memory, religion, race, gender, the body, or anything else – *the fact of a shared interpretive endeavor provides an important framework for dialogue and debate among scholars working from different analytic perspectives in the field of study*, a foundation upon which an overall understanding of the substantive themes, salient moral and political issues, and significant events and experiences central to their area of concern may be built. Looking forward, such a framework for dialogue and debate, organized around an exposition of our various interpretive lenses, holds promise for developing new theoretical visions and methodological programs in the field of sociology and beyond.

This is the perspective from which we organized a unique conference, *The Roots and Branches of Interpretive Sociology: Cultural, Pragmatist, and Psychosocial Approaches*, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in August 2018.<sup>7</sup> From this endeavor, we learned that many scholars were excited by our call to bring them to the table to discuss their interpretive lenses with one

another. Many almost intuitively grasped the distinctions we made among traditions and camps in the field (the cultural, the pragmatist/interactionist, the psychosocial, and others) that could be gathered under the umbrella of a broader “interpretive” agenda in sociology. And why not? We make such distinctions between different camps, with their various theoretical and methodological traditions, when we teach. This is how we organize many of our journals, our professional societies and their sections, and other scholarly institutions. We also often use such categories to explain our scholarly identities. In line with these distinctions, qualitative interpretation has developed simultaneously along different paths, among a field of factional communities, and the proponents of these different camps make various claims to distinguish their respective approaches from others.

However, despite the fact that we use such distinctions to delineate our disciplinary field, they rarely sync neatly with the work scholars actually do when they interpret the cases, communities, and issues they study. Rather, in their practices of social research and in their acts of interpretation, scholars combine and integrate elements of different traditions and programs in various ways that help them to focus on and make sense of their experiences as scholars. In other words, the process of interpretation comes alive in the practice of research and, more particularly, in research situations that demand a range of theoretical and methodological tools to illuminate and articulate the social foundations of meaning central to the case at hand.<sup>8</sup> Thus, over the course of their work, scholars develop interpretive lenses that help them find answers to the questions that drive them. While this may not come as a surprise to many readers, we rarely interrogate and compare the nuances of these lenses explicitly. Thus, we have asked the contributors to this series to demonstrate how they do this work, to illustrate their interpretive processes and reflect on them so that the diversity of interpretive lenses in different areas of study can be made more explicit.

### **Interpretive frameworks, theoretical traditions, and the big tent of interpretive sociology**

Taking the metaphor of the “lens” seriously means considering how various approaches to interpretive analysis focus our analytic attention – how we use them to see certain social structures, processes, and forces while backgrounding or ignoring others. Lenses are basically focal configurations. They can be multilayered (existing as a combination or synthesis of previously established perspectives) and multifocal (allowing us to tune our vision differently at different angles of sight), but ultimately scholars craft them from various theoretical and methodological traditions and use them to hone their perception and attention.<sup>9</sup> An exhaustive summary of those theoretical and methodological traditions is well outside the scope of this essay. Instead, we

will outline in this section three broadly relevant *interpretive frameworks*, each of which is rooted in a different set of classical traditions. Moreover, each of these frameworks orients scholars to a different angle of vision, stressing a different dimension of social life as key to unpacking the foundations of meaning in the world. These interpretive frameworks also carry assumptions about the character of data – about what constitutes data, where we should look for it, and what it can reveal.

The *collective-formative framework* conceives of meaning as rooted in underlying collective forces that are expressed as various symbolic representations, patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, and other group properties. The *interactive-emergent framework* sees meaning as an ongoing accomplishment stemming from situated, dialogical, and dynamic processes that can be fundamentally cooperative or competitive. The *psychosocial framework* sees meaning as rooted in the deep structures and processes of psychic life, and views personal interiority as a symbolic realm that is inseparably linked to the broader social milieu.<sup>10</sup> We limit our discussion of each of these interpretive frameworks to outlining the basic ways that they shape the parameters of intellectual focus and prompt us to interpret our cases and topics with attention to different dimensions of meaning. Thus, while highlighting their general properties, we admittedly gloss over or bracket out otherwise important theoretical nuances and ongoing debates in the field. If these frameworks might be understood as *root* perspectives of interpretive sociology, then there are indeed a very wide variety of *branches* that manifest as the lenses scholars use when they creatively apply different aspects of these frameworks, sometimes combining or reconfiguring them in novel ways, to explore their particular topics and cases. Although we focus our discussion in this section on the roots, we also mean to be broadly inclusive of a wider variety of branches.

### *The collective-formative framework and cultural sociology*

We can consider cultural sociology in general, and the strong program in cultural sociology in particular (Alexander and Smith, 1993, 2003), as the epitome of the collective-formative framework of interpretive analysis. Cultural sociologists today take a wide variety of approaches to analyzing and interpreting the normative foundations of meaning in social life.<sup>11</sup> Such scholars work to reveal how culture, as a fundamentally collective system of meaning, shapes our shared mental processes (Zerubavel, 1991, 1997, 2015; Brekhus, 2007, 2015; Friedman, 2013, 2019), emotions (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]; Saito, 2006; McCarthy, 2017), and moral orientations (Wuthnow, 1987, 1989; Dromi, 2020), as well as the narrative structures of our identities, memories, values, and sentiments (Zerubavel, 2003; Smith, 2005; DeGloma, 2014a; Loseke, 2019; DeGloma and Johnston, 2019), along with the

definitions of events and experiences that bond us together with some and mark our most salient distinctions from others. As a collective system of meaning, culture, from this perspective, also provides a framework for action in the world. Outlining the strong program in cultural sociology, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith present a vision of culture as deep-seated and formative, a collective system of meaning with “a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces” (Alexander and Smith, 2003: p. 12). Drawing from and synthesizing aspects of classical Durkheimian and Weberian theory, along with cultural anthropology, structural linguistics, literary analysis, and more, they define their interpretive lens as a “structural hermeneutics” that requires unpacking the deep layers of symbolism and meaning that underlie human actions and events while also identifying how such meanings are ultimately structured according to “dominant cultural codes” that transcend particular events, situations, and cases (Alexander and Smith, 2003: p. 25; see also: Alexander and Smith, 1993). Our task as interpretive scholars is to use the tools of deep hermeneutic analysis to explore how actors understand and shape the meanings of situations, events, and issues with regard to these more broadly systemic “culture structures” (Rambo and Chan, 1990; Alexander and Smith, 2003: p. 14).

This general focus on the collective-formative foundations of behavior, cognition, and emotion stems from the work of Émile Durkheim, who famously defined social facts as “ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual,” as *sui generis* properties of a society that are bequeathed to, or deposited in, individuals via strong socialization processes (Durkheim, 1982 [1895]: p. 51; see also: Berger and Luckmann, 1966: pp. 129–37 on “primary socialization”). This classical argument has aged quite well, as theories of social action, cognition, and emotion are central to contemporary research and debate in various areas of interpretive scholarship and theory today. Later, showing how societies are bonded together via deep-seated, collectively held distinctions between sacred and profane dimensions of the world, Durkheim pioneered the notion that unseen cultural codes, structured in their antithesis to one another, shape our actions (as rituals), thoughts (as beliefs, knowledge, and values), and feelings (as shared emotional states) (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). In this tradition, many cultural sociologists stress that rituals, events, and performances, as well as texts, discourses, spaces, products, and more, can all be interpreted as expressions of deep, underlying aspects of culture that bind members of a collective together. Central to this interpretive framework is the position that collective norms, whether broadly relevant and foundational to societies or manifesting in other communities of various types, exist independently of any individual and provide foundational parameters that structure the thoughts, feelings, and actions of group members.

This focus on collective norms also allows for new and fruitful explorations of how cultural forces underlie and shape social power. In other words, the tenets of cultural sociology allow scholars to focus on how culture establishes a foundation for distinction, tension, or conflict between different groups, to reveal how “meanings can drive domination and exclusion” (Alexander et al, 2012: p. 16; see also: Wagner-Pacifci, 1994; Papadantonakis, 2020), and to see social environments as pluralistic, fragmented, and contentious arenas populated with various communities that compete over the definitions of situations, issues, and events (see, for example: Gubrium and Holstein, 2000; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; DeGloma, 2014a).<sup>12</sup> In this view, actors compete over, and have greater or lesser access to, “the means of symbolic production” as they performatively engage different audiences and work to establish or shift meaning on a broad cultural level (Alexander, 2004a: p. 532; 2017: p. 79; see also: Olick and Robbins, 1998: p. 122; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002: pp. 32, 46–7; Mast, 2012).

Max Weber (1992 [1930]) also pioneered a collective-formative framework, arguing that widespread cultural spirits of any given era shape subjective orientations to action. Weber (1978 [1922]: p. 4), who is most commonly associated with the label “interpretive sociology,” advanced the notion of *verstehen* to stress the need for scholars to develop an “interpretive understanding of social action” by elucidating the meanings of action from the perspectives of the actors. Any individual’s seemingly subjective motivation to act is actually “‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber, 1978 [1922]: p. 4).<sup>13</sup> Thus, through such an interpretation of human behaviors and practices of various sorts, we can understand the social orientations and meaning-contexts that shape human activities on a broader scale (Weber, 1978 [1922]: p. 4; see also: Schütz, 1970: pp. 265–93; Bourdieu, 1990 [1980]). For Weber, this means our actions are rooted in what Isaac Ariail Reed (2011: p. 140) calls a “landscape of meaning.” In this view, Reed argues:

meaning appears as a cause that is not a separate force in the world, over and against mechanisms and motivations, but rather appears to inhere in them, to form the shape and direction in which mechanisms work, and give meaning to the thoughts, intentions, and desires of individual agents. The landscape of meaning *forms* those entities that *force* social life forward. Reed (2011: pp. 140–1)

Thus, cultural meaning and individual motivation, macro-formative spirits and microsocial actions, are inseparable, and we need to understand each with regard to the other (see also: Garland, 2006: pp. 426–8). Likewise, Weber’s (1946 [1915]) notion of “spheres of values,” a predecessor to Foucault’s (1990 [1978]) concept of discourses and Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of fields, also

grounded social actions in more broadly relevant and formative environments and institutions.

*The interactive-emergent framework and symbolic interaction*

We can consider symbolic interactionism as the epitome of the interactive-emergent framework. The perspective of symbolic interactionism arose with the retrospective interpretation of philosophical pragmatism (Huebner, 2014), most notably as pioneered by Herbert Blumer (1969), who coined the term in 1937 and later published its founding treatise. Blumer's (1969: p. 2) oft-cited three premises of symbolic interactionism make meaning central while firmly rooting it in social interaction among individuals. Thus, for Blumer, and arguably for symbolic interactionism proper, meaning is actively accomplished in situated exchanges with very little attention to the broadly collective (transcontextual) foundations of meaning as a pre-existing cultural force. While cultural sociologists principally call attention to the collective foundations of meanings in social life, pragmatists and symbolic interactionists of various stripes principally focus on the *emergence* of shared meanings via social interaction and dialogue, including the meanings we attribute to the self, which is viewed as a dynamic and reflexive social product.<sup>14</sup>

In practice, many interactionists do not limit themselves to Blumer's rather narrow acultural definition, and the contemporary school (or, more precisely, *schools*) of interactionism has only become more diversified, fragmented, and broadly applicable (Fine, 1993; Brekhus et al, forthcoming). However, most interactionists do look (as Blumer did) back to the work of George Herbert Mead, as well as Charles Horton Cooley, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and others linked to the University of Chicago during the early 20th century. Particularly influential in this tradition is Mead's (2015 [1934]: pp. 173–8) notion of an “internalized conversation of gestures,” which centers analytic attention on socially situated interactions among people, interrelations that shape a reflexive internal dialogue and root the meaning of self, and self-understanding, in the social situation. For Mead, and for interactionists more generally, the self is a “symbolic, situationally contingent, and structured” (Fine, 1993: p 77) social entity in that its definition, along with that of experiences and events, arises from and during the back-and-forth among individuals. From this perspective, “humans pursue meaning,” whether of the self or of the world around them, “by the dialogical method” (Wiley, 2006: p. 5). Moreover, “inner speech is the key to the human semiotic or symbolic ability, itself a means of inventing culture” (Wiley, 2006: p. 5). Thus, interactionist scholars stress the emergence of shared meaning via dynamic social interaction, as well as the emergence of the self as an evolving product of dynamic social relationships.<sup>15</sup> This involves a continual process of communication and interpretation, which occurs both *among* individuals



(as a process of interaction) and *internally* (as a process of inner dialogue) as individuals communicate with themselves in order to engage the world.

The pragmatist and interactionist tradition emphasizes that people cooperate to make meaning in their social situations. From this perspective, norms of cognition, emotion, and action, along with moral orientations and ethical principles, emerge in localized group settings.<sup>16</sup> These meaningful dimensions of our lives are negotiated properties that do not exist without the creative work of individuals who are invested in cooperating to reach a joint understanding of the situations they share with others. Indeed, interactions allow for the creation of a shared moral order (Goffman, 1967; Scott, 2015: pp. 25–48). They also provide a dynamic foundation for conflict, oppression, and inequality (Schwalbe, 2015 [2008]). While diverging from classical pragmatism in many ways, and drawing inspiration from British anthropology (see: Dingwall, 2021), Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1967, 1986 [1974]) continued to stress the local character of meaning but put more emphasis on actors' efforts to define their situations – their selves, their local scenarios, and the world around them – and make effective use of institutional frameworks and settings in the process. Others recognize different influences, but in general scholars working in line with this broad tradition typically interpret interactive work as the social source of meanings that have ongoing consequences for people's lives, a perspective that has informed an incredibly wide array of analyses related to different cases and topics, including those that elucidate the construction of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990; see also: Benzecry and Winchester, 2017: pp. 55–7) and race (West and Fenstermaker, 1995; Van Ausdale and Faegin, 2001; Hordge-Freeman, 2015).

Despite stressing a different angle on meaning, proponents of the interactive-emergent framework of interpretation do not necessarily reject collective-formative arguments, and vice versa. We maintain that these perspectives are complementary. In fact, many scholars actually work to bridge these cultural and interactionist approaches to achieve a more comprehensive view of social life. Thus, many who identify in some way as symbolic interactionists are also concerned with culture; they just approach it differently. In a position critical of Blumer, Gary Alan Fine (1979, 2012) stresses the interactive foundations of shared idiocultures rooted in small groups and communities. Building on his career of ethnographic analysis, Fine (2021) more recently elaborated on the strong cultural influence of meso-level communities as units in-and-of themselves but also as “hinges” that link the individual and micro dimensions of social life to more collective macro-social forces. Others, borrowing from both pragmatism and the same hermeneutic theories that inspire cultural sociologists, stress that the self exists as a narrative that is shaped in communities and informed by broader cultural forces (see, for example: Denzin, 1987; Davis, 2005; DeGloma, 2014a). Likewise, many who identify as cultural sociologists are also concerned with interaction. For example, Alexander's (2004a, 2017)

notion of “cultural pragmatics” bridges a strong emphasis on cultural foundations of meaning and action with attention to situated performative acts.

### *The psychosocial framework*

Yet, another path has been forged by those who bring psychoanalytic thinking to bear on social analysis. Psychosocial analysis, currently experiencing a revival among Western scholars,<sup>17</sup> highlights the link between the psychic interiority of individuals and the social world. It is a “paradigm for thinking about psyche and society together” (McLaughlin, 2019: p. 20). Whereas those who are inspired by Weber’s interpretive vision consider the social logics that shape individual motivations, and those inspired by pragmatist theory to consider the self as inner dialogue, psychosocial scholars employ psychoanalytic theory to interpret the depths of psychic structure and meaning and to consider the connection of this complex and deeply personal realm to the social world, often addressing cultural and interactionist themes in the process. They stress a reorientation to the two-way link between the symbolic depths of individual interiority and broader social forces and often theorize the psychic characteristics of communities as part of this interpretive process (Chancer and Andrews, 2014; McLaughlin, 2019; and compare Reed, 2011: p. 135). The aim is to develop more “sufficient multi-dimensional views of human beings and their/our social interactions” and thereby “to accord human complexity its due” (Chancer and Andrews, 2014: p. 3). Such a perspective is distinct in its orientation and conceptual architecture, yet ought to be compatible with other interpretive frameworks. Thus, the psychosocial interpretive framework is “methodologically the natural ally” to other modes of analysis that seek to reveal underlying foundations of meaning (Frost and Jones, 2019: p. 5). Illustrating this interpretive affinity, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2003: p. 4) argues, “cultural sociology is a kind of social psychoanalysis. Its goal is to bring the social unconscious up for view.”

Sigmund Freud was a pioneer primarily in that he recognized personal interiority as a frontier, a deeply symbolic one that trained analysts must interpret in order to get at deeper truths (Zaretsky, 2004). However, “psychoanalysis is not only an exploration ... of purely interior life. It addresses the interaction of the internal and external in experience, affect, memory, and learning” (Calhoun, 2014: p. x), and, we might add, the body, identity, power and authority, and much more. Founding thinkers, from Freud to Melanie Klein to Jacques Lacan and many others, stressed the symbolic depths of psyche but also saw these depths as symbolic links to the social world. Activists and scholars of the mid-20th century, most notably those associated with the Frankfurt School, broadened the psychoanalytic mission to analyze the rise of fascism in Europe, as well as various other

politically charged social issues, by interpreting their psychosocial character and by positing the nature of social personality structures. Social forces can have consequences for individual psychologies and vice versa, they argued in various ways. These psychosocial scholars of the Frankfurt School, along with a few influential US sociologists (most notably C. Wright Mills) and various feminist theorists, influenced a wave of new social movements to shift the analytic lens from personal interiority to shared interiorities, and from *within* the individual psyche to *among* individuals with psychic and experiential connections, as expressed in the feminist mantra of the time “the personal is political.”<sup>18</sup> Such a perspective has grown with the rise of the trauma paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s and the ensuing advent of the field of trauma studies, along with ongoing and developing questions about the nature of power and authority in the world (see: McLaughlin, 2014, 2019; Decker, 2019). Influential sociologists – including (but not limited to) Talcott Parsons, Neil Smelser, and Nancy Chodorow, and later Jeffrey Prager, Lynn Chancer, Patricia Clough, Neil McLaughlin, George Steinmetz, and Arlene Stein – have also imported psychoanalytic theory into various realms of social analysis. Despite these well-known contributions, however, and despite the growing range of scholars engaged in psychosocial work, the notion of a psychosocial scholarship (or psychoanalytic sociology) remains marginalized in the field of sociology (Cavalletto and Silver, 2014; Chancer and Andrews, 2014; Silver, 2014) and consequently off the radar of most who use some version of the collective-formative and interactive-emergent interpretive frameworks. If we value blending and combining tools from various frameworks to explore new and productive interpretive lenses – which is indeed a core statement of this series – remedying this marginalization of psychosocial perspectives remains an important and under-realized task.

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In our very brief overview of these foundational interpretive frameworks in the field of sociology, we unavoidably left out a number of traditions and perspectives that could just as easily be included. We do not claim to be providing a neat or comprehensive genealogy of knowledge and influence here, only to highlight a few foundational approaches that have inspired a diverse array of contributions to interpretive analysis and theory. Indeed, the distinctions we make here are themselves an analytic formulation that reflects the classification norms of our field. Drawing from these frameworks and combining them in creative ways, interpretive scholars have attempted to address the social influences shaping human interiority (from the psyche to subjective meaning, from inner dialogue to our cognitive and emotional processes), the self (as a reflexive entity, as a social structure,

and as an actor positioned in the world), social action (with regard to the meanings of motivation and our social orientations to various objectives), and community (stressing solidarity and shared meaning, from the small group to the meso-level collective to the largescale society), as well as distinctions and contentions that often characterize intergroup relations and a pluralistic field of social standpoints, along with performance with regard to all of these levels.

### **Intellectual flexibility and the interpretive imagination**

As theories and programs proliferated in the field of sociology, scholars have developed and applied the collective-formative, interactive-emergent, and psychosocial frameworks in novel and innovative ways, cultivating new interpretive lenses that they use to illuminate pressing topics and significant issues. For example, building on the work of Karin Knorr-Cetina (1999), many scholars in the area of science and technology studies adopt and adapt a foundational interactive-emergent framework to interpret the construction of broadly relevant paradigms of scientific knowledge by analyzing situated laboratory cultures.<sup>19</sup> Considering another case, some feminist theorists, following the lead of scholars like Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1989, 1999) and Lynn S. Chancer (1992), have used and developed a psychosocial framework to advance a critical analysis of gender and class dynamics that define interpersonal and institutional relationships. In other cases, scholars advancing the critical perspectives of postcolonialism and critical race theory have called the dominant assumptions of more established sociological traditions into question, and for good reason. However, many such scholars also engage and refocus a collective-formative framework while working to affect intellectual and political change. Consider, for example, that when Edward W. Said (1978) critiqued the ways that Europeans defined the Orient to establish “European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (p. 7), he elucidated a historically entrenched and formative Eurocentric classification scheme (with cultural, intellectual, political, and moral dimensions) that has served to justify durable power relations for centuries. Consider also, for example, that by bringing the concept of whiteness to the fore of our collective analytic attention, critical race theorists are unpacking, interpreting, and critiquing a broadly influential collective-formative construction that underlies and shapes a central power dynamic in the world. Not only have postcolonial and critical race scholars worked to shift the structure of our intellectual and analytic attention to address previously ignored issues and perspectives, but they have done so by interpreting and critiquing broadly relevant culture structures that shape individual mindsets and institutional practices along morally and politically important dimensions of power.

These are just a few of many possible examples that show the far-reaching relevance of the interpretive frameworks we outline here. Scholars driving each of these critical interventions – science and technology studies, psychosocial feminist theory, postcolonialism, and critical race theory – have reconstructed some traditional premises and assumptions of sociological analysis to address new and vital questions while engaging our interpretive frameworks and refocusing our interpretive lenses in important ways.

While scholars engage these broadly influential interpretive frameworks to focus sociological analysis in different ways, we must be careful not to reify any particular framework or intellectual camp by treating it as a pure or discrete entity that is essentially separate from the others. We must also be careful to acknowledge that many scholars draw from several perspectives and combine aspects of multiple frameworks in creative and productive ways, crafting interpretive lenses that allow them to address the particular situations, issues, relationships, and problems they are working to illuminate.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, our best theoretical developments have always combined different interpretive tools and traditions in new and exciting ways. Yet, despite this intellectual flexibility, sociologists often treat intellectual camps and schools as discrete entities, using disciplinary labels to typify and situate different scholarly contributions. Such classificatory practices allow us to form intellectual identities that lump us into camps, in line with some and split from others, paving the way for career paths and reputational narratives that follow familiar plotlines and trajectories. They also provide grounding referents with which scholars shape and justify their claims to *interpretive authority* by way of *analytic positionality*. We claim our analytic camps in order to define our relationships to the communities we study *and* to our scholarly field at large. While, generally speaking, demarcation of the field is unavoidable, there are also consequences of which we should be aware, including a tendency for the rigidity of our categorical structures to inadequately capture the flexibility of our intellectual practices.

One consequence of the way we divide our field into distinct schools and programmatic sections is that we perpetuate an *illusion of purity*. We treat our intellectual camps and interpretive traditions like singular units that stand alone – apart and sometimes even above the others. The tendency to see any interpretive school as a crystalized and contained paradigm is, we argue, a phenomenon made possible by a selective structure of intellectual attention. For example, to speak of a pure “interactionist” lens is to downplay the rich variety of traditions and influences that have produced this diverse and fragmented school of thought (Fine, 1993; Fine and Tavory, 2019; Brekhus et al, forthcoming), as well as to ignore the ongoing retrospective (re)construction of its intellectual heroes and their ideas (Huebner, 2014; Dingwall, 2021). Today, symbolic interactionism resembles more of a potluck

than a particular cuisine, diffuse in its offerings, addressing countless topical areas of study. Likewise, to wholly engage the strong program in cultural sociology as it is articulated by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (1993, 2003), one must grasp and contend with their synthesis of ideas at the core of this lens, with special attention to the contributions of Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Ferdinand de Saussure, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and many others. Moreover, among cultural sociologists, there is a great deal of variation in terms of topical focus, level of analysis, character of data, and analytic method. Like symbolic interactionism, cultural sociology today is populated by an immense variety of scholars who focus on countless topics in quite different ways while drawing on various sources of inspiration. The same holds for the blossoming field of psychosocial studies, which we expect will continue to expand its breadth of intervention across the field. It is only when such camps take on a crystalized and almost reified existence – when we start to speak of them as singular or insulated paradigms – that we lose sight of the fact that they are porous constructions inspired by multiple ideas and inclusive of various orientations to the practice of interpretation. In other words, “every such program of necessity involves combinations of methodological tendencies, theoretical presuppositions, and political implications or valences” (Reed, 2011: p. 12). Scholars who claim these traditions use them in different ways, a phenomenon we expect will only swell with time. In short, we should embrace this intellectually flexibility and value variation in our interpretive lenses.

Another related consequence of our tendency to neatly split our field into different programs – to think in terms of what we might call an intellectual sectarianism – is an *illusion of irreconcilability*. Consider two aspects of this phenomenon: First, we often reify the differences among intellectual camps and traditions in order to frame the contributions of one in contrast to others. Second, we then tend to accentuate conflict between perspectives, sparking “us” versus “them” debates and forging polemics with which we sometimes express a biting dismissiveness of competing programs. In our view, this is often an intellectual expression of the phenomenon Freud (1961 [1930]: p. 72) termed “the narcissism of minor differences,” an accentuation of a relatively small number of distinctions at the expense of much larger similarities for the purpose of reinforcing boundaries, and with the effect of generating hostility or conflict (on this point, see especially: Movahedi, 2014; Silver, 2014: p. 54). Moreover, when what we refer to as *illusions* of purity and irreconcilability translate to *practices* of research and theory construction, they heighten tendencies of singularity and rigidity over multiplicity and flexibility, spurring debate at the expense of cooperation and encouraging “claims to novelty that appear as novelty only within traditions, and only because traditions are cultivated in a parochial way” (Benzecry et al, 2017: p. 3). Alternatively, to see just how fruitful it can be

to flexibly combine aspects of various frameworks into useful interpretive lenses, one only needs to consider Alexander's (2004a, 2017) notion of "cultural pragmatics," or Fine and Tavory's (2019: p. 458) call to include "shared meaning" and patterned social structures as premises of symbolic interactionism, or the analytic diversity of social trauma studies (for example, work by: Saito, 2006; DeGloma, 2009; Stein, 2014), or work that blends foundational analytic perspectives to build a cultural theory of narrative identity (for example: McAdams, 1993; Frank, 1995; DeGloma, 2014a; DeGloma and Johnston, 2019), or psychosocial perspectives on contemporary racism (Jefferson, 2014; Prager, 2014; Singh 2014), for example. In sum, if culture, interaction, and psyche are entwined and mutually reinforcing loci of meaning, we must embrace a conscious and deliberate intellectual flexibility in our work, rooted in and fed by a diversity of approaches to the interpretation of meaning in social life.

★ ★ ★

The purpose of this series is to interrogate, explore, and demonstrate the various interpretive lenses that scholars use when they engage their areas of interest, their cases, and their research situations. As such, the volumes in this series will provide a unique platform for scholars who use different interpretive lenses to come together to explore their approaches to unpacking meaning with regard to common themes. Each volume is centered on a substantive topic (for example, religion, the body, or contentious memories) or a particular interpretive-analytic method (for example, semiotics or narrative analysis). The editors of each volume feature the work of scholars who approach their central topic using different interpretive lenses that are particularly relevant to that area of focus. They have asked each author to explicitly illustrate and reflect on two dimensions of interpretation in their work, and to explore the connections between them. First, they asked authors to address how the individuals and communities they study assign meanings and achieve shared understandings with regard to the core topic of their volume. In doing so, they address the social and cultural forces at play in shaping how people understand their identities, experiences, and situations, as well as how they frame their accounts, motivations, and purposes while acting and performing in the world. Second, volume editors asked contributing authors to explicitly reflect on their interpretive processes and approaches to unpacking the meanings of the social phenomena they study. Some authors present new material while others provide a reflexive overview of their research to date, but all illustrate and discuss the work of interpretation and the central significance of meaning. Such conscious reflection on our interpretive traditions and lenses – on how they shape our analytic foci (in terms of what cases we explore, at what levels of analysis,

with regard to which social actors) and the ways we find meaning in our cases – can illuminate under-recognized or unspoken choices we make in our work. Further, it can expose blind spots and suggest new frameworks for dialogue among scholars. This reflexive dimension, along with the diversity of lenses featured together in each volume, is what makes this series unique. In this vein, and to these ends, we hope the volumes of this series will present arrays of interpretive lenses that readers can use while working to make sense of their own cases and to develop new perspectives of their own. In the process, we also hope to advance the dialogue about interpretation and meaning in the social sciences.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On the centrality of meaning in interpretive social analysis, see Reed's (2011) important work on interpretation and knowledge, especially his discussions of the "interpretive epistemic mode" (pp. 89–121) and the "normative epistemic mode" (pp. 67–88).
- <sup>2</sup> See Reed (2011), especially on the "realist semiotic and the illusion of noninterpretation" (p. 52).
- <sup>3</sup> Indeed, this is what Clifford Geertz (1973) meant when he called for "thick description" in ethnographic analysis.
- <sup>4</sup> Alfred Schütz (1967 [1932]: pp. 205–6; 1970: p. 273) recognized the layers of interpretation we point to here when he argued: "The thought objects constructed by the social scientist ... have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of [people], living their daily life within their social world. Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, namely constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene." Geertz (1973: p. 9) made a similar distinction when he argued "that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions." See also: Reed (2017: pp. 29–31) on "interpreting interpretations." Such a distinction also informs the fundamental premises of psychoanalysis, as the analyst is always in the business of interpreting interpretations and unpacking layers of symbolism.
- <sup>5</sup> See Benzecry et al (2017) for a recent statement on "the fragmented nature of social theory" and an outline of the diverse theoretical traditions that continue to drive research in the field today.
- <sup>6</sup> A forthcoming volume in this series titled *Interpreting Contentious Memory: Countermemories and Conflicts over the Past*, edited by Janet L. Jacobs and Thomas DeGloma, will feature scholars who use different interpretive lenses to study mnemonic conflict.
- <sup>7</sup> For the original program to the 2018 conference, including a full listing of topics and sessions, see [www.interpretivesociology.com/archive-2018-conference.html](http://www.interpretivesociology.com/archive-2018-conference.html).
- <sup>8</sup> See also: Tavory and Timmermans (2014: p. 35), who advocate engaging the process of research and interpretation armed with "multiple theoretical perspectives."
- <sup>9</sup> As Asia Friedman (2013) argues, the metaphor of the *filter* may be more suitable in some cases to highlight the social structure of perception, specifically with regard to attention and distention as well as relevance and irrelevance.
- <sup>10</sup> Some might recast our formulation here as one that primarily involves a distinction between macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. While often relevant, this is also misleading. Rather, each of the interpretive frameworks we discuss refers to a dimension of meaning that manifests at, and can be studied from, all levels of analysis.
- <sup>11</sup> For recent statements, see: Alexander et al (2012); Reed (2017); Spillman (2020). For the purposes of illustrating the collective-formative framework in this essay, we focus on



“cultural sociology” as Alexander and Smith (2003) distinguish it from a “sociology of culture.” Scholars in the latter camp, which is evident in its own variety of influential work, place great emphasis on the significance of culture in social life but ultimately treat it as a factor shaped by other variables (as in the work of Pierre Bourdieu) or as a pragmatic resource (which is most famously associated with Ann Swidler’s (1986) “toolkit” metaphor). While these and other traditions make important contributions in their own right, we use the strong program cultural perspective as our exemplar of the collective-formative framework we are discussing here.

- <sup>12</sup> From a different angle, this view of culture as a foundation for competition is also at the core of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) sociology.
- <sup>13</sup> Alfred Schütz (1967 [1932]: pp. 97–138), working to reconcile Weber’s sociology with a philosophical phenomenology, developed the notion of “intersubjectivity” as a powerful alternative to the notion of the “subjective” that is often wed to the idea of *verstehen*, thereby stressing the linking of minds and collective meanings (what Schütz referred to as “typifications”) rooted in shared social standpoints.
- <sup>14</sup> In our discussion, we lump together the “varieties of microsociology” outlined by Claudio E. Benzecry and Daniel Winchester (2017), who distinguish phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and dramaturgy from symbolic interactionism proper. While the distinctions between these various categories certainly have historical and theoretical relevance, all are embraced by proponents of symbolic interactionism today as belonging to a multifaceted and diverse school or camp focused primarily on the situated and cooperative emergence of meaning. For recent statements, see also: vom Lehn et al (2021); Brekhus et al (forthcoming); Dingwall (2021).
- <sup>15</sup> See also: Perinbanayagam (1991); Athens (1994); Wiley (1994, 2016). While Mead viewed the societal “generalized other” as relatively integrated and harmonious (much like Durkheim’s view), W.E.B. Du Bois (1995 [1903]) developed his theory of “double consciousness” to address how societal dynamics of power and oppression shape the self. Others have developed the theory of self-reflexivity and inner dialogue by synthesizing it with theories of narrative identity (Ezzy, 1998; DeGloma, 2014a; DeGloma and Johnston, 2019).
- <sup>16</sup> See Fine (1979, 2012, 2021) on “idioculture” and Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) on “group style.”
- <sup>17</sup> See Frost and Jones (2019) on the relaunch of the *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*.
- <sup>18</sup> This now-famous mantra was first used as the title of a paper published by activist Carol Hanisch in the 1970 magazine *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation – Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*. On this shift, see also: Chancer (2014); DeGloma (2014b).
- <sup>19</sup> See also the discussion in Benzecry and Winchester (2017: pp. 59–61). See also: Fine (1984) for an earlier review of relevant theoretical perspectives.
- <sup>20</sup> See Tavory and Timmermans (2014), who advocate for such an empirically grounded theoretical flexibility. See also: Spillman (2020), who organizes her assessment of the field of cultural sociology by emphasizing collective symbolic forms, interactive processes, and socio-historical contexts, arguing that these perspectives “should be fruitfully combined for a fuller picture” (p. 16) of our topics and cases.

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