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CONCEPTIONS OF INTERACTION AND FORMS OF SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

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Two different conceptions of social interaction, the "normative" and the "interpretive," are examined in terms of the mode of description required for deductive explanation. It is shown that if social interaction is an interpretive process, descriptions of interaction cannot satisfy the requirement for literal description imposed by the logic of deductive explanation. Consequently, sociological explanations of patterns of action must necessarily be interpretive and purposive, in the sense developed by Weber and Kaplan. In addition, this view of social interaction suggests that the process of interpretation itself be taken as a phenomenon for investigations as proposed in ethnomethodology and sociolinguistics.

THE dominant methodological position in contemporary sociology is that patterns of action are to be explained using the deductive form of explanation found in the natural sciences.¹ Recently, Blumer (1966a) has, as in earlier papers (1954, 1956), challenged this view in arguing for a conception of social interaction as an interpretive process, but the serious issues he

raised were obscured in the exchange following his paper.² Nevertheless, the problems raised by Blumer are fundamental for sociology and need to be addressed directly. The purpose of this paper is to formulate the interpretive conception of social interaction and to discuss the methodological issues it raises concerning the description of behavior and explanation of patterns of action. In so doing, it is hoped that the nature of sociological inquiry will be clarified and, in addition, that the relations between sociology and ethnomethodology will be put into useful perspective. The concern here, then, is not with the relative merits of the interpretive conception of interaction, but rather with the methodological consequences of taking seriously the idea that social interaction is an interpretive process.

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¹ On the deductive pattern of explanation, see Kaufman (1944:68-69), Hempel and Oppenheim (1948), and Nagel (1961). Strong statements of the position that sociological explanation should follow this pattern may be found in Homans (1964, 1967), Zetterberg (1965), Rudner (1966), and Blalock (1969:1-3). More typically, this position is expressed obliquely, as in Dubin (1969: passim, and especially 166, 170-171), Greer (1969:123), Parsons (1937:6, 24; 1960:468), Merton (1968:41, 150, *et passim*), Smelser (1968:14-15), Stinchcombe (1968), Gibbs (1968), and Wallace (1969:3). For the prevalence of the "natural science model," see virtually any introductory text or methods book.

SOCIAL INTERACTION AS AN INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

The important features of the interpretive conception of interaction stand out most

² See Bales (1966), Blumer (1966b), Woelfel (1967), Stone and Farberman (1967), and Blumer (1967). The exchange is concerned primarily with whether G. H. Mead's work has been properly understood and fails to come to grips with the methodological problems raised by Blumer.

clearly when contrasted with current major theoretical approaches. While these approaches differ markedly among themselves in terminology and in important psychological and sociological presuppositions, they are nevertheless all based on a common underlying view of the interaction process, a view that will be called here the "normative paradigm." Consequently, we begin with a brief formulation of the fundamental ideas of the normative paradigm, following which we will develop the contrasting point of view of interaction as an interpretive process.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to note that the central concern of sociology under both the normative and interpretive paradigms is with "action" as opposed to nonmeaningful behavior. That is, at the most elementary level, the phenomena of interest to sociology are regularities and changes in selected features of behavior that are meaningful to the individuals involved. In order to emphasize this focus, the term *action* may be used to refer to behavior that is meaningful to the actor.³ Actions do not occur in isolation but rather are linked to each other as one actor responds to and anticipates the actions of others, and this is so even when an action is performed in solitude. Any particular action, then, is part of a process of interaction involving several actors responding to each other's actions.

In this view, large-scale social phenomena, such as organizations, institutions, conflict, and the like, can be seen as patterned relations among the actions of individual actors in interaction with one another. It must be emphasized that on the one hand this does not necessarily entail psychological reductionism,⁴ and, on the other, complex social patterns need not themselves be meaningful to the actors. For example, the rate of theft in a group may not be known to the members of the group; nevertheless, an individual act of theft is behavior meaningful to the

members, and the rate expresses a regularity in these actions that can be taken as a phenomenon for sociological investigation. Thus, complex social phenomena are seen as patterned arrangements of interactions among individual actors. The process of interaction, then, is at the logical core of sociological interest, even though for some purposes this is left implicit.

The Normative Paradigm

In the major current theoretical approaches in sociology, the actor is viewed, on the one hand, as having certain acquired dispositions, such as attitudes, sentiments, conditioned responses, need-dispositions, and the like, and, on the other, as being subject to particular expectations supported by sanctions.⁵ For convenience we may call such expectations "role-expectations," and we use the term "status" to refer to an organized set of role-expectations applying to a particular actor. In these terms, the role-expectations of any one status are thought of as differentiated with respect to the statuses occupied by other actors with whom the occupant of the first is interacting. Consequently, interaction between actors is governed by the role-expectations of their respective statuses (Merton, 1968:422-424; Gross, *et al.*, 1958; Oeser and Harary, 1962), and questions concerning interaction are treated primarily in terms of the relation between the actors' dispositions and role-expectations, role conflict, conformity and deviance, and sanctioning or reinforcement processes. Further, the actors are assumed to share a system of symbols and their meanings, including language and gestures, that serves as a commonly understood medium of communication for their interaction. Moreover, as Inkeles (1959) and Homans (1964) have noted, some set of explicit or implicit psychological assumptions is taken for granted that constitutes the theorist's model of the actor (e.g., learning mechanisms and the notion that actors seek to optimize gratification, or that they repeat reinforced

³ Even behavioristically inclined writers, such as Homans (1961), when they deal with social phenomena, use common-language categories of meaningful action to identify the "behavior" they seek to explain and suggest no other definition of their phenomena, much less provide explicit criteria and demonstrate that these are satisfied in their work.

⁴ Nagel (1961) has called this the "ontological thesis" of methodological individualism, which does not entail a commitment to reductionism.

⁵ On the importance of normative rules, see Homans (1961:13), Coleman (1968b), and of course the traditions drawing on Linton (1936), Parsons (1937, 1951, 1961), Parsons and Shils (1951), and Merton (1968).

actions and avoid those that have been punished). Interaction in a given situation, then, is explained by first identifying structures of role-expectations and complexes of dispositions, and then showing that the relevant features of the observed interaction can be deduced from these expectations and dispositions along with the assumptions embodied in the model of the actor.

The Assumption of Cognitive Consensus. The notion of a shared system of symbols and meanings occupies a particularly critical and essential place in the normative paradigm (e.g., Parsons, 1951; Skinner, 1957; Warriner, 1969). This can be seen clearly if we observe first that common to both the concepts of disposition and expectation is the idea of a stable linkage between the situation of an actor and his action in that situation. In the case of a disposition, this linkage is a tendency for the actor to behave in some definite fashion in a particular situation. In the case of an expectation, the linkage is an imperative: the individual ought to behave in some specified way in a given situation. It will be convenient to refer to such a linkage, whether it is a disposition or an expectation, as a rule, which can be represented by an ordered pair (S, A) , where S is a specified situation and A is a particular action linked to the situation S by a disposition or an expectation. A disposition, then, is a rule that has been internalized or learned by an actor, while an expectation is a rule that has been institutionalized in a social system.

It is evident now that if a particular rule, (S, A) , is relevant on a given occasion, that occasion must be recognized by the actor as an instance of the situation S . For if the occasion is treated as an instance of some other situation, say S' , then a different rule, say (S', A') , would be relevant. Similarly, on any given occasion the concrete behavior of an actor must be recognized as either an instance of the action A or as an instance of some other action, for otherwise such processes as reinforcement and sanctioning would be impossible. The actor, then, treats specific occasions as instances of situations and concrete behaviors as instances of actions. Moreover, if social interaction is to be stable, the different participants must define situations and actions in essentially

the same way, since otherwise rules could not operate to produce coherent interaction over time. Within the normative paradigm, this cognitive agreement is provided by the assumption that the actors share a system of culturally-established symbols and meanings. Disparate definitions of situations and actions do occur, of course, but these are handled as conflicting subcultural traditions or idiosyncratic deviations from the culturally established cognitive consensus.

For the observer, this implies that the questions of what the situation is and what action an actor has performed on a given occasion are answered by referring to the shared system of meanings of the group within which the interaction takes place. Without recourse to the common cognitive culture, there is no way for the observer to decide whether two behaviors, performed by different actors or the same actor at different times, are repetitions of the same action or represent totally different actions. The researcher, then, must learn the culture of a group, particularly its language, before he can say what it is that he observes.

The Status of the Normative Paradigm. Specific theories based on the normative paradigm are, of course, formulated in widely varying terminologies and differ from one another in important ways concerning further psychological and sociological assumptions. For example, Parsons and Shils (1951) employ a modified psychoanalytic model of personality, while Homans (1961) attempts to stay within a framework of propositions drawn from operant-conditioning psychology, and Coleman (1968b) uses a revised version of rational man. Further, compared with other sociological theorists, Parsons (1951, 1961) insists on a highly abstract and analytical empirical interpretation of his concepts. On the macrosociological level, debates center on problems of functional analysis (e.g., Demerath and Peterson, 1967), stability and conflict, and the interrelations between legitimation, coercion, and power (e.g., Blau, 1964; Coser, 1967). However, in these controversies, the basic assumptions of the normative paradigm are not in question. Rather, they are presupposed by the very issues in contention even when as is frequently the case, these basic assumptions are left entirely implicit. In ad-

dition, however, some sociological inquiry, particularly that influenced by symbolic interactionist thought or informed by a tradition of historical scholarship, ignores various assumptions of the normative paradigm, even while sometimes making use of concepts based on it. Nevertheless, despite its often implicit and sometimes ambiguous status, the paradigm has tended to dominate theoretical and methodological discussions in contemporary sociology.

The Interpretive Paradigm

The conception of interaction as an interpretive process expounded by Blumer (1954, 1956, 1962, 1966a), Turner (1962), and others (e.g. Mead, 1934; Mills, 1940; Garfinkel, 1962, 1964), differs sharply from the normative paradigm. Turner (1962:23), for instance, directly contrasts the normative role model with the concept of role-taking: "*The idea of role-taking shifts emphasis away from the simple process of enacting a prescribed role to devising a performance on the basis of an imputed other role.* The actor is not the occupant of a status for which there is a neat set of rules—a culture or set of norms—but a person who must act in the perspective supplied in part by his relationship to others whose actions reflect roles he must identify." A role, in Turner's formulation, is a coherent pattern of behaviors. The actor is assumed to have a tendency to perceive the behaviors of others in such patterns, and "it is this tendency to shape the phenomenal world into roles which is the key to role-taking as a core process in interaction" (1962:22). Further, "the unifying element [by which behaviors are seen as a pattern] is to be found *in some assignment of purpose or sentiment to the actor*" (1962:28). In short, one actor perceives the behavior of another as a meaningful action expressing some purpose or sentiment embodied in a role. On the basis of this perception of what the other is up to, the actor then devises his own course of action. Moreover, Turner (1962:22) notes that "since the role of alter can only be inferred rather than directly known by ego, testing inferences about the role of alter is a continuing element in interaction. Hence the tentative character of the individual's own

role definition is never wholly suspended. Consequently, the perceived purpose and meaning in the other's action are always provisional and subject to revision in the light of subsequent events in the course of interaction. Thus, what was initially seen as one role may later be seen in retrospect as having actually been a very different role, resulting in a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the actions the other was performing all along.

Blumer (1966a:540) develops this same conception of interaction using somewhat different terminology. Thus, he suggests that in interaction "the participants fit their acts together, first by identifying the social act in which they are about to engage and, second, by interpreting and defining each other's acts in forming the joint act. By identifying the social act or joint action, the participant is able to orient himself; he has a key to interpreting the acts of the others and a guide for directing his action with regard to them. . . . [The participants] have to ascertain what the others are doing and plan to do and make indications to one another of what to do." Further, Blumer (1966a:538) notes the tentative character of a participant's formulation of what he and the others are about: ". . . in the flow of group life there are innumerable points at which the participants are redefining each other's acts." Thus, Turner's view of social interaction coincides with Blumer's. **Both conceive of interaction as an essentially interpretive process in which meanings evolve and change over the course of interaction.**

Documentary Interpretation and Indexicality. In order to see clearly the methodological implications of the interpretive paradigm, it will be useful to employ the sharper formulation based on Garfinkel's use of the notions of documentary interpretation and indexicality (Garfinkel, 1962, 1964). Documentary interpretation consists of identifying an underlying pattern behind a series of appearances such that each appearance is seen as referring to, an expression of, or a "document of," the underlying pattern. However, the underlying pattern itself is identified through its individual concrete appearances, so that the appearances reflecting the pattern and the pattern itself mutually determine one another in the same way that the

“part” and “whole” mutually determine each other in gestalt phenomena (see Gurwitsch, 1964). This mutual determination of appearances and underlying pattern is referred to by Garfinkel as “indexicality,” and a particular appearance is called an “indexical particular.”⁶ A central characteristic of documentary interpretation is that later appearances may force a revision in the perceived underlying pattern that in turn compels a reinterpretation of what previous appearances “really were.” Moreover, on any given occasion, present appearances are interpreted partially on the basis of what the underlying pattern projects as the future course of events, and one may have to await further developments to understand the meaning of present appearances.

In these terms, role-taking in interaction is a process in which the participants engage in documentary interpretation of each other’s actions such that the underlying pattern consists of the context of their interaction, including their motives, purposes, sentiments, etc. (i.e., their respective roles), of which the particular actions are seen as expressions. Each action in the course of interaction, then, is an indexical particular that is understood by the participants in terms of the place of the action in the context of what has gone before and what they see as the future course of the interaction. Moreover, this context itself is seen for what it is through the same actions it is used to interpret. That is, on any particular occasion in the course of the interaction, the actions that the participants see each other performing are seen as such in terms of the meaning of the context, and the context in turn is understood to be what it is through these same actions. Further, what the situation on any particular occasion is understood to have been may be revised subsequently in the

light of later events. Consequently, what the situation “really was” and what the actors “really did” on a particular occasion are continually open to redefinition.

It is apparent that in the interpretive view of social interaction, in contrast with the normative paradigm, definitions of situations and actions are not explicitly or implicitly assumed to be settled once and for all by literal application of a preexisting culturally established system of symbols. Rather, the meanings of situations and actions are interpretations formulated on particular occasions by the participants in the interaction and are subject to reformulation on subsequent occasions.

Methodological Implications. It is now possible to draw the methodological implications of a fundamental observation made by Blumer (1966a:542). If the basic process in interaction is documentary interpretation in the form of role-taking, through which actions are seen as they are in terms of the actor’s perception of the context, “the study of interaction would have to be made from the position of the actor. Since action is forged by the actor out of what he perceives, interprets, and judges, one would have to see the operating situation as the actor sees it, perceive objects as the actor perceives them, ascertain their meaning in terms of the meaning they have for the actor, and follow the actor’s line of conduct as the actor organizes it—in short, *one would have to take the role of the actor* and see the world from his standpoint.” [Emphasis added.] That is to say, in order to understand and follow the course of interaction, the researcher must engage in documentary interpretation, and in particular he must do so in order to identify what action is performed at any given moment.⁷

The central premise of this argument is that there is no way of seeing an event as an action and of describing its features other than through the documentary method of

⁶ The concept of documentary interpretation was borrowed and somewhat transformed by Garfinkel from Mannheim (1952:53–63). The term “indexical” is taken from Bar-Hillel (1954), who defines an indexical expression to be one that depends for its meaning on the context in which it is produced. Strictly speaking, the concept here should be called “essential indexicality” to indicate that it is in principle impossible to eliminate the dependence on context when there is a gestalt “part-whole” interdependence. See Garfinkel and Sacks (forthcoming).

⁷ This is so even using fixed observational categories such as Bales’ (1951). Invariably, to classify an action as an instance of a particular analytical category, such as “gives support, . . .,” the observer must impute motives or sentiments to the actor and identify the other actors to whom the act was directed. That is, the observer must decide the meaning of the behavior in its context.

interpretation. Because actions are constituted and have their existence only through the participants' use of the documentary method of interpretation, the researcher has access to these same actions as intended objects of description only through documentary interpretation.

Moreover, this conclusion holds whether the researcher relies only on his own observations or uses reports by informants, organizational or historical records, or survey respondents' replies to questions. To the extent that accounts from such sources are treated as descriptions of patterns of action or of expectations or dispositions in which the researcher is interested, these accounts are documentary interpretations on the part of the individuals providing the information, and in order to construct his own descriptions as a basis for analysis, the researcher must see through these reports to identify the underlying pattern they reflect (see Cicourel, 1964, 1968). That is, the researcher's description is itself a documentary interpretation, no matter how abstract or analytic his descriptive categories may be.⁸

Descriptions based in this way on documentary interpretation may be called *interpretive* descriptions. Thus, a major consequence of viewing social interaction as an interpretive process is that depictions of interaction in terms of the meanings of the actions, whether these depictions be the participants' own or the researcher's, must be construed as interpretive descriptions. The importance of this conclusion, as will be seen below, is that the characteristics of interpretive description are incompatible with the logic of deductive explanation.⁹

⁸ The only way to avoid this is to relinquish interest in the pattern of action by employing descriptive categories based on features that are invariant over all possible reinterpretations of the actions. That is, the features on which the description is based would have to be independent of the entire range of meanings that could be imputed to the concrete behaviors. But then the concept of action would become irrelevant, and in fact it would not be definable within such a system of categories.

⁹ This point was noted by Blumer (1954, 1956). However, the use of the concept of essential indexicality allows a much sharper statement of the argument, since it places the discussion in a clear logical context (Bar-Hillel, 1954; Quine, 1960, 1961). It should be mentioned that Buckley (1967)

DEDUCTIVE EXPLANATION AND MODES OF DESCRIPTION

In the deductive form of explanation, facts are explained by showing that they can be deduced logically from assumed theoretical premises and already given empirical conditions. Descriptions of the phenomenon enter into such an explanation at two points: as the given empirical conditions and as statements of the facts to be explained. Consequently, commitment to the deductive form of explanation entails commitment to a mode of description that satisfies the logical requirements of deductive argument. The notion of a valid deductive argument, however, rests on the assumption that the meaning of each assertion entering into the argument is independent of the occasions of its use, i.e., that the assertion is a "statement" and not an essentially indexical expression (Bar-Hillel, 1954:365-366, 378; Quine, 1960:42, 44, 227; 1965:5-8). In particular, then, each description entering into a deductive explanation must be treated as having a stable meaning that is independent of the circumstances in which it is produced. A description satisfying this condition as well as the usual criterion of intersubjective verifiability will be called *literal*, in the sense that the description itself is to be taken in a strictly literal fashion. Thus, deductive explanation in any strict sense is appropriate and meaningful only when the descriptions of phenomena can be treated as literal. A central question, then, concerns the conditions under which descriptions can be taken as literal.

The Characteristics of Literal Description

Literal description is taken for granted in the natural sciences, and problems of description tend to be treated mainly as practical matters of competent technique rather than as posing fundamental methodological questions of concern to practicing scientists. However, as Schutz (1962:53) has observed, "intersubjectivity, inter-communication, and

has also criticized theories within the normative paradigm. However, it would seem that little is gained by employing a general-systems metaphor unless the fundamental descriptive problems are solved.

language are simply presupposed" as taken-for-granted resources for the conduct of research in the natural sciences. That is to say, science is fundamentally a social enterprise, so that scientific descriptions are the products of research activities conducted by members of a particular scientific community and consist of accounts of those activities that are provided and understood by competent members of that community. The conduct of research and communication of results, moreover, depend on common-sense knowledge that is taken for granted by the members of the relevant scientific community, and one's competence as a member of that community consists partially in being seen as having command of this body of presumptively shared common-sense knowledge.¹⁰ It is impossible, then, for a researcher to give a complete account of his research activities, but instead he must rely on common-sense understandings that he and his colleagues assume are taken for granted by all competent members of the fraternity.

Consequently, the question is how descriptions can be treated as literal by members of a particular scientific community, that is, as independent of context and intersubjectively verifiable. As an initial approach to the problem, the following is proposed. Any description of a phenomenon is based on perceived features that the phenomenon displays to the observer. A literal description, then, amounts to asserting that, on the basis of those features, the phenomenon has some clearly designated property or, what is logically the same thing, belongs to some particular well-defined class of phenomena. Consequently, for members of a scientific community to treat a description as literal, they must take it for granted that the following are enforceable criteria for the products of research activity:

- (1) A description of a phenomenon as an instance of a class specifies explicitly the particular features of the phenomenon that are sufficient conditions for counting it as belonging to that class.
- (2) The features on which the classification is based are demonstrably recognizable

by any competent member of the relevant scientific community independent of the other members.

"Feature" in this context means either a part of the phenomenon specified by further descriptions meeting the above two criteria or an aspect of the perceived phenomenon taken for granted as a matter of common sense, that is, perceivable by all competent members of the relevant scientific community. Thus, an attempt to clarify what a particular feature is must either take the form of further literal description or else resort to "what any competent person can see" such that to question the appearance of the feature is to render questionable one's status as a competent member of that particular scientific community. Literal description, then, depends on a body of common-sense knowledge, taken for granted by scientific colleagues, as an essential resource.

Further, "sufficient conditions" is meant in its full logical sense. Consequently, all phenomena exhibiting the same features must be identified as members of the same class, and membership of a phenomenon in that class can be denied only by showing that certain of the alleged features on which the classification was originally based were actually not present at the time the classification was made. Except for such a demonstration, a literal description can be revised only in the direction of making it more refined and never in a way that denies the original classification. In particular, a literal description stands as true irrespective of what else might be said about the phenomenon, and thus what the description means depends in no way on the context of other features the phenomenon might also display. For example, under the assumption that the measurements were done competently, the assertion that a certain body had a mass of 3.52 ± 0.03 grams at a particular time must stand as a stubborn fact that cannot be altered by other statements that might be made about the body. Of course, the theoretical significance of this fact will depend heavily on other facts, as well as on the theoretical framework employed by the investigator. The fact itself, however, cannot be denied without challenging the competence with which the original observations were made.

¹⁰ On the crucial importance of implicit, unexplained procedures in natural scientific research, see Bridgeman (1927, 1951), Campbell (1920, 1921), Kaufman (1944), and Kuhn (1961, 1962).

Finally, the enforceable character of the criteria of literal description means that, while demonstration of conformity to them frequently may be omitted, the members of the relevant scientific community take it for granted that they may legitimately be called upon to show explicitly that any description offered as literal in fact satisfies the criteria.

Thus, scientific research is a practical activity, which, as any practical activity, is embedded in a context of implicit common-sense knowledge, and is carried on by members of a particular scientific community for the purpose of developing descriptions that can serve as the bases for eventual theoretical understanding. In particular, when explanation is taken to be deductive in form, the practical purpose at hand in research is the production of descriptions that can be treated as literal. The criteria of literal description, required for the conceptual and logical clarity of deductive explanation, then, are imposed as enforceable canons of criticism for the products of scientific research.¹¹

The Description of Interaction

The phenomena of interest in sociological investigation are patterns of action, which consist ultimately of interactions between particular actors. Even when the explicit concern is with macroscopic phenomena, these are comprised of patterns or regularities in interactions within some population. In a fundamental way, then, sociological investigation depends upon descriptions of interactions, and, if sociological explanations are to be deductive, these descriptions must be taken to be literal. Under the normative paradigm, the question of literal description can be dealt with by invoking implicitly or explicitly the assumption of a shared system of symbols and meanings, for such a complex of shared symbols could be used to provide context-free and unambiguous de-

scriptions of situations and actions (e.g., Warriner, 1969). If, however, social interaction is essentially an interpretive process, then, as we have seen, descriptions of interaction are necessarily interpretive descriptions. But if at this most fundamental level the only way an observer can identify what actions have occurred is through documentary interpretation, then descriptions of interaction are not intersubjectively verifiable in any strong sense—since the interpretations of different individuals will necessarily agree only when they are able to negotiate a common social reality (Emerson, 1969; Scheff, 1968)—nor are such descriptions independent of context.

For, in describing interaction interpretively, the observer necessarily constructs an underlying pattern that serves as the essential context for seeing what the situations and actions are, while these same situations and actions are a necessary resource for seeing what the context is. Thus, the observer's classification of the behavior of an actor on a given occasion in the course of interaction as an instance of a particular type of action is not based on a limited set of specifiable features of the behavior and the occasion but, rather, depends on the indefinite context seen as relevant by the observer, a context that gets its meaning partly through the very action it is being used to interpret. Moreover, though the behavior of an actor on a given occasion may be classified as an instance of some particular type of action, this classification is indefinitely revisable on the basis of later events or further information.¹²

It is, for example, a familiar experience in social interaction for individuals to explain what they really meant by some previous gesture, and such reinterpretations frequently are accepted at face value, thus sharply altering the course of interaction. In observational studies of interaction, it is not uncommon for the observer to understand what the events recorded in his notes

¹¹ The emphasis on conceptual and logical clarity as enforceable canons of criticism for deductive explanation contrasts markedly with the conduct of everyday practical affairs. In practical activities, one must be only as precise and rigorous as is necessary to accomplish the present purposes; to insist on more is to be seen as an obstructionist or some other objectionable social type. See Garfinkel (1960).

¹² This does not mean that behavior has no literally describable or "objective" consequences. Rather, the point is that the behavior and its consequences take on sociological relevance only when subject to interpretations by actors in the society. Thus, Nagel's discussion of this matter (1961:475-476) misses the essential point.

really consist of only in the light of subsequent events and often only after he has left the field altogether. Similarly, in survey research, the meaning of a set of items or an index often becomes clear only well after the analysis has begun to take definite shape and a clear story line has started to emerge, in which case, the index receives its meaning from the way it fits into the emerging pattern of findings, but the pattern of findings partly depends on seeing the index as measuring a particular thing.

Clearly, then, the description of interaction cannot be treated as literal. Rather, to understand what is meant by a particular description it is necessary to see it in the light of what else has been said about the interaction. Thus, in order to establish the meaning of a description of an action, the observer must rely, not only on a body of common-sense knowledge shared with his colleagues, but rather also on his grasp of the common-sense understandings shared by the participants in the interaction itself.¹³ Consequently, in order to communicate to his colleagues, the observer must evoke in them the context for any given descriptive statement so that they will see it in the same light he does.

Moreover, it should be evident that since larger group, organizational, institutional, or cultural patterns are themselves comprised of regularities perceived by the observer in interactions among actors, the description and analysis of such patterns are thoroughly interpretive processes. Consequently, such macro-social patterns are no more susceptible to literal description than are the

particular interactions entering into them. Of course, an observer, whether participant observer, historian, or survey analyst, generally has a wider range of events and a broader context to interpret than do any of the individual participants, and thus his descriptions may sometimes be seen as more comprehensive, penetrating, and "objective," than the participants' own accounts. This, however, does not warrant a claim to literal description, since the mutual determination of event and context remains, and the observer's account of what in fact happened at particular times and places is subject to continual revision in the light of unfolding events, further information, and reflection.

IMPLICATIONS

It is evident that if social interaction is taken to be an interpretive process, then descriptions of interaction cannot be taken as literal, and sociological explanations of patterns of action cannot be treated as deductive in any strict sense.¹⁴ This conclusion does not deny the possibility of sociological investigation, but it does compel a reexamination of the nature of sociological explanation. While this reexamination cannot be undertaken in complete detail here, some general remarks can be offered.

Interpretive Sociology

As we have seen, sociological explanations of observed social phenomena typically take the form of identifying dispositions of the actors such as beliefs, attitudes, etc., on the one hand, and perceived features of their situations such as norms, socially structured interests, and the like, on the other, such that actors so motivated and situated would act in the manner observed. If social interaction is taken to be an interpretive process, such explanations cannot be reconstructed meaningfully in deductive form but rather must be viewed as imputations of

¹³ This is crucial in view of Quine's (1960) insistence that the adequacy of a paraphrase of a given sentence (i.e., a description of that sentence in terms of its meaning) always depends on the purposes intended by the person using the sentence. Thus, descriptions in the natural sciences are indexical expressions but can be paraphrased, if needed, by appropriate, more nearly eternal sentences through reliance on the taken-for-granted, shared competence of scientific colleagues, though as Quine (1960:227) notes, this is seldom actually done in practice. However, this strategy is not available when the objects being described are themselves actions, often in the form of utterances. For, in this case, the adequacy of the description or paraphrase depends on the participant's intentions and purposes, i.e., its meaning to the actor, which is what one is trying to describe in the first place.

¹⁴ From this point of view, polemics such as Homans' (1964, 1967) are fundamentally misguided. Indeed, Homans' own efforts at deductive explanation (e.g., 1961) can be seen as resting heavily on metaphor and ad hoc reinterpretations of supposedly firm concepts and underlying principles. This, of course, does not mean that his explanations are necessarily bad ones, but only that they cannot be treated as deductive in a strong sense.

purposes and circumstances to the actors that render their actions intelligible to the observer. Nevertheless, as Kaplan (1964: 363–367) has emphasized, interpretation of action in terms of the purposes and situations of the actors is a meaningful and significant form of explanation. The conclusion, then, is not that sociological explanations of patterns of action are impossible but that they differ in fundamental ways from explanations of nonmeaningful phenomena.

The essentially purposive nature of sociological explanation was recognized explicitly by Weber (1947:98–99) in his conception of adequacy on the level of meaning. In this perspective, a conceptual framework for sociological analysis is not to be viewed as a prolegomenon for the formulation of a deductive theory but rather as a complex of interrelated ideal types used for interpreting concrete social phenomena (Weber, 1949: 89–103). In this view, particular sociological concepts such as attitude, belief, definition of the situation, status, role, norm, common definition, etc., cannot be identified with variables to be measured by means of literal description but, instead, are what Blumer (1954) has called “sensitizing concepts,” i.e., abstract ideas that when filled with particular empirical content enter into a scheme for interpreting a given concrete social phenomenon.

In addition to this altered view of the nature of sociological theory, the shift from the normative to the interpretive paradigm imposes different methodological requirements on empirical investigations. Perhaps the most important of these at present is that far more careful and sophisticated attention needs to be given to the manner in which direct observations, both in field studies and in survey research, are coded.¹⁵

¹⁵ It must be emphasized that quantitative methods, such as survey research, are still applicable within the interpretive paradigm. However, it should be clear that survey data are not literal. To be sure, one could examine the association between check marks on questionnaires, and the presence or absence of a check mark can be described literally. But for this to be more than merely an exercise in statistics, some sociological significance must be given to the check marks, and as Cicourel (1964) has emphasized, the connection between the marks on paper and the social phenomena to which they are taken to refer is established interpretively rather than literally.

So long as these operations are seen as literal measurement, the problems involved in them can be viewed as technical difficulties that can be treated conceptually as “error” in a sense similar to measurement error in the natural sciences. When, however, these are recognized as interpretive processes, then they must be viewed as carrying a major burden of conferring significance and meaning on the data. As a consequence, the investigator needs to be much more explicit and self-conscious than is customary in making available to his audience the context and grounds for his interpretations.

In addition, much more careful attention needs to be given to the way in which a particular interaction is embedded in larger social contexts and to the methodological problems of studying macro-social phenomena.¹⁶

Finally, the problem of objectivity is very different in the natural sciences on the one hand, and in interpretive sociology on the other. In the former, “objectivity” is equivalent to literal description, while in the latter significant literal description is not possible, and the problem of objectivity must be formulated in terms in which the question of moral evaluation is an essential feature (see Weber, 1949 and Gouldner, 1968, for suggestive statements of the problem).

The Study of Interpretive Processes

A further consequence of viewing social interaction as an interpretive process is that the process itself can be taken as a phenomenon for investigation in its own right (Garfinkel, 1961, 1967; Cicourel, 1964; Zimmerman and Pollner, forthcoming). It is essential to note that in such an investigation, the documentary method of interpretation is treated, not as a resource taken for granted

¹⁶ Current versions of symbolic interaction theory do not adequately address these problems insofar as uncritical use is made of such notions as “significant symbol,” “common definition,” and the repetitive, stable, regular features of large segments of social life (e.g., Blumer, 1962:187; 1966a:541; Denzin, 1969:923). While these and allied ideas play an essential part in symbolic interaction discussions of large-scale social phenomena, explicit account is not taken of the fact that recognition and description of such elements in social phenomena are themselves interpretations on the part of the observer.

in the study of patterns of action, but as a topic for study itself. In this case, the phenomena under investigation shift from the actions of the participants to the way the interpretive process is used by them so as to produce for them the sense of a shared, orderly social world.¹⁷

For the purpose of studying interpretive processes as such, the investigator suspends interest in what actions the actors are performing and why they are doing so, although the actors themselves are of course vitally concerned with these questions. Instead, attention is directed to the "methods" by which the actors assemble, communicate, and justify accounts to themselves and each other of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Of particular importance is the manner in which the participants produce and sustain through their accounts on a given occasion their sense that their interaction is embedded in an objectively existing social world and that they share common definitions and a common language. This, in turn, raises the fundamental problem of the reflexive character of interpretive processes (Garfinkel, 1967), for the accounts through which the social world is objectified are themselves part of that social world. These, and related problems that can only be alluded to here,¹⁸ are among the central concerns of ethnomethodology and certain areas of sociolinguistics.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay has been to

¹⁷ Failure to recognize this shift in topic is the source of the fundamental misunderstanding evidenced by writers such as Coleman (1968a) and Denzin (1969). See the lucid dissection of Coleman's remarks by Israel (1969). While Denzin's discussion is generally sympathetic, apparently he also has failed to grasp this central point. Thus, he states (1969:922) that in ethnomethodology "the method of documentary analysis is set forth as a preferred strategy." But, the point is that there is no other way to do sociology, and the thrust of ethnomethodological interest is to study the properties of the interpretive process itself.

¹⁸ In particular, the problem of reflexivity requires a more expanded formulation to avoid the impression that it is merely a paradox. See Garfinkel (1967), Wieder (1969), Zimmerman (1970), and Douglas (forthcoming) for further discussion.

formulate as clearly as possible the methodological implications of treating social interaction as an interpretive process. The principal result was that if interaction is essentially interpretive, then descriptions of interaction cannot satisfy the requirements of literal description imposed by the logic of deductive explanation. This, then, requires an altered view of sociological inquiry. Sociological explanations of patterns of interaction are inherently interpretive rather than deductive, and thus they are subject to canons of objectivity and competence quite different, though no less demanding, from those employed in the sciences based on literal description. Further, the apparatus of sociological theory is not to be viewed as a primitive effort toward deductive explanation but rather as a framework of conceptions that guides the investigator in formulating an interpretive scheme useful for the analysis of his problem.

Finally, by dropping the assumption of a culturally established cognitive consensus represented by a shared system of symbols that can be taken for granted by the investigator, the interpretive perspective makes available for inquiry the process of documentary interpretation itself. In these terms, it is clear that ethnomethodology and interpretive sociology are not competitive enterprises, nor is one a "subfield" of the other. Rather, each deliberately suspends interest in what is taken as problematic by the other.

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AGE, COHORTS AND THE GENERATION OF GENERATIONS

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Social change often takes the form of many small units, like persons or families, changing from "old-style" to "new-style" behavior, creating a behavioral trend. The rate of change is very important for the further effects. If middle-aged and old people are less likely to change, we get differences between birth cohorts at any given time and, for the population as a whole, delayed response to new conditions. Studies of rigidity and age generally support a fixation model of cohort behavior, and so do data on mobility and age. A tentative model of cohort effects is developed on this basis and the corresponding lag function shown; it implies a pattern of smooth oscillations in the behavioral time series with an average "period" of 25 years or more. The result has nothing to do with the distance between generations as customarily understood, i.e., from birth to marriage and child-bearing.

OUR subject is the much debated "generations" and the role they play in social change. It will be shown that a particular statistical model is capable of explaining some of the underlying phenomena in a fairly simple manner. Thus we shall try to show not only how generations may arise, but also the consequences that follow for the rate and manifestations of social change. In order to do so and to establish that the model is consistent with present knowledge of behavioral change, it will be necessary to review findings on the relation between age and mobility or change-proneness, for this relation, as will be seen, plays a crucial role in the model. However, no exhaustive treatment is intended. Also, it will be advantageous to adopt the more precise terminology favored in current demographic literature and speak of cohorts and of cohort effects.

As used in demography, "cohort" stands for a set of individuals who pass some crucial stage at approximately the same time, like marriage, first employment, and especially birth. In what follows, the analysis will be focused on birth cohorts, persons born in the same time interval, so that we might distinguish, for example, the 1911-1915 cohort from the 1916-1920 cohort, and so on.

The place of the cohort concept in the study of social change has been treated by Ryder (1965). At this point the rationale for cohort analysis will have to be examined a little closer. Obviously we are interested in cohort data because we hope they will reveal something not revealed by ordinary period analysis; in other words, members of a cohort prove to have something in common beyond the defining property. It should be noted that several models of cohort behavior can be constructed, and they may all have some validity, each within its own area of application. One would be a compensation model which may be tried on fertility data. Should women of a certain marriage cohort and their husbands encounter a business depression in early marriage and reduce their fertility below the duration-specific normal value, the model would predict a higher than normal value during a subsequent period. If economic conditions have returned to normal, couples would strive to make up for lost fertility.

However, the model which is relevant in the present context is a different one, a *fixation* model. This is also the model which is stressed in Ryder's paper. With increasing age people become less likely to change; in its later life each birth cohort reflects, there-

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