

Series Editors' Preface: Interpretive Lenses in Sociology – On the Multidimensional Foundations of Meaning in Social Life¹

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.²

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,³ 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.⁴ 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?⁵ 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 437–438)?

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. 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 and 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.⁶ 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 or compare the nuances of these lenses explicitly.

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. 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, authors 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, communicating, 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, and 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. Furthermore, 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.

In this volume, Thomas DeGloma and Janet Jacobs present a collection of essays that explore the morally and politically charged phenomenon of “contentious memory.” With an overarching emphasis on the ways that actors promote countermemories as they confront dominant and entrenched views of the past, this collection highlights different theoretical and methodological traditions scholars use to explore a variety of cases that show how the past is commonly a focal point of social conflict. Approaching a breadth of topics from a range of interpretive perspectives, the chapters in this book offer numerous insights that the editors tie together in the volume’s introduction, which also offers a cogent and compelling overview of the various issues and dimensions of analysis associated with mnemonic conflict and contentious memory. With this important work, DeGloma and Jacobs show how and why disputes over the past are central to the broad and developing area of social memory studies, as well as to many other areas of sociological concern and study.

The contributors to this volume are all memory scholars in their own right, but, as the editors point out, “they are also variously known by the ways their research makes other contributions – as psychoanalytic social theorists, anthropologists, historians, immigration scholars, race scholars, ethnographers, gender theorists, social movement researchers, and more.” These scholars apply various combinations of analytic perspectives to unpack the complexities of conflict and contention with regard to social memory and history, with many calling direct attention to the frictions between personal or autobiographical memories, on the one hand, and more public and collective memories, commemorations, and memorials, on the other hand. In the process, they call attention to consequential issues such as war, genocide, military occupation, electoral conflict, immigration and deportation, race and racism, trauma and its transmission, and various political conflicts over history. All the while, these authors have worked to illustrate and reflect on their particular interpretive lenses, considering not only what their cases illustrate, but also how they have come to know and understand this – how the people they study build the meanings of the past and how they, as scholars, create their own meanings and frameworks for comprehending the social dynamics of memory. All of these chapters, therefore, offer readers various tools that can be used to study new cases focused on unresolved, difficult, and problematic past events, episodes, and experiences. We are thrilled to feature this important book as part of our *Interpretive Lenses in Sociology* series.

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Notes

- ¹ An extended series introduction is available for open access download at www.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/interpretive-lenses-in-sociology. Shorter and slightly modified versions appear as prefaces to the different volumes of this series.
- ² 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).
- ³ See Reed (2011), especially on the "realist semiotic and the illusion of noninterpretation" (p 52).
- ⁴ Indeed, this is what Clifford Geertz (1973) meant when he called for "thick description" in ethnographic analysis.
- ⁵ Alfred Schütz (1967 [1932], pp 205–206; 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." Also see Reed (2017, pp 29–31) on "interpreting interpretations." Such a distinction informs the fundamental premises of psychoanalysis, as the analyst is always in the business of interpreting interpretations and unpacking layers of symbolism.
- ⁶ See also Tavory and Timmermans (2014), who advocate engaging the process of research and interpretation armed with "multiple theoretical perspectives" (p 35).

References

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