

The Interpretive Tradition in Social Science

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Abstract

The interpretive tradition has a long, rich, and diverse history within social science. This article moves beyond the positivist-interpretivist debate by outlining the interpretive tradition in the social sciences as a set of interwoven conversations over the last two hundred years. Six movements within the tradition are presented, along with key contributors to each movement: The classical interpretivist tradition, which focused on the differences between social and natural sciences; the interpretivist response to positivism in the twentieth century; and four interpretivist discussions since the mid-twentieth century: the rise of poststructuralism, developments in the critical tradition, efforts to transcend the qualitative-quantitative epistemological divide, and the rise of theories of morality and interpretation.

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to trace interpretivism as a conversation, or more properly, as several conversations within social science. I understand interpretivism as a tradition within social science, composed of efforts to understand, to construct meaning, to tap into the subjective experiences that people have. This is the subject of much debate about what social science is and should be. It is fundamentally an epistemological discussion—what can social scientists claim to know, and how can they claim to know it? The discussion overlaps with other debates: the relationship between the “natural” sciences and the “social” sciences, objectivity versus subjectivity, inductive versus deductive, qualitative versus quantitative, the meaning of truth, human nature, the nature of social relationships and of society more generally, ethics and morality, research methods, the role of the researcher, the role of the scholarly community, the nature and place of the everyday, the role of history and context, disciplinary boundaries, and the very role of theory itself. I will also reference these themes, but only as they come up in the discussions over interpretivism. I emphasize too that interpretivism is about social science: It is not bound by any one discipline, and indeed draws in several disciplines (sociology, history, political science, anthropology, philosophy, etc.).

My primary audience is scholars in the family field who may not be familiar with the interpretive tradition. They may know some of the key figures, but may not know the full extent of the discussion, the contemporary diversity of interpretivism, current debates in the field, and the range of possibilities interpretivism gives us for research. This paper is not a review or criticism of the positivist tradition. Hollis (2002) argued that explanation and understanding—positivism and interpretivism—are typically presented against each other within the philosophy of social science, and within that dichotomy, values and ethics have always been problematic. I

do not use that approach in this paper. A discussion of the positivist tradition in social science would be the subject of another paper. Indeed, positivism (and post-positivism) is mentioned only in passing, as interpretivist scholars responded to it in various ways. This paper is organized around a long, ongoing, and increasingly diverse debate *within* interpretivism. Interpretivists debate each other about the meaning and import of what they are about, and this creative discussion has resulted in insight and an ever-increasing array of options for social theories and research. In that light, this essay is not intended to be exhaustive. It is intended to give a general outline and selected, key thinkers who moved the conversation forward.

This essay is motivated by my observation that in family studies, interpretivism and positivism are often presented against each other, often with arguments that one or the other is better. Unfortunately, this discussion does not capture the current state of the field, nor does it capture the rich history and diversity within the interpretive tradition. Where interpretivists have themselves applied their ideas to family, I pointed that out. Moreover, this is an overview against which more in-depth analyses and applications can be positioned. I hope that this essay gives a sense of what the possibilities are, and I hope that this will be fertile ground for further discussion and application of the ideas of particular theorists, movements, and the interpretive tradition in general. I especially hope to open the door to a great deal more diversity in interpretive theories and interpretive social research within the field of family studies. I believe that by doing so, we will better grasp families and family members' experiences in their diversity and complexity, and with that understanding, be better positioned to improve the human condition.

I organize this essay around various conversations—which I call movements—within the interpretive tradition. Movement 1 is the classical interpretivists in the nineteenth century and

into the twentieth century. Movement 2 is the mid-twentieth century response to the positivist critique. Movement 3 is the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism within the interpretive tradition. Movement 4 is the critical tradition of interpretivism. Movement 5 comprises the rise of mixed-methods research and efforts in the late-twentieth century and early-twenty-first century to transcend the qualitative/quantitative divide. Movement 6 is the rise within the last thirty years of theories of morality and interpretivism. Of these movements, only the first two are chronological; movements 3 through 6 are largely simultaneous. The reader should also note that while often theorists were directly responding to each other, at other times they might not have been responding to each other consciously. A review of their work captures a long, diverse, and ongoing tradition of interpretivist thought in the social sciences.

Movement 1: Understanding and Interpretation as the Goals of Social Research

I take the writings of Martineau, Dilthey, Simmel, and Weber as representing what I call the first movement in the interpretive tradition within social science. During this movement, the social sciences in general were being established as a particular field of inquiry, apart from the natural sciences. Each of these scholars explored the role of subjectivity and interpretation in this field—both within the people who were the objects of inquiry and within the researchers who studied them. Between them, they articulated several bases for interpretation as central to the social scientific endeavor.

Harriett Martineau established the basic orientation of interpretive research in her classic methodological work, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. A well-known British writer, she wrote this book after her field research in America during the 1830s. Perhaps reflecting her historical position in the early post-Enlightenment period in which progressive thinkers believed in the possibility of human access to external reality, she suggested that the purpose of her

methodological treatise was to “aid in supplying means of approximation to truth” (Martineau 1989:21). However, unlike some other scholars, she argued that research into human society cannot follow the model of the natural sciences: Subjects of physical scientists are less diverse than human subjects, and important things like human emotion do not rely upon the judgment of things that physical scientists study (Martineau 1989:18-19). The most important methodological tool in studying human society, then, is what Martineau called “sympathy,” which will help the social researcher to accomplish the goal to understand the thoughts and feelings of the people being studied. (By *sympathy*, she seems to mean a harmony or kinship with another’s feelings.) Indeed, while the bulk of her book was given to technical advice about what to study and how to study it when doing interpretive fieldwork, Martineau thought this orientation of the researcher was the first and most important instrument (if I may use the word) of the researcher.

The observer must have sympathy; and his sympathy must be untrammeled and unreserved. If a traveler be a geological inquirer, he may have a heart as hard as the rock he shivers, and yet succeed in his immediate objects: if he be a student of the fine arts, he may be as silent as a picture, and yet gain his ends: if he be a statistical investigator, he may be as abstract as a column of figures, and yet learn what he wants to know: but an observer of morals and manners will be liable to deception at every turn, if he does not find his way to hearts and minds (Martineau 1989:52).

This finding a “way to hearts and minds” is not just an instrumental goal, building a relationship with the local population so that they will give you the information you require; it is a subjective and interpretive goal. Without sympathy, the researcher “cannot but misunderstand the greater part of that which comes under his observation” (Martineau 1989:54). Coming to understand how group members feel and think, the researcher will see what is “most important” within the

given culture, and will grasp the meanings behind the “symbols” that pervade the culture in ways that group members perceive them (Martineau 1989:58).

Wilhelm Dilthey followed in the same vein as Martineau, believing that the key methodological difference between the human sciences and the natural sciences is hermeneutics, or understanding and interpretation. He defined understanding as “recognizing inner content from signs received by the senses” and interpretation as “systematic understanding of recorded expressions” (Dilthey 1976:248). Understanding must happen in order to get along in a particular culture, and so understanding is necessarily a general process. Interpretation is what a researcher does. Interpretation requires understanding, but what is understood must be recorded in some way before it can be interpreted. Thus, interpretive techniques (in Dilthey’s mind) are applied to recordings (what we today would call transcripts, fieldnotes, captured images, etc). In addition, interpretation requires that understanding be systematic (thus implying analytic technique), and systematic interpretation is a necessary prior to any study of “laws” or “patterns” in human society. “So, from the beginning, we are facing a problem which distinguishes human studies from the physical sciences” (Dilthey 1976:247). The interpretivist framework, according to Dilthey, requires not only that we take understanding seriously, but that it be done systematically and that it be epistemologically prior to any search for laws or patterns.

Simmel noted that interpretation is done both by each member of society and by the researcher studying society. This creates a much different problematic for those studying human society than for those studying “nature.” One answers the question of “how nature is possible” through a methodology that involves “forms of cognition through which the subject synthesizes the given elements into nature.” One answers “the question of how society is possible” through a methodology that considers “the conditions which reside a priori in the elements [people]

themselves, through which they combine, in reality, into the synthesis, society” (Simmel 1971:8). In other words interpretivism requires studying *how* people interpret. Then, interpretivism requires that we do two interpretations—what the people interpret, and what the researcher interprets about what the people studied interpret.

Weber also saw the social sciences as requiring a different method from those of the social sciences. He argued that natural science and social science address different questions. While natural science addresses “the question of what we must do if we wish to master life technically,” it does not address “whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so” (Weber 1946:144). Empirical science, he argued, cannot provide norms and ideals from which to derive directives for practical activity: “An empirical science cannot tell anyone what he *should* do—but rather what he *can* do—and under certain circumstances—what he wishes to do” (Weber 2011:54; *italics in original*). Values can inform what research gets done and how research findings get used, but social science should be value-neutral (Weber 2011).

Weber believed that the goal of the study of society is what he called *Verstehen*—the interpretive understanding of social action, that is, the interpretation that actors themselves give to things (Weber 1978:4). Social scientists study culture, and in this domain scholars “can and must” dispute “normative standards of value” (Weber 2011:76). They do this by creating order out of the many facets of a culture. “Order is brought into this chaos only on the condition that in every case only a *part* of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality” (Weber 2011:78; *italics in original*). A social scientist’s mission is to study this order that people create through designating portions of concrete reality that are “interesting and significant,” and relating that order to a

larger system of cultural values people use to approach reality. Because of this, Weber thought, knowledge of general laws is never intrinsically useful in the social/cultural sciences; researchers need concreteness (Weber 2011:77-79). It is in concrete instances that researchers can reason about cultural significance and its place within frameworks people use to approach reality.

Several themes were developed by the scholars of the first movement in the interpretive tradition. One was the distinction of social science from natural science. For various reasons, including the nature of the subject matter, the nature of the researcher, and the goals of the research, the social sciences could not use the same method or methodology as the natural sciences. All of these scholars saw it as the goal of social research to tap into the subjectivity of the other (sympathy, understanding, *Verstehen*). All viewed society as an object—believing that one can stand apart from society to study it—although they saw the observer as having a subjectivity of his or her own. Further, they also saw the objects of study as subjective and changing. Finally, there was some recognition that using an interpretive approach and studying values, meaning, and subjectivity, can promote human well-being. Martineau (1989), for example, believed that research that improved understanding across socio-cultural differences would enhance the status of women and racial minorities, and Weber (2011) believed that the study of cultural values would be an important check against a society becoming increasingly driven by technical rationality.

Movement 2: The mid-twentieth-century interpretivist response to positivism

Discussions about the differences between interpretivism and other modes of doing research continued in the first half of the twentieth century. However, that relationship shifted as the methods associated with other modes of doing research became more refined. Market research, opinion polls, and survey methods were all developed. Increasingly more sophisticated

statistical methods were also created. Much research in the social sciences became variables-based (Abbott 1999). The consequence was that scholars in the social sciences came under increasing pressure to justify the continuing relevance of meaning and interpretation, lest meaning and interpretation get relegated to other disciplines as not amenable to social scientific investigation. The threat of this was deeply concerning to some, as the rise of instrumental rationality untempered by humanistic and ethical considerations was seen as dangerous to human freedom, diversity, and morality. The human cost of the wars of this period provided ample fodder for this position. Key thinkers in this period grappled with an intellectual and political environment that favored instrumental reasoning, and pushed for theoretical and methodological diversity as necessary not only for the subject matter of research, but as a disciplinary and moral imperative. Key scholars in the second movement include Karl Mannheim, Hannah Arendt, Alfred Schutz, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Mannheim's interpretativism involved in at least four components: cultural-historical contextualization, including an analysis of the relationship between human action and knowledge; democratic participation in knowledge production; recognition and self-criticism of the researcher; and a consideration of the ends of knowledge. The first component is a recognition of the socio-historical setting within which knowledge has emerged (Mannheim 1936:3). To explain an idea, you must understand the biography of its author and also the life histories of others with whom the author is in community (Mannheim 1936:27). This is because "knowledge is from the very beginning a co-operative process of group life, in which everyone unfolds his knowledge within the framework of a common fate, a common activity, and the overcoming of common difficulties" (Mannheim 1936:29). Thus, on both an individual level and on a collective level, we cannot interpret without knowing the history of actions taken by

relevant actors. A second component is a democratization of the knowledge-production process. Democratization promotes interpretivism by promoting a diversity of perspectives: It allows the ideas of the “lower strata” to confront the ideas of the “dominant strata” on the basis of equal claims to representational validity (Mannheim 1936:8-9). To the extent that interpretive research presents the ideas of erstwhile marginalized populations, it expands the conceptual tools with which interpretation can take place. A third component is the recognition of scholars and their own self-criticisms. Mannheim (1936:16, 56) argued that the subject, as a human being, is inescapably part of reality. That includes researchers themselves. Objectivity in research is a goal, but that goal is not attained through suppressing the researchers’ evaluations, but through the researchers’ own self-criticisms. Situating and delimiting one’s own subjectivity is thus an important part of interpretation. A final component is a consideration of the ends of knowledge. Mannheim famously argued that the worldviews of groups can be characterized as either ideologies (if they support the status quo) or utopias (if they challenge the status quo). Utopias are particularly important, because if people do not have the capacity to imagine a different world—a utopia—they lose the ability to shape history or even to understand it (Mannheim 1936:263). An understanding of the ends of knowledge is thus prerequisite to interpreting the world. Mannheim thus developed a more social and historical consideration of the place of knowledge and the elements of interpretation.

Mannheim argued that adequate interpretation is more than just a methodological difference from the tradition of the natural sciences. True to his own framework, then, he considered the historical situation of quantitative and interpretive methods, and suggested that quantitative methods (such as surveys, statistics, and psychological tests), which had been significantly refined during his years of scholarly activity, could be seen as a historic phase

through which social inquiry must pass, as human thought moves from one conception of social reality to another (Mannheim 1936:43-44). He saw such methods, if used in isolation from interpretive concerns, as quite limiting: “Nothing is more removed from actual events than the closed rational system” (Mannheim 1936:219). Of course, such quantitative methods have been much further developed over the next seventy-five years, and scholars in subsequent years have found other ways in which to come to terms with methodological shifts.

Arendt voiced similar concerns about the quantitative methods which were developing during the mid-twentieth century, which were connected to her concerns about the foundations upon which interpretive theories were being built. As concerned the latter, she took issue with any theories that posited a micro-ontology—an idea about human nature. She wrote, “The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer” (Arendt 1998:11). Instead of reliance upon arguments about human nature, Arendt suggested that theorizing could only access the ways in which people are *conditioned*.

One of the ways in which people are conditioned, Arendt warned, is through the use of statistics. She found several bases on which to criticize how she perceived statistics as being misused: Those who used statistics often dismissed an evaluative premise, that what does not fit the pattern is asocial or abnormal. They tended to work with large numbers and broad patterns, thereby leaving out much of social life (e.g., the individual, the unique, the creative). Meaning, she argued, is in the rare deeds of the few, not in the everyday, and so statistics omitted the very subject matter of social science. Finally, a common consequence of these is uniformity in theory and in practice. Statistical uniformity is not a neutral, scientific ideal, she pointed out; it is a political ideal (Arendt 1998:42-43). As a political ideal, it needs to be subjected to evaluation,

interpretation, and debate. Thus, any increase in the use of statistics and other quantitative methods actually call for simultaneously greater attention to interpretation.

Schutz took interpretation in a slightly different direction from that of Arendt, for he (like Mannheim) saw the everyday as a legitimate and important field of inquiry for interpretive scholars. He argued that “the primary goal of the social sciences is to obtain organized knowledge of social reality,” which he defined as “the sum total of objects and occurrences within the social cultural world as experienced by the common-sense thinking of men living in their daily lives among their fellow-men, connected with them in manifold relations of interaction” (Schutz 1954b:261). In so doing, social scientists study what the natural scientists just assume (Schutz 1954b: 266-267). Social scientists study what would otherwise be thought of as bias or subjectivity—the perceptions and understandings of ordinary people, an approach that sets interpretivism apart from some other approaches. Schutz explained, “The world of nature, as explored by the natural scientist, does not ‘mean’ anything to the molecules, atoms, and electrons therein” (Schutz 1971:272). Appealing to Weber’s concept of *Verstehen*, he explained that the “goal is to find out what the actor ‘means’ in his action, in contrast to the meaning which his action has for the actor’s partner or a neutral observer” (Schutz 1971:274). To do that, we need better conceptual models. Too often the models we have of people are detached from actual human experience; these need to be revised, since they control what we are able to think or know about people (Schutz 1954a:32).

Coming from a philosophical perspective, Merleau-Ponty (1964) argued that the disciplinary dichotomies we have set up are not only artificial, but hinder knowledge on both sides. Whereas we have created an environment in which we think of ideas and facts as in opposition to each other, each requires the other (p. 99). In his argument as to why empirical

research needs such things as theory and human subjectivity, he wrote that if sociology were to be cut off from meaning or signification, then philosophy would be cut off from knowledge of what it was trying to understand (p. 101). Objective inquiry requires interpretation, and interpretation needs objects to interpret. In the end, only intersubjectivity permits us to understand knowledge produced by science (p. 111).

Scholars in the second movement of the interpretive tradition were writing in an environment in which quantitative and statistical methods within the positivistic tradition were becoming more refined and valued. In that context, they forwarded several arguments about interpretive work: Meaning requires biography, history, and a consideration of the ends of knowledge. Statistics necessarily exclude much of the subject matter of social science. What positivists may consider to be “bias” is what social scientists want to study. Researchers themselves are subjective beings. And objectivity and subjectivity in fact require each other. Across these arguments, scholars of the second movement were establishing and refining a continued presence for social science, even while positivism and its quantitative applications were becoming more refined.

Movement 3: From Structuralism to Poststructuralism

The third movement in the interpretivism involved a response to structuralism, a very modernist way of thinking about society that held that empirical phenomena reflect or are caused by some underlying order, such as social class or myth. Some held that structuralism would provide an overarching framework that would subsume all social research, but scholars in this tradition both showed how structuralism was inadequate to capture meaning, and also ushered us into a poststructuralist intellectual landscape. The anthropologist Levi-Strauss presented some of the major arguments of structuralism, to which a range of theorists responded. I first consider

Geertz's defense of interpretive anthropology, then Cicourel's and Bourdieu's arguments about why structuralism is inadequate and what the study of meaning must entail. Then I continue the movement through Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Certeau, and Latour, as they explored what a poststructuralist social science would look like.

Levi-Strauss (1963) sought to build a framework for studying social life that would meet the expectations of natural science. To this end, he saw the goal of social science to identify and study recurrent patterns, rules, or laws that are general across societies and that appear in particular practices (p. 34). By doing this, social scientists can meet what he perceived to be the standards of science—they would be studying things that are independent of the observer and that make “long statistical runs” (enough quantitative data that statistical analysis of it would have sufficient power to draw statistically significant findings). This would make the study of social phenomena more amenable to mathematics or quantitative linguistics (p. 57), for example. Through such inquiries, social scientists would be able to find “universal laws” (p. 65) that govern all aspects of social life (p. 62).

A key figure in the interpretive tradition who opposed the Levi-Straussian, structuralist approach to the study of social life was Clifford Geertz (1973). Geertz suggested that we need to accept three premises that reoriented what the study of social life should be about. First, he appealed to Weber in arguing that the basic fact about social life is that people create and live in “webs of significance” (p. 5), and that this is the central feature we should study. Second, he argued that ethnography is not merely observation (to which it could be reduced if the structuralist anthropologists' ideas were taken to their extreme); ethnography is necessarily about interpretation (p. 9). It requires that the researcher do more than just observe patterns, but connect them to other domains to construct meaning out of these patterns. Finally, he argued that

culture is not some power external to social life that causes things; it is something that must be understood through what he called thick description (p. 14).

With these three premises, Geertz argued that scholars engaged in the interpretive study of social life have goals that are different from those of other scholars. The main point of interpretive research is to gain “access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some expended sense of the term, converse with them” (Geertz 1973:24). Thus, these scholars aim at understanding rather than at building causal models. A second goal of interpretive research—a way that improves understanding of others’ conceptual worlds—is to improve the lexicon of useful concepts. One can do that by being sensitive to and even use the constructions that the subjects themselves use (p. 15). By introducing these terms into the scholarly conversation, interpretive researchers help other scholars to access the cultural world(s) of the research participants. This implies a different standard for measuring the quality and progress of interpretive research. We cannot judge interpretive research by how well it allows us to predict an outcome, to measure the extent of something in a population, or to indicate the degree to which one variable influences another. Geertz wrote, “Anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the *precision* with which we vex each other” (p. 29; *emphasis added*).

Geertz (1973) suggested some methodological implications of his approach. One of them is that scholars should do empirical research into actual events, not arrange “abstracted entities into unified patterns” (p. 17). This was clearly in contradistinction to Levi-Strauss’ approach, but much in line with Mannheim’s observation that the closed rational system is far removed from social reality. The messiness and nuances of everyday life are what qualitative researchers thrive

on. A second key principle of Geertzian interpretivism is that writings based on this type of research are not only interpretive, but second- and third-order interpretations at that (p. 15). What he was getting at with this point is that we are interested in how our research participants interpret their world. That may involve how they make sense of the interpretations they confront in their everyday lives. And then interpretive research create an interpretation of how they interpret this world of meaning (“webs of signification”). While those from a natural science perspective might find this perplexing and even incapable of being evaluated, remember that Geertz provided standards for judging interpretive work. The work of the scholar should provide a better understanding, and better conceptual tools with which to build that understanding. Recognizing that interpretive research entails layers of interpretations does not threaten the interpretive project, but sets it in a better situation to accomplish its goals.

Cicourel (1964) provided an interpretivist critique of structuralism by addressing the structuralist assumption that quantitative measurement makes social research better than research that does not involve measurement. He explained that there are serious problems with measurement systems themselves (p. 221). One of those problems involves how the measurement systems are used. Too often, research methods follow the assumptions of the measurement systems (p. 224), not assumptions or findings regarding the nature of social life itself. Further, quantitative measurement often requires that researchers make assumptions about what things mean, and how those meanings may be distributed throughout a population. Making those assumptions is necessary for such research projects to go on. However, the meaning of things are just what one “must analyze and study empirically if [one desires] rigorous measurement” (p. 223). This implies that quantitative researchers should not only be open to more interpretive research, but should demand it, be avid consumers of it, and give it a more

central role in their disciplines. If this does not happen, and scholars neglect to study what Cicourel called the “bottom half” (what gets taken for granted behind measurement), they make measurement (in a particularly memorable phrase) “metaphorical and not literal” (p. 223).

The quantitatively expressed results necessarily reify the events under study, but our interpretations of them—even after the usual formal apologies and cautions about their generality and precision—are treated as positive findings which are fictitiously assumed to be replicable and valid. All of this tends to make social research something of a closed enterprise rather than an open search for knowledge relative to a given era (p. 224).

Cicourel was here reminding us that not only does good quantitative research rest upon prior interpretive work, but the arguments that quantitative scholars make about their findings are also forms of interpretation. Emphasizing interpretive research does not mean that scientific research must be made more fictitious. Rather, if scholars do not recognize and incorporate interpretation and interpretive research as central to the work of any social scientific discipline, the work of that discipline becomes a fiction.

Similar to Geertz’s argument that interpretive research is second- and third-order interpretations, Goffman (1974) argued that ordinary people organize their worlds through the use of what he called frameworks. There are multiple frameworks available within a given culture, and so any given individual within the culture may have several at hand as resources through which to understand that world. Which framework someone takes at any given time is what makes that situation meaningful to him or her (p. 21). Thus, scholars in the interpretive tradition are involved in the study of frameworks. To understand meaning in a society, they study the set of primary frameworks that members of that society use. Noting the resistance such an approach often faces in the social sciences, he added that there is an imperative to study

meaning-giving frameworks “even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary social life have usually been happy to give over to others” (p. 27). It is, of course, ironic that such a major component of social life would be considered inappropriate for study within the social sciences.

Bourdieu took on structuralism as he built his own theoretical framework. One key element of this framework is the habitus, a concept that he intended to mediate between structure and agency. Importantly, though, habitus is also an interpretive concept. One’s habitus, Bourdieu argued, tends to reproduce regularities and also adjust to situations, but it does this as interpreted through the conceptual lenses that it contains (Bourdieu 1977:78). This is important, because if the habitus is a product of the structural conditions within which it is acquired and also tends to reproduce those structures, then there is no room for agency. Bourdieu (1990:41) cautioned us not to make agents and their actions epiphenomenal to structure. Rather, in order to study real people and real history, one must move beyond the study of “statistical regularity or algebraic structure” and instead study how that order is produced. This requires building a theory of practice, what people actually do and how they actually do it (1977:72). Practice is not “a mechanical reaction” (1977:73), predetermined by one’s structural position and history.

In what can be considered a direct blow to Levi-Straussian structuralism, Bourdieu rejected the idea that structure itself is what defines meaning. Meaning, Bourdieu (1977:5) showed, is contained outside of structure (e.g., in temporality or other contexts). This is part of why structure is necessarily indeterminate. To understand meaning and its relation to social life, we must return to habitus: “The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the

demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus" (Bourdieu 1977:78). Thus, regardless of what objective structures may exist in society, actual practices and potentials contained within the situation are influenced by interpretive conditions within the habitus.

Deleuze went even further than Bourdieu, to question the very nature of objective, social structures. He saw the temptation of philosophers to create order (such as a system of categories) where order is merely a conceptual imposition on actual experience. Notions that express actual experience are, instead, "really open and . . . betray an empirical and pluralist sense of Ideas" (Deleuze 1994:284). Structuralism thus shuts down understanding of and research into human experience because it presupposes that the nature of those experiences as representing a determined structure.

In one treatise Deleuze explored the role of repetition, an essay relevant to social researchers who debate the merits of understanding individual cases, or generalizing or positing universal laws. He argued that social analysis is not about generalizing or about universal law; these are hypotheticals. To study social life is to study the singular, which can be repeated under various circumstances; this, then, is truly empirical. "To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. . . . Generality, as generality of the particular, thus stands opposed to repetition as universality of the singular" (Deleuze 1994:1). Generality is only hypothetical (p. 4), while repetition "is in no way approximative or metaphorical" (p. 25). Repetition is also necessarily connected to evaluative statements: "The Good, by contrast, holds out the possibility of repetition, of successful repetition and of the spirituality of repetition, because it depends not upon a law of nature but on a law of duty, of which, as moral beings, we cannot be subjects without also being legislators"

(p. 4). In arguing that good comes from the repetition of the singular, Deleuze was extending Arendts' position that excellence lies in the rare deeds of the few, and this should be the focus of attention in the social sciences.

Given this reorientation of the social sciences away from hypotheticals and from generalizing laws, Deleuze (1987) proposed that scholars shift from arborescent thinking and toward rhizomatic thinking—that is, away from a metaphor of trees and toward a metaphor of rhizomes (the closest image of which that most people would have would be of grass).

Let us summarize the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills. It constitutes linear multiplicities. . . . The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. . . . In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system (p. 21).

With Deleuze, we have clearly come a long way from positivistic social science. This type of thinking has radical potential for social analysis. A Deleuzian understanding of something would be complex, open-ended, with multiple connections, defined by movement rather than by being, and egalitarian.

Deleuze's thinking can be applied to any facet of social life, and he himself suggested an application to family, for example. Whereas others see family as an institution, as a structure, or

as a network of individuals, Deleuze conceptualized family as much more fluid and interconnected:

It is certain that neither men or women are clearly defined personalities, but rather vibrations, flows, shizzes, and “knots.” The ego refers to personological co-ordinates from which it results, persons in their turn refer to familial co-ordinates, and we shall see what the familial constellation refers to in order to produce individuals in its turn. . . . [The analyst’s work involves] tirelessly taking apart egos and their presuppositions; liberating the prepersonal singularities they enclose and repress; mobilizing the flows they would be capable of transmitting, receiving, or intercepting; establishing always further and more sharply the shizzes and the breaks well below conditions of identity; and assembling the desiring-machines that countersect everyone and group everyone with others (Deleuze 2009:362).

Deleuze’s focus on decentered, nonhierarchical multiplicities actualized in coordinates and flows provides a new way of thinking about family. Family is not a “whole,” but “a locus of application and reproduction.” One might trace a child’s feelings to the parents’ ideas, investments, and representations, with the goal of reaching “the social and political units of libidinal investment,” which in turn shifts our attention toward the psychoanalysts (and others in the social sciences) who themselves are conditioning ideas about family (p. 365).

Deleuze’s work set the stage for the classic poststructuralists, who went on to displace other centers and to conceive of elements of the social world as representation. Foucault’s rejection of continuous narratives imposed upon actual experience, and Derrida’s rejection of legitimacy outside of “the text” or data themselves are two examples of how Deleuze’s ideas can have radical implications for the study of social life. Foucault (1972) observed that a sign of the

ascendancy of this new way of thinking has been the “displacement of the discontinuous.”

Whereas under modernist work, discontinuity signified a failing of scholarly work, something that must be reduced or eliminated. Now, discontinuity has become a basic element, a positive feature validating social analysis and making it more true to social experience (p. 9). Derrida (1997) argued that methodologically, one “cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place” outside of the very medium within which it is contained. There is an “absence of the referent or the transcendental signified” (p. 158). One need not go as far as Derrida (that nothing exists outside of text) within the poststructuralist camp, but his ideas illustrate one position of how far deconstruction can go in the poststructural interpretation of social worlds.

Certeau (1984) proposed that the study of what people do in the course of everyday life will reveal the artificiality of grand schemes and theories. His ideas are foundational to scholars who study everyday practices of ordinary people, from feeding one’s children breakfast, to ordinary people’s experiences of grieving. Studying everyday practices reveals diversity and creativity that are otherwise concealed by theories and models that ostensibly make sense of reality. “A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference” (p. 18). Researchers should study the “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (p. xiv). Such decentering of power relations restores “logical and cultural legitimacy” to everyday practices (p. xvi), foregrounding the value and experience of the everyday, and enhancing the possibility of justice for erstwhile marginalized groups. It would

also make messy our ideas about social life—our theories and our research methods—but such would more accurately reflect the social world we claim to study. “*Theory* favors a pluralist epistemology” (p. 199; *italics in original*).

Separately, Certeau (1986) chided the social scientists in general for propagating a set of myths with harmful implications for social life. He argued that studying actual processes by ordinary people in real contexts (including time) would restore an ethics to the work of social scientists (p. 221). Certeau explained that the social sciences were originally institutions “express[ing] ethical postulates through technical operations.” When “the scientific establishment” separated itself from ethical goals, it then transformed the products of its technical operations into a reality which everyone was then obliged to believe (p. 200). This turns historical discourse into “the one possible myth of a scientific society that rejects myths” (p. 221), a situation that can be rectified by taking time seriously (a move by Certeau that helped to prompt the historical turn in the social sciences).

Latour (2005), the chief proponent of actor-network theory (ANT), has recently extended the poststructuralist line of thought (with clear debts to Deleuze). He suggested that social science is wrong from the beginning when it begins with assumptions about the existence of such things as society, social institutions and groups, and individuals as autonomous agents.

Would you qualify as ‘scientific’ a discipline that puts to one side the precise information offered by fieldwork and replaces it by instance of *other* things that are *invisible* and those things people have *not* said and have vocally denied? (p. 50).

In place of such assumptions, Latour proposed a social science that bases itself upon empirical observations of associations, and investigations into the processes by which they work. He replaced social ties with “translations between mediators that may generate traceable

associations” (p. 108) and facts with “matters of concern” (p. 115). Actors are far from independent, choosing individuals, since both they and their environments always bear the imprint of other mediators.

It is helpful here to remember Deleuze’s rhizomes, as a model for society in which everything is connected to multiple other entities and bears the imprint of all of those entities. In that light, Latour has provided a model in which Deleuze’s philosophy can be applied to the study of the social world. According to Latour, research consists in tracing the nature of rhizomatic patterns of association.

We are now interested in mediators *making* other mediators *do* things. ‘Making do’ is not the same thing as ‘causing’ or ‘doing’: there exists at the heart of it a duplication, a dislocation, a translation that modifies at once the whole argument. . . . The more *attachments* it has, the more it exists. And the more mediators there are the better (p. 217).

Interpretation by actors comes into play as “plug-ins” – elements of the social landscape that queue one into one mode of understanding as opposed to some other. However, in ANT, neither positivism nor interpretivism is ascendant; rather, each represents “successive aspects of social assemblages (p. 227). The researcher simply traces a network, one that “is still real and objective, but it is livelier, more talkative, active, pluralistic, and more mediated” (p 115) than networks posited under the old empiricism. I classify ANT within the structuralist debate because Latour’s framework decenters modernist ways of thinking about social structure, and in its place proposes a Deleuze’s methodology of studying social life.

Levi-Strauss’ work represents a high-point in the belief in a structure of recurrent patterns, rules, and laws underlying social life, which can be made amenable to mathematics.

Much discussion in the interpretive tradition followed that approach. First, interpretivists demonstrated that such an approach excludes interpretation, which is the fundamental reality of social life. Indeed, structuralism cannot capture interpretation because meaning cannot be contained within structures. And beyond that, all measurement rests upon interpretation. As an alternative to the structuralist approach, interpretivists proposed a gradual deconstruction of social inquiry and putting in its place research into how meaning is constructed in open, empirical, and pluralist ways that take seriously history and everyday people's actual experiences.

Movement 4: The critical tradition and interpretation

The fourth movement in the interpretive tradition involves explicit criticism of social injustice. Social scientists have long been concerned with power inequalities in society, and how these inequalities are expressed through the imposition of dominant frames of thought, even when they do not represent well people's actual experiences. This imposition is even more concerning when it prevents the expression of human creativity and the achievement of human well-being and potential. In this discussion of the interpretive tradition, I begin the critical tradition with a group of scholars who assembled at the University of Frankfurt, Germany, in the 1920s and 1930s, and then relocated to the United States. They were not the first critical scholars, but their work begins the critical interpretivist tradition in that they took on positivism and its logic of technological rationality as their major conceptual opponent, and presented interpretivism as an important and humanitarian foil to modernist attempts at administrative domination through technical superiority. The Frankfurt School of critical theory, as it came to be called, marked an important shift in Marxism, in which the major focus of criticism was against the cultural and ideological structures that protect the status quo. Key members of that

group included Horkheimer and Adorno. I then follow up with Mills, an American conflict theorist, who proposed a focus on social problems and injustice as both a moral imperative and a means of avoiding unproductive epistemological debates. Then I review the work of Butler, whose work is poststructuralist but also critical in her focus on liberation of marginalized groups.

Scholars who belonged to the Frankfurt School of critical theory believed that the problems of science are rooted in the whole framework of modernity that began with the Enlightenment. In other words, science itself was simply an outgrowth of the values and biases that grew out of Enlightenment thinking. Those values and biases had not been adequately interrogated, and if they were, they would be found unacceptable. For example, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argued that in the transition to modern science, meaning itself got discarded in favor of formulas, rules, and probability. According to modernist science, either something conforms to “calculability and utility” or it is “viewed with suspicion” (p. 3). The reason is that a principle value of modernity is control, and technical rationality is the way to achieve that control: “Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination” (p. 95). For example, progress in the culture industry happens as you produce, control, and discipline consumer needs (p. 115). Meaning, including schemas and personalities, comes to be given by power hierarchies (p. 168) rather than a creative act by intelligent individuals—an outcome quite at odds with the original intentions of the Enlightenment thinkers.

Horkheimer (1972) explained how even private behaviors come to be controlled through this form of technological domination, and called for a critical attitude as the basis for action to resist that domination. He argued that within the public sphere, family has been used by political, moral, and religious authorities to reinforce power hierarchies (p. 114). However, he did not see family as therefore something to be resisted; he believed that family could also be the basis for

the construction of a more just social order. That family has been used to support unjust domination does not exclude the possibility that it can be used to promote full and equitable human development. The reason for this is that in private, family members are treated as whole human beings, and not as consumers, objects, instruments, or variables. This encourages family members to think differently about the position and role of human beings in society; it opens the way for and even encourages critical thought. “To this extent, the family not only educates for authority in bourgeois society; it also cultivates the dream of a better condition for mankind” (p. 114). Ironically, this critical attitude is *necessarily* a product of the modern, commercial economic order. It is a protest against the current order, and it is also an idea of self-determination, the idea that our actions flow from our own decisions and not from some mechanism. Critical theory thus presupposes “the critique of the existing order and the struggle against it” (p. 229).

Adorno (1991) explored further the ways in which the culture industry (the collection of corporations that control the production and distribution of culture including print and broadcast media, music, fashion, and other forms of entertainment and style) came, over the course of the twentieth century, to dominate everyday life, and what the consequences of this are likely to be. He argued that mass culture (this culture that is given by the culture industry rather than creative and spontaneous among the people) has become so pervasive and powerful that people go along with it because that is where they learn the mores that they “will surely need as their passport in a monopolized life” (p. 92). True culture, as Adorno saw it, does not merely accommodate itself to the conditions within which people find themselves; it is a protest against current relations (p. 100). And yet, more than more, that is not what “culture” has come to mean in Western societies (and in societies influenced by the West). “The concepts of order which [the culture industry]

hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo. They remain unquestioned, unanalyzed and undialectically presupposed, even if they no longer have any substance for those who accept them” (p. 104). Interpretation counters this. Especially where popular culture offers no critique, interpretive scholarly work presents an essential, alternative stance toward the power hierarchies and technological domination.

In some of his other work, Adorno (1976) explained what went wrong when positivism was applied to the social sciences. He wrote that there has been a tendency to privilege empirical, utilizable social research, since it is more fitted to administration and control (p. 70), not because it is more suitable to the nature of the thing studied or because it fits with our values. As a consequence, in so much of empirical science, it is the methods that drive the choice of what to study and what questions to ask, and not the nature of what is studied (p. 72)—a position that would later be echoed by Latour. This is deeply problematic, since it is circular logic to study an object by means of a method which itself determines what the object of study is (p. 73). Further, we have reason to believe that these methods are not well-suited to human society; the natural scientific model does not “happily and unreservedly” transfer to society (p. 73).

That the model of the natural sciences is not always a good fit for the study of human society does not mean, however, that we must reify a bifurcated model of social research. The eagerness to quantify everything is a result of science, as currently understood (and sometimes called the unified science perspective), which requires that everything fit within a consistent system (Adorno 1976:77). However, Ardorno argued that we cannot respect the “formal demand” for “unity,” since science itself is arbitrary and is based upon questionable assumptions (p. 79). One of those assumptions, for example, is the distinction between qualitative and quantitative. Adorno explained that all quantitative analysis abstracts from qualitative data, and

all qualitative data contains the content that quantitative generalizations rest upon. Hence, “The opposition between quantitative and qualitative analysis is not absolute” (p. 76).

Methodologically, then, we can neither unify all social research under a single framework, nor draw sharp distinctions between different approaches. A critical stance, then, cannot be dogmatic about methods. Instead, we need “the critical amalgamation of divergent sociological methods” (p. 79).

Mills (1959) brought in a pragmatic flavor to the critical tradition, arguing that the goals of social science should be identifying and solving social problems. He believed that the development of empirical science and disciplinary specialization had in fact hindered these objectives, to the advantage of individuals and institutions in positions of power. Mills argued that we only understand problems when we consider them against comparative and historical social structures. “Yet because of epistemological dogma, abstracted empiricists are systematically a-historical and non-comparative” (p. 68). (The oxymoron “abstracted empiricists” was probably not lost on Mills.) We need to understand and address social problems, but when we overelaborate or focus too much on methods and on theories, we have lost touch with the core problems of our field, he wrote (p. 74-75). One example of such overelaboration, he believed, is the excessive focus on the inductive versus deductive divide. Classical social science, according to Mills, was neither inductive nor deductive. It did both at the same time, even in the same study, by formulating and reformulating problems and their solutions (p. 128). This, then, is what social science should be about. In order to study problems and their solutions, social scientists should build a comparative and historical understanding of social structures, in order to define the reality and social structures in terms of which social problems are formulated. We must “avoid the arbitrary specialization of academic department”

and specialize instead according to topic and problem, bringing in a range of perspectives and methods that can bear upon it (p. 134). It would be wrong, for example, to turn family studies into its own discipline, with a narrow range of theories and a defined set of methods, and worse to organize it around abstracted empiricism.

It is undeniable that Butler's (2007) ideas owe a debt to poststructuralism, particularly in their rejection of ontology and their emphasis on discourse and creative action. However, I place her in the critical movement because of the strong normative component to her theories. Her focus is on gender/sex, but the principle of performativity that she developed can be fruitfully applied to a range of topics. She argued that gender is *performative*—“that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 34). The concept of performativity necessarily implies a temporal aspect. Every concept

is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification (p. 45).

Butler held that “truth” can no longer credibly be applied to either dispositions or identity. The only “truth” is “a performatively enacted signification,” which is no longer naturalized and therefore permits “the parodic proliferation and subversive play of . . . meanings” (p. 46). If this were the extent of her theory, it would simply be an extension of Deleuze’s and Foucault’s breaking down of the structuralist hegemony during the mid-twentieth century through multiplicity and discourse. However, Butler was not simply engaged in a project of deconstruction. She intended to liberate possibilities that already existed, but that were rendered invisible and illegitimate by the dominant power hierarchies (p. 203). Seeing gender and sex—

and by extension, all social categories and institutions posited within the social sciences—as performative, opens up both inquiry and practice to consider if not to validate a wider range of identities, desires, and practices. Though this clearly has radical possibilities, I would note here that the knife cuts both ways, and Butler’s ideas present a major challenge to the critical tradition. Previous critical scholars nevertheless believed in the existence of a more fundamental truth that was rendered invisible by unjust power relations in society. If truth does not exist at all, then it does not exist—equally, for everyone—and I am not convinced that all interlocutors are willing to give up their claim to it. The critical tradition is not just destructive, a position of play or of chaos; it is evaluative and prescriptive—even in its Butlerian manifestation—and this rests upon a notion of truth.

Scholars in the fourth movement of the interpretive tradition rejected rationalities suited for control and domination, arguing instead for rationalities that are a better empirical fit with the thing being studied, that better align with our values, or that pragmatically help us to solve social problems or promote human freedom. Doing so would better allow science to live up to its original, Enlightenment ideals.

Movement 5: Attempts to Unify Quantitative and Qualitative Research

The tension between positivism and interpretivism was sometimes translated into the debate between qualitative methods and quantitative methods. In other movements we have seen scholars argue that the division is arbitrary, and epiphenomenal to more foundational epistemic divisions. In recent decades there have been various attempts to combine divergent methods—and by extension, divergent epistemologies—in the same research projects or agendas. One major response was the rise of the mixed-methods approach as a pragmatic solution. However, there has also been discussion about other ways to think about the epistemological divide.

The mixed-method approach to social research was a response to the increasing polarization within the epistemological debate, and a recognition that every research method has its limitations. As previously noted, the widespread acceptance of the hypothetico-deductive model by the quantitative community (positivism) during the middle twentieth century was connected to—or perhaps caused—the movement of qualitative researchers toward more inductive research. On the one hand this was a refinement of the positivistic tradition. In this, post-positivism became the intellectual heir to positivism. Post-positivism held that all research is influenced by a theory or framework; knowledge is fallible; a body of evidence can be explained by several theories; investigators have their own values; and social reality is constructed (Teddie and Tshakkori 2009). It can be debated to what degree scholars in this tradition have actually accepted these propositions, but to the degree that they have been accepted, they opened a space within the quantitative tradition for dialogue with alternative ways of knowing and alternative ways of arriving at that knowledge. Against the traditional hypothetico-deductive model was proposed the inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and this contrast developed into the “paradigms debate.” On their side of this debate, from the 1960s to the present, qualitative researchers have been developing and specifying a bewildering range of qualitative methods (Teddie and Tshakkori 2009). Thus, both positivism and interpretivism have been shifting and developing over the last half century.

The increasing methodological diversity and sophistication on both sides of the paradigms debate, along with the recognition that all methods have their limitations led to the rise of the mixed-method approach. The approach started in the 1970s, but became much more influential during the 1990s. Morgan (2007) argued that pragmatism is the theoretical basis for mixed-method research, and this shifts attention away from metaphysical questions and toward

methodological questions. Several principles result from taking a pragmatic approach to research: The researcher rejects binary choices about which method is best. The researcher views knowledge as constructed and also as based on an external reality. The researcher views theories instrumentally; they are true to the extent that they work in a particular research context. The researcher endorses pluralism and integrative eclecticism. And the researcher does not rely on reasoning about any “weakest link” that would disprove a position, but views knowledge as a cable whose fibers are small but that collectively holds things together (Teddie and Tshakkori 2009). Scholars in this tradition may even hold that mixed-methods has now become its own approach to social research.

Pragmatically avoiding metaphysical questions is only one way to attempt to combine the two approaches to doing social research. In the last couple of decades, other scholars have taken on metaphysical questions in an attempt to erase the differences between qualitative and quantitative, inductive and deductive, positivistic and interpretive. One such position is represented by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). They argued that

The differences between the quantitative and qualitative traditions are only stylistic and are methodologically and substantively unimportant. All good research can be understood—indeed, is best understood—to derive from the same underlying logic of inference (p. 4).

Given the history of epistemological debates in the social sciences, this was quite an assertion. King, Keohane, and Verba went on to say that they did not want to push exclusively the use of quantitative techniques, but argued that “nonstatistical research” would “produce more reliable results if researchers pay attention to the rules of scientific inference” (p. 6). These rules, they explained, apply to “all kinds of research,” although these rules are simply most clear in research

involving statistical models because they are so “abstract” and “unrealistic” (p. 6). These authors then acknowledged that their approach is “not relevant to all issues that are of significance to social scientists.” Their list of “important questions” that cannot be addressed through their approach included agency, obligation, citizenship, and “the proper relationship” between the national and the global (p. 6). Indeed, it is in this that they revealed why they believed that they had come up with an approach that created a single epistemological paradigm from the social sciences: They simply excluded a large number of “important questions” that are significant to social sciences (essentially all issues that are addressed using the interpretivist framework). That done, all research in the social sciences could—they believed—follow the same logic and research methods.

Goertz and Mahoney (2012) started from the same premise—excluding from the outset interpretive qualitative research from the discussion—but arrived at a different conclusion. Even with interpretive research excluded, they concluded that there is not one unifying framework for all social research. Instead, qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis are in fact different cultures. Both are causal, they argued, but they are based on different mathematical foundations. Qualitative analysis is based on logic and set theory, while quantitative analysis is based on probability and statistical theory. The result is that they have different orientations toward research, and they develop different cultures. Both are valuable, they argued, and the two approaches complement each other. While this represents a position not as extreme as that of King, Keohane, and Verba’s, it is interesting that to engage in this sort of comparison between quantitative and qualitative at all, they first had to exclude interpretive qualitative research.

Biernacki’s (2012) major purpose was to criticize efforts to mix quantitative and interpretive efforts, but in the course of his argument he also presented criticisms of some of

interpretive methods in social research, such as qualitative coding of texts. He acknowledged that there have been various efforts over the years to make quantitative and interpretive methods fit better, such as suggesting that interpretation is prior to measurement. “If you reconstruct how sociologists mix quantitative and text-interpretive methods [however], combining what is intrinsically uncombinable, you discover leg-pulling of several kinds” (p. 9). Social science research, he argued, is not logical or inductive or inferential, but performative (p. 25). Put more precisely,

Looking at social scientific research as an incarnation of ritual is not a belittling simile. It is a potent explanatory key. . . . Instead, ritual is a distinct mode of communication and performance that reconfirms timeless models by which people can regenerate their social relations or professional roles (p. 10).

Biernacki’s book can be read as a roll call of logical problems with efforts to make interpretive analysis fit within the standards of what some call “scientific” research. For example, he argued that facts do not generate paradigms (as some who do inductive research claim), but rather that “central paradigms govern events” (p. 50)—an untenable proposition among positivistic researchers; sampling (another strategy through the systematizing of which one might make interpretive research more “scientific”) removes a text from its environment, and thereby excludes its basis for having meaning (p. 134); in interpretive research, using a “large-N” has the opposite effect of that in the sciences, by “shielding results from critical discussion” (p. 136); word counts (an explicitly quantitative strategy) are made “impertinent” to the extent that they are “more transparent and reliable than qualitative coding” (p. 143); and even the experience of science itself does not require generalization to a larger population (p. 148). Therefore, efforts to reconcile quantitative and interpretive social science by making interpretation more amenable to

standards of quantitative research create rituals through which scholars perform professional roles, but not improvements in social scientific research itself.

After making his argument that reconciling quantitative and interpretive research is no epistemological or methodological improvement, but rather creates a great deal of critical problems, Biernacki concluded that

Humanist inquiry on its own better satisfies the “hard” scientific criteria of transparency, of retesting the validity of interpretations, of extrapolating from mechanisms, of appraising the scope of interpretations, of recognizing destabilizing anomalies, of displaying how we decide to “take” a case as meaning something, of forcing revision in interpretive decisions, of acknowledging the dilemmas of sampling, and of separating the evidence from the effects of instrumentation. Correlatively, ritual seems the best frame for understanding blurred social “science” because ritual process renders intelligible a constellation of logical oddities (p. 151).

Interestingly, though, none of these criticisms challenges Morgan’s and Teddie and Tshakkori’s arguments about mixed-methods research (though they may explain why King, Keohane, and Verba and Goertz and Mahone had to set aside interpretive research rather than try to unify it with quantitative or positivistic research). This is partially because mixed-methods research does not necessarily involve making interpretive research more quantitative or positivistic, or vice versa, but gives permission to use multiple research methods to address the same problem or topical area. It is also because, as they conceive it, mixed-methods research is pragmatic, and therefore declines to take up questions of logical inconsistency as long as other objectives such as attenuating a social problem or meeting the expectations of a funding agency are met. Still,

Biernacki makes a powerful argument in favor of letting interpretive research stand on its own merits rather than trying to fit it into the standards of some other paradigm.

Reed (2011) recently offered an approach to combining epistemic modes quite different from other attempts. Rather than trying to adjust interpretive research to fit positivistic modes, he subsumed positivist research (and especially the imperative to build causal models) within the interpretivist paradigm. The reason for this is that, “since all knowledge involves human subjectivity as its instrument or medium, no form of knowledge can be said to exist outside of the problem of interpretation” (p. 35). Hence, interpretation is the more foundational concern with regard to social scientific knowledge. To explain how causal knowledge operates within interpretivism, one must begin with an understanding of the interpretive epistemic mode. In this mode, the investigator “draws upon a plurality of theoretical abstractions” that need not comprise “a coherent, general, and referential theory of social reality in the abstract.” These “bits of theory” are combined with “bits of evidence, and then these theory-fact pairs are brought together into a meaningful whole” (p. 10). This general model of doing interpretive research is then related to causal explanation “as *forming* as opposed to *forcing*, causes” (p. 11). The coherence required by interpretivist work is the minimal coherence expected of a landscape. And just like a landscape, an interpretive framework acts upon its elements by forming the contexts within which they operate.

For, the processes of social life, the “how” of everyday interaction and negotiation, the organization of humans into effective working units, the development of specific capacities and powers to *move* the world, are formed by meaning. This is the underlying epistemological commitment of methodologies often deemed “interpretive,” and to consider these methodologies as fundamentally set against the possibility of explanation

is a mistake. Quite the opposite: methodologies are “interpretive” precisely in so far as they guide us toward this meaning-reconstruction, whereby social mechanisms are finally comprehended in their concrete, sometimes vicious power because the meanings that form them are brought to light (p. 161).

Causation (and potentially all other elements expected of positivistic explanation) operates within and is conditioned by the context revealed by interpretivist research. Interpretation is thus not opposed to causality or other imperatives of “science,” or merely a precursor to a more rigorous quantitative analysis. It is a necessary condition of all social inquiry.

In the fifth movement we saw a range of attempts to grapple with the epistemological divide in the social sciences. The mode optimistic attempt, the mixed-methods approach, was to combine erstwhile conflicting methods on the ground that we need both to gain a full understanding of social phenomena. However, the epistemological debates show that the solution is far from clear. Some argue that there is truly a common underlying logic, while others argue that quantitative and qualitative are oppositional cultures, but arguments on both sides often make their case by excluding interpretation in order to have a framework that is simple enough to make the case they want to make. Biernacki argued that mixing methods is usually a bad idea, and concluded that interpretive research alone does more than people often give it credit for. Finally Reed recently reversed the standard positions, arguing that interpretivism is in fact the dominant framework in the debate, within which positivism can be subsumed. Since each of these positions is currently favored by one party or another, it is clear that the debate about how we can reach across the epistemological divide is still going strong, though with the caution that modifying interpretive social research methods to be more positivist usually results in sloppy research and an undervaluation of interpretive knowledge.

Movement 6: Theories of Morality and Interpretivism

The final movement of the interpretive tradition entails various attempts to incorporate morality and ethics into the discussion. Scholars in this movement argue that morality and interpretation each require the other, both in everyday life and in the work of social scientists. Certainly, this is not the only movement to take up these questions. Ideas about morality have been part of the interpretive tradition since the classical thinkers, and also appears in every movement. However, I place this collection of thinkers into their own category because they have effectively been having a sustained conversation and also because they present a well-considered attempt to interrogate the bases, processes, and effects of including morality within interpretive research. In this discussion, I place the terms morality, ethics, and evaluation on the same plane, and I do not presuppose what political positions these might entail. Indeed, as even a superficial reading of the work of scholars in this tradition would reveal positions anywhere from the political left to the political right. It is unfortunate that in some circles, terms like “moral” have come to be associated primarily with conservative positions; sustainability, human rights, and gender equality are moral concepts often (but not always exclusively) taken up by those on the political left, while other moral concepts such as the right to life, religious freedom, and heritage are often (but not always exclusively) taken up by those on the political right.

I begin this section with the work of Taylor, a Romanticist philosopher who linked concepts of agency, responsibility, and interpretation. Then I introduce MacIntyre, who had similar concerns to Taylor, but who turned to the Aristotelian tradition as the best theoretical framework with which to address them. Finally, I review the work of Flyvbjerg and Sayer, two scholars who have recently developed the neo-Aristotelian framework, and suggested what neo-Aristotelian social science would look like.

Taylor (1985:15) defined the self as “a responsible human agent,” and stated, “What is crucial about agents is that things matter to them” (p. 98). That things matter to people implies that they recognize that there are standards by which their own and others’ behavior, choices, and feelings can be judged, and they can make distinctions between different kinds of goals that one might pursue (p. 102). A strong evaluator can express why one option is better than another (p. 24), and only when one can make such evaluations can one have agency. Thus, self-evaluation is essential to agency (p. 16), and humans are self-interpreting and self-evaluating animals (p. 45).

Taylor (1995:vii-viii) argued that epistemology has been wrong to argue that we can understand what knowledge is without also understanding human life and experience. Hence, any claim to truth must be made in the context of humans and their experience. This does not mean that his position is subjectivist, he argued (1985:47), because our interpretations and evaluations constitute who we are. They are not merely a view on reality, something separable from reality, or epiphenomenal to reality. In this framework, human subjectivity and evaluations are *objective* elements of reality. This reality is composed of some elements that are particular to humanity—“These are . . . matters of pride, shame, moral goodness, evil, dignity, the sense of worth, the various human forms of love, and so on” (p. 102). It is the proper domain of social sciences to investigate these human “matters of significance” (p. 102) to understand their role in social life. Research in this area would investigate how “the agent understands and constitutes himself as integrally part of a ‘we’” (Taylor 1995:173), “the value and importance of ordinary life” (p. 56), and “the constitutive nature of language” (p. ix). Taylor (1985:114) wrote that “Typical questions of this kind of thinking [evaluative, and involving “the peculiarly human emotions”] are of the form: what is really, that is, properly, shameful? What ought we to feel

guilty about? In what does dignity consist? And so on.” Such research would take on a “tentative, exploratory nature,” since it is happening “in a modern context” in which larger orders cannot be assumed. Social science, being properly interpretive and evaluative, demands that kind of openness. “Those who hunger for certainty will only find it in the first perspective, where the ends of man are thought to be defined by a naturalistic science” (p. 114).

MacIntyre (1984) positioned his neo-Aristotelian theory against the inability of modern individuals to reason about moral questions. He traced how the Enlightenment set us on a path that resulted in moral statements becoming merely personal statement of preference, and people of different preferences had no way of resolving their differences. Since moral questions (any questions that ask, what should we do?) are inescapable in social life, the result is a situation of interminable animosity and frustration. The only other alternative we have that might give us a way of reasoning about moral issues, MacIntyre reasoned, is in the Aristotelian tradition, and while he relied heavily upon the writings of Aristotle and Aristotelians, he built his own theory that extended the Aristotelian tradition by stressing the importance of narrative and history.

The key components of MacIntyrean theory are virtue, practice, and tradition. MacIntyre (1984) argued that citizens of modernity paid a high price by giving up the Aristotelian concept of virtue: Rules, negotiation, and abstracted or universalistic principles simply do not capture the theoretical power to be gained by the concept of virtue. He defined virtue as “those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good . . . and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good” (p. 219). By being a set of dispositions, virtues avoid rules (and all the problems that come with them), are embodied and set within our characters, and engage with contexts such as culture, place, and time. Virtues are

developed through engagement in practices. MacIntyre defined a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve . . . standards of excellence” (p. 187). The idea of virtues developed through practice thus defined would place MacIntyre squarely in Aristotelian thought. What MacIntyre added to this was history and narrative, which he often referred to as “tradition.” Each human life is a story embedded within the larger stories of which the individual is part (p. 221). The past is to be commented on and responded to, and corrected and transcended (p. 146). Striving for the good is always within specific contexts, but those contexts themselves have histories, meaning that movement toward the good “may involve new understandings of what it is to move towards the good” (p. 176). Thus, MacIntyre’s theory is not conservative, much less reactionary. These principles of virtue, practice, and tradition together frame MacIntyre’s conception of human nature:

A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” (1984:216).

Interpretive social research addresses moral questions by considering the contexts and history of human efforts to arrive at a conception of the good.

There is a need for research that lays “bare the empirical, causal connection between virtues, practices and institutions” (MacIntyre 1984:196). Such research would follow three stages: accounting for a practice, for a human life, and for a tradition (MacIntyre 1984:186-187). The practices that would be the first stage of such inquiries cover a wide range—“arts, sciences,

games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making a sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept” (p. 188). The “goods” toward which these practices are oriented are empirical questions of the research, with the understanding that as historical entities, they develop over time (p. 193-194).

In subsequent work, MacIntyre (1999) explored the nature of human relationships in this quest for the good, positing that humans are *dependent* rational animals. Individuals are dependent upon others in their community, and the development of virtues requires that they “participate in . . . network[s] of relationships of giving and receiving.” What people may be called upon to give may be disproportionate to what they have received, and their relationship to others may thus be unconditional, since obligations are importantly determined by others’ needs (p. 108). In this, though, “the good of the individual is not subordinated to the good of the community nor vice versa” (p. 109), since each depends upon the other.

This later work by MacIntyre has implications not only for his social theory, but also for social research. Scholars in the MacIntyrean tradition seek to understand the nature and roles of virtues in human life through inquiry into the practices, lives, and communities that sustain and develop them. This inquiry is in itself a practice! Hence, in this passage by MacIntyre, he is theorizing about human relationships in general, but it can be generalized to interpretive researchers themselves as dependent rational animals who try to understand the experiences of other human beings:

Interpretive knowledge of others derives from and is inseparable from involvement with others . . . Knowledge of others, that is, is a matter of responsive sympathy and empathy elicited through action and interaction and without these we could not, as we often do, impute to those others the kind of reasons for their actions that, by making their actions

intelligible to us, enable us to respond to them in ways that they too can find intelligible (1999:14).

Seeing researchers as dependent rational animals trying to enter into community with research participants gives a new perspective on interpretive research. It is also echoes Martineau's insight that interaction and empathy are prerequisites to interpretive understanding.

Flyvbjerg (2001) also built on the Aristotelian tradition, but he emphasized the concept of phronesis (practical wisdom) as definitive of the social sciences, and drew the practical implications for social science research. He argued that epistemic comparisons between the social sciences and the natural sciences are misleading, since the “respective strengths and weaknesses” of the two types of sciences fall “along fundamentally different dimensions”: “the social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest” (p. 61).

Given their subject matter, the natural sciences are better at testing hypotheses to demonstrate abstract principles and law-like relationships, while the social sciences are better at producing situated knowledge about how to understand and act in contextualized settings, based on deliberation about specific sets of values and interests. . . . The natural sciences excel at conducting decontextualized experiments to understand abstract and generalizable law-like relationships, while the social sciences can conduct contextualized studies involving field research that produces intimate knowledge of localized understandings of subjective human relationships, and especially in relationship to the values and interests that drive human relationships” (Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram 2012:2)

Flyvbjerg (2001:134) defined phronesis in this way:

Phronetic research focuses on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situation. It *may* mean, but is certainly not limited to, a focus on known sociological, ethnographic, and historical phenomena such as “everyday life” and “everyday people.” What it *always* means, however, is a focus on the actual daily practices which constitute a given field of interest” (*emphasis in original*).

Phronetic researchers are interested in how people get a feel for situations and become experts in handling them. Unlike in modernist ways of thinking, practical wisdom is not achieved through the learning and application of rules; it is achieved through in-depth experience with a range of cases. Hence, social science research should also favor a case-study approach.

Flyvbjerg (2001) suggested a range of methodological guidelines that follow from his perspective. Focus on values (e.g., “Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done?” (p. 130). Make interpretations based on claims of validity, and allow interpretations to be challenged by other interpretations. Place power at the core of analysis (e.g., “Who gains, and who loses? Through what kinds of power relations? What possibilities are available to change existing power relations? And is it desirable to do so? Of what kinds of power relations are those asking these questions themselves a part?” (p. 131). Emphasize practice before discourse or theory. Study cases and contexts. And ask “How?” and do narrative analysis. Flyvbjerg believed that social science conducted in this manner would build off of the epistemological strengths of social science, and also produce research that would be more relevant to important human concerns.

Sayer (2011) tied together many of the themes of this movement. He began with a micro-ontology that people are “beings whose relation to the world is one of concern” (p. 2). The reason for this is that as mortal, finite, an dependent beings, people are vulnerable: “Because of

our psychological and physical vulnerability, our dependence on others and our capacity for diverse actions, and because of contingency, we are necessarily evaluative beings, continually having to monitor and evaluate how we and the things we care about are faring, and to decide what to do” (p. 23). Further, he wrote,

As needy, vulnerable, evaluative beings we can hardly suspend all evaluation. We may need to be more evaluative in order to be more objective (p. 44).

That people are “needy, vulnerable, and evaluative” is a stance often disregarded by social scientists, who consequently produce only “alienated and alienating” theories of social life—concepts such as preference, interests, values, convention, discourse, socialization, exchange, and power fail to capture people’s own evaluations (p. 2).

In order to understand how people themselves experience their world, scholars must move to different forms of rationality, practical rationalities:

They are concerned with ends rather than means, and particulars rather than universals. They are concrete and embedded rather than abstract and disembedded, they embrace ethical judgement, and they often take a tacit rather than discursive form, involving know-how rather than propositional knowledge. It also includes what is sometimes termed ‘practical wisdom’ (Sayer 2011:61).

Rules and procedures may help someone get started, but they do not help someone become competent. To develop “an efficient and effective practical feel for the game”—phronesis—requires that one experience a range of situations (p. 71). Since experiences are necessary for people to reach their potential, it is more productive to “think in terms of human becoming rather than human being . . . where becoming is contingent, path-dependent and open-ended” (p. 110).

The experience of people in the world also requires an understanding of human relationships. Being vulnerable, concerned, and in need of experience, we rely upon social relationships to provide both support and opportunities to develop into our potential.

Autonomy should be understood not as complete independence of others but as self-command and capacity for agency within the context of relationships and responsibilities that afford us some support. Responsibilities both tie us to others and require us to exercise our capacity for self-command, albeit in a way which takes account of others (Sayer 2011:128).

These relationships into which we enter are not only sometimes given to us (such as our parents and our children), but are also with people who often exercise or are developing agency themselves, and therefore the argument that all relationships should be relationships of choice is “unrealistic and ethically absurd” (p. 128). The modern ideal of the autonomous, choosing individual is a myth. Our concerns encompass many individuals about whom and situations about which we do not exercise choice.

This presents us a social context in which people are responsible agents who are dependent on others, and who are thus vulnerable and invested in their social environment. In such a context, research into meaning must go

beyond that of hermeneutic approaches in that it deals not only with signifiers and the signified, shared understanding and rule-following, but *significance* or *import*. . . .

Describing ‘what something means to me’ cannot reasonably be glossed merely as expressive of the speaker’s feelings; it is *about* something: their well-being or ill-being, and that of their attachments and commitments (Sayer 2011:141; *emphasis in original*).

This means that as vulnerable, evaluative beings, we require some kind of idea of flourishing (p. 239). “We *have* to be evaluative if we are to describe, understand, and explain social life adequately” (p. 216; *emphasis in original*). In brief, interpretation is not enough. If interpretative research does not also include evaluation, it will fail to capture human experience. It will also fail to matter.

Research conducted along this line will focus on several elements of ethical being, including: moral sentiments, socialization, virtue and character, moral (not conventional) norms (based on avoiding harm and promoting flourishing, and not on authority or tradition), stories, applications to novel situations, judgments of others, responsibility (not to establish blame, but to establish formative relationships), and shame (a self-assessment of not living according to one’s commitments). Implications for social science methodology include: overcome aversion and indifference toward normativity; deconstruct fact-value dualisms; be postdisciplinary; incorporate both politics and ethics; be therapeutic, dialogical, and critical; and rigorously discuss alternative ways of organizing society in terms of their feasibility and desirability (Sayer 2011).

The sixth movement of the interpretive tradition begins with the premise that morality is fundamental to human experience. MacIntyre then introduced neo-Aristotelianism into the conversation as a powerful alternative to modern ways of thinking about evaluation. This led to a focus on how people develop and display practical wisdom in particular situations, but beyond that, it also led to a recognition that social inquiry itself is a practice, one that is conducted by researchers who are dependent and who have as much a relation of concern to social worlds as the people whose lives they study. The final principle to come out of this tradition is the idea that

interpretation itself is insufficient to build understanding; vulnerability, significance, and evaluation are necessary components to social thought.

Conclusion

Interpretivism is not a single, unified position; it is a conversation and a living tradition. What many people understand as interpretivism is actually rooted in arguments made around the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps that is because interpretivists are repeatedly challenged by positivists and post-positivists, and so they go back to when the interpretive position was articulated against that position. However, interpretivism has moved far beyond that historical moment. Both interpretivists and their critics need to understand this, in penalty of becoming irrelevant to current debates.

The conversation that is interpretivism is very diverse, and in recent decades has split into several different conversations. Though I suggested different “movements,” there is clearly a great deal of crossover. Poststructuralism has echoes across the movements. Morality and ethics is a theme of both the critical movement and the movement around theories of evaluation and interpretation. And most interpretivists express an openness to a range of methodological diversity and have found various ways to transcend (or render less relevant) epistemological and methodological divides.

There is a great deal of untapped potential within the interpretive tradition. There are many other theorists and branches that I could not cover in this essay (e.g., classical Marxism, existentialism, postcolonialism, and various theological and non-Western cultural traditions can be brought into the conversation). The classics are still fodder for fresh and relevant insights. And also, the work of nearly every contributor to the interpretive tradition can become the subject of an independent treatise. One should remember, too, that this is a *living* tradition. The

conversation is ongoing. Any of the various movements of interpretivism can and is being developed further. This opens a potential for many works of theory, beginning with the other contributions to this special issue.

This framework of the interpretive tradition has implications for family research. The most important is that theoretical diversity fosters methodological diversity, and new ways of thinking about families. A field of inquiry wears down when it does not encounter new ideas. Fortunately, there are many fresh ideas out there. Many of them are coming from the ongoing debates within interpretivism, and they are crossing disciplinary boundaries. Finally, I have noted on occasion where the theorists themselves applied their ideas to family. However, even where the theorists themselves did not directly apply their ideas to family, other scholars can do it for them. It is clear that interpretivism provides family scholars a rich field of scholarly opportunity.

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