

MODERN GERMAN SOCIOLOGY

Edited with introductions
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Structures of Meaning and Objective Hermeneutics

ULRICH OEVERMANN, WITH TILMAN ALLERT, ELISABETH
KONAU, AND JÜRGEN KRAMBECK

We shall attempt below to sketch a hermeneutic perspective on socialization theory,¹ which we regard as significant for sociology in general. Our approach has grown out of the empirical study of family interactions as well as reflection upon the procedures of interpretation employed in our research. For the time being we shall refer to it as *objective hermeneutics* in order to distinguish it clearly from traditional hermeneutic techniques and orientations. The general significance for sociological analysis of objective hermeneutics issues from the fact that, in the social sciences, interpretive methods constitute the fundamental procedures of measurement and of the generation of research data relevant to theory. From our perspective, the standard, nonhermeneutic methods of quantitative social research can only be justified because they permit a shortcut in generating data (and research "economy" comes about under specific conditions). Whereas the conventional methodological attitude in the social sciences justifies qualitative approaches as exploratory or preparatory activities, to be succeeded by standardized approaches and techniques as the actual scientific procedures (assuring precision, validity, and objectivity), we regard hermeneutic procedures as the basic method for gaining precise and valid knowledge in the social sciences. However, we do not simply reject alternative approaches dogmatically. They are in fact useful wherever the loss in precision and objectivity necessitated by the requirement of research economy can be condoned and tolerated in the light of prior hermeneutically elucidated research experiences.

Excerpted from "Die Methodologie einer 'objektiven Hermeneutik' und ihre allgemeine forschungslogische Bedeutung in den Sozialwissenschaften," in Hans-Georg Soeffner, ed., *Interpretative Verfahren in den Sozial- und Textwissenschaften*, pp. 352-432 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1979). The selection, translated by Dieter Misgeld and Gerd Schroeter, consists of pp. 352-354 and pp. 378-387 of the German original.

Despite the general applicability we claim for it, the explication of objective hermeneutics which follows builds upon the research context from which it arose.² We do not believe that it is merely coincidental that our approach originates in the analysis of interaction and socialization. The methodology of objective hermeneutics has a special affinity with the sociological theory of socialization. Reconstructive explanations of the structural characteristics of interaction should make up the core of a theory of socialization, especially if they involve general claims about the social constitution of ontogenesis.³ Ontogenetic theories of the development of actors possess explanatory power only if the formation of structures by subjects is attributed neither to the direct causal effect of the external environment nor simply to the monological unfolding of innate capacities. Instead, structures must be seen as resulting from reconstructions which the actors themselves undertake by way of schemata of practical action, which they possess independently of their innate capacities.⁴ This general starting point corresponds to the empirical finding (based on the analysis of records of interaction) that children taking part in interactions display considerable capacities for the internal differentiation of objective structures of meaning. It is quite obvious (and also unproblematic for developmental psychologists) that these differentiations are not anticipated or intentionally produced by the child and that they cannot be completely decoded or deciphered subsequently. For the structures of meaning in question far exceed the interpretive capacities of the growing child at his particular stage of development. This is precisely where the usefulness of the study of interaction (and of socialization) lies.

When systematically pursuing a sociological theory of socialization in the sense discussed, it will become obvious that its assumptions ought to be taken into consideration in every analysis of the social constitution of subjects and of their interactive competence. These assumptions are not valid for theories of socialization alone but possess general validity for the analysis of the actions of adult subjects. Where this is not the case, such analyses fall prey to psychological reductionism from the start. From this perspective, the theory of socialization is not simply a social psychological or a developmental psychological appendix to general sociology, as is the case, almost without exception, with socialization theories in sociological theory. It is rather a fundamental and independent component of a general structural sociological theory, in the sense that it is impossible to carry out a consistent structural analysis in sociology without considering this component. Our hermeneutic methodology is essential for a sociologi-

cal theory of socialization. It is, furthermore, a research orientation applicable to sociology as a whole.

The tangible objects of the procedure of objective hermeneutics are records of real symbolic social actions or interactions, either written, oral, visual, or involving a combination of different media. The actual form of the records is merely a technical matter for the interpretive procedures of objective hermeneutics. For their interpretability is principally dependent upon the fact that they can be understood as a language or that the interactively generated meaning recorded can be paraphrased by way of language.

Under this condition, all recorded interactions, in whatever medium and in whatever technical format, may be regarded as valid interaction texts, as long as they represent the essential object of interpretation.

The reconstructive interpretation of interaction texts permits the discovery of rules which constitute interaction texts as *objective structures of significance* [*Bedeutungsstrukturen*], which reflect the *latent structures of meaning* [*Sinnstrukturen*] of interaction itself. The objective structures of significance of interaction texts (which are prototypes of objective social structures in general) are real and have some permanence. Analytically (though not empirically) they are independent of any specific and conscious representation of the meaning of interaction on the side of the participating subjects. We might also say that a text, once produced, comprises a social reality of its own that must be reconstructed with procedures adequate to it. It can be traced back neither to the disposition for action and the psychic conditions of the speaker nor to the psychic reality of the recipients. For this reason, it would be a basic mistake to try and infer the meaning of a text by deductions about the intentions of its producer or by way of an understanding of specific recipients. We also reject the common social science practice of making assertions about the psychic reality of actors, their motives, expectations, and value orientations, without a thorough and well-defined hermeneutic reconstruction of the objective structures of significance of their interaction texts.

To avoid misunderstanding, we must stress that the category of interaction as used here differs in two respects from the way in which it is commonly employed. On the one hand, we are starting from the premise that interaction is the most elementary unit of human action and also the smallest analytical unit of the theory of action. In this sense, individual action already represents an abstraction. Without being able to substantiate this more fully now, we refer to the fact that

the difference between behavior and action can be maintained conceptually only by adopting such an assumption. For that reason, the concept of interaction is in a certain sense in fact untenable and misleading because it presupposes the primacy of single, isolated actions, from which interaction is supposed to be built up as the smallest possible unit.

On the other hand, we are not using the concept of interaction substantively in order to designate circumscribed changes and processes in the sense of concrete actions. We employ the concept more generally in order to identify meanings shared by actors within specific segments of time. From this general perspective, the category of interaction refers to a steady, uninterrupted temporal stream of events in a system of relationships, independently of whether in concrete terms these events signify constancy or change, rest or movement; we do not make the social scientific relevance of these events dependent upon the meanings intended by participants. Thus we proceed in terms of a less restrictive framework by emphasizing the objective importance of events.

The latent structure of meaning of a single interaction or utterance (as the structure of situationally and contextually possible relations of significance) permits, as a rule, different "ways of reading." Participants in the original situation of action produce only *segments* of these readings intentionally. The distinction between latent objective structures of meaning and their intentional representation is decisive for objective hermeneutics. A perfect overlap between intentional representation and latent structure of meaning is possible in principle. But it represents an especially ideal case of fully self-reflective communication: having reconstructed their own interaction texts, the acting subjects grasp the full meaning of their actions. However, in the sociological analysis of interaction, latent structures of meaning have to be differentiated from their subjective and intentional representation and from the overall psychic reality of the participating subjects. Latent structures of meaning also have to be reconstructed before other operations of data analysis are brought into play. Only in a very ideal case can we achieve what are commonly considered to be unproblematic implications of procedures of interviewing and observation: i.e., to infer the actors' dispositions for action on the basis of their own statements, and to derive from them the structure of their action. However, even in this ideal case, we cannot make do methodologically without a concept of the latent structure of meaning: for without the prior reconstruction of latent structures we are unable to determine whether we are confronted with an ideal case.

The constructions of objective hermeneutics imply a concept of significance, which, although sharply distinguished from the behaviorist notion of external criteria of conduct, cannot be reduced to a concept of subjective intentionality. By adopting a specific interpretation of Mead's theory of significance, we begin with a concept of significance and of objective social structure as emerging from interaction. Social structure in turn is to be treated as a prerequisite for the constitution of intentionality. Obviously, objective significance points to intentions and, just as obviously, it is impossible to think of the real emergence of significance from interaction without referring to the intentionality of actors. In the tradition of Mead we might even say: intentions are logically equivalent to or synonymous with the rule-dependent objective significance of an interaction text. They are instances of intentions ascribable to an idealized, transcendentally constructed, generalized subject of the "universe of discourse." Here we have in mind Mead's notion of the absolute other, the "generalized other" in the system of rules constituting significance. Therefore, in following Mead, we are merely paraphrasing the concept of objective significance. The intentionality of a specific individual subject must be categorially distinguished from it.

In order to achieve a theoretically meaningful idea of the constitution of actors, it is necessary to assume — with Mead — that the constitution of objective patterns of significance has already been achieved in interaction. The concept of the objective significance of interaction must also be incorporated into an evolutionary theory in Mead's sense — a theory of the emergence of species as well as specific structures of interaction.

The concept of the latent structure of meaning lays claims to a level of reality of its own, which must be sharply distinguished from the reality of observable conduct relevant for the theory of behavior, as well as from the reality of subjective projections of action possibilities, of definitions, and of constructions significant for action theory and symbolic interactionism. But our theory of the reality of objective structures also analytically transcends the concept of social reality found in Marx; in fact, it provides the foundation for Marx's concept. With the concept of the latent structure of meaning, real and objective possibilities of significance are introduced, whether the actors taking part in the interaction are aware of them or not.

Objective hermeneutics is a method of interpretation which can decode this reality. For the time being we shall use the term "objective hermeneutics" (even though this may perhaps not be the most suitable

choice), in order to illustrate our concern with the painstaking, extensive explanation of the objective significance of interaction texts and of the latent meaning of interaction. Reconstructive methods of textual interpretation have nothing in common with an empathetic reconstruction of psychic processes, for example in the interpretation of questionnaire results or of answers obtained through projective tests. We remain convinced that reconstructive interpretations of the objective significance of interaction texts come first; only then can we turn to the internal realities of actors.

We can conclude that, as an empirical science of objective social structures, sociology has interaction *texts* as its central subject matter. It may also serve as a theoretical frame for the sciences of action, such as the social and the cultural sciences, the humanities, and even economics.

Perhaps surprisingly, we shall mention Karl Popper as a chief witness for the approach of objective hermeneutics. We take this position even if a close union between behaviorist reductionism and critical rationalism is currently regarded as more compelling. Popper's conception of "world three" — the world of the structures of argumentation and proof — corresponds to our concept of latent structures of meaning. Popper applies it to empirical questions, in his historical reconstruction of science. The application of "world three" concepts permits a reconstruction of the original situation in which the problem arose and to which the sciences in question responded. Popper employs the methods of textual interpretation in the pursuit of these issues. This has nothing in common with the psychological analysis of mental processes. To give an example: Popper reconstructs the situation of inquiry which underlay Galileo's argument. It is to be found in the context of a theory of tides, a theory which was already considered problematic in Galileo's own day. Popper demonstrates the strategic importance of Galileo's initial discoveries for the future of science. In the past, Galileo's approach was erroneously assumed to be the result of his dogmatic personality. Thus Popper adopts an approach similar to objective hermeneutics: we have argued that theoretical concepts must be elucidated in the language of the "reconstructed case" itself. This example, furthermore, indicates that such constructs of psychological motives as "authoritarian" or "dogmatic" have no independent explanatory power. They only illustrate the need for more complete explanations. Structural explanations formulated in the language of the case in question or of the historical event itself must always be the first step in any empirical analysis. This is so even for Popper, the criti-

cal rationalist. They cannot be replaced by measurement operations supposedly required by the unity of science as a principle of inquiry.

Cognitive representations of the world can be encountered only on a second level of reality which, as it were, lies beneath the level of latent structures of meaning. Cognitive representations are merely a segment of the reconstructed latent structure of meaning of an interaction text. Additional distinctions are needed here, such as distinctions between different mental/cognitive functions. Distinctions between subjective and intentional representations on the one hand, and collective patterns of interpretation on the other, belong to this second level of reality. Collective patterns manifest themselves only to a limited extent, but they control judgments about the appropriateness of action. These matters usually become thematic in critical discussions of behaviorism: for behaviorists never resort to an independently structured psychic reality for purposes of explanation. They restrict themselves to observing and recording external, "meaningless" events. Even symbolic interactionism, with its central concept of the social definition of the situation (or the social definition of reality), is in danger, in the final analysis, of making social reality dependent upon the subjective-intentional achievement of meaning. Thereby objective structures of meaning disappear from view.

Even in daily life we can encounter analogies that correspond to the level of reality claimed by the concept of the latent structure of meaning and that recognize the subjectively intended meaning entailed by the concept. We implicitly recognize subjective meanings entailed by latent structures, for instance when in the case of a misunderstanding we return to the original text and its significance. An example of such a misunderstanding is the breakdown of procedures for inferring the intentions of a speaker from the implications of the spoken text. In the same manner we refer to an objective level of reality (having subjective implications) when we want to ascertain the "actual" motives for a person's action: We interpret the person's interaction texts by relying upon the belief that they have a significance which is independent and separate from the initial intentions of the "speaker." We also assume that the actor will reveal her real nature in these additional meanings.

The psychoanalyst proceeds in an analogous manner when he regards neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue, parapraxes, dreams, and free associations as structures of meaning. He treats them as texts, for the meaning of texts exceeds subjectively intended meanings. Only by using such methodological and theoretical assumptions can the psy-

choanalyst draw empirically valid conclusions about unconscious motives revealing themselves in those texts. We also discuss these phenomena because in such cases the ego is not entirely successful in exercising censorship. Neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue, parapraxes, dreams, and free associations can be regarded as texts appropriate for the reconstruction of unconscious motives. We have already pointed to the affinity between objective hermeneutics and the psychoanalytic method of interpretation, as well as to similarities in their understanding of the unconscious. In objective hermeneutics, for example, we look upon the representations of unconscious motives as repressed derivations of the latent meanings of childhood scenes which have subsequently been reinterpreted. They share the attribute of timelessness with latent structures of meaning; as structures they are independent from the particular existential or historical moment of time in which they are decoded. Unconscious or latent meanings always manifest themselves behind the backs of the subjects. And quite apart from the exceptional ideal case of complete self-knowledge achieved by way of communication, the difference between latent structures of meaning and their intentional representations in the actor's thought represents the standard empirical case.

The difference can be caused by three distinct types of conditions:

1. During the child's primary process of socialization — in other words, until he takes on the roles typical of adult life or until puberty, depending on which theoretical criteria of development are relied upon — his capacity for the interpretation of meaning is limited by the level of development. As a result, the presuppositions for the full realization of the latent structures of meaning of interaction are, as a general principle, not yet met. While arguing the relevance of objective hermeneutics for socialization theory we recognize, of course, that the latent structures of interaction (and the ontogenetic structures of development) are for sociological theory nothing but the realm of objectively social phenomena, existing outside the actor. We also share the view that ontogenetic development depends upon interpretations of the latent structures of meaning by significant others, such as parents and teachers. Their interpretations take the place of the developing subject's own interpretations. In this way, objectively understandable motives for action can be transformed into subjective intentions. Interpretations such as these (substituting for the subjects' own interpretations of the objective meaning of their actions) do not occur only in the process of socialization. They are also typical of "resocializing" efforts made, for example, in therapy and in other pro-

cesses of social control.

Developmental shortcuts in the subjective-intentional realization of latent structures of meaning may, but need not have a distorting effect; rather, they essentially imply simplifications. The more elementary the stage of development, the less explicitly will the latent structures of meaning be realized. The difference between subjective-intentional representations of latent structures of meaning and the structures themselves is the result of ontogenetic development and consists in the degree of explicitness of structures of significance.

We are now addressing problems belonging to a theory of the constitution of experience. Consequently we can take an important fact into account. Naturally, at an early stage in their development, children notice the significance of interaction for socialization only to a limited extent. They lack the interpretive competence and socialization required for differentiated constructions. However, they do perceive the natural, undistorted meaning of interaction, its "emotive truth," so to speak. Potential distortions in perception arise only later. They are caused by their acceptance of restrictive, ideological, or neurosis-producing social norms and interpretations. Pathological developments may originate in these distortions.

We shall attempt to illustrate this point of view by way of the following example of the relationship between an overprotective mother and her child. At a very early stage of development the child will clearly "recognize" the latent meaning of interaction with her mother. This latent meaning can be interpreted as the projection of maternal needs onto the child, who is abused as a surrogate in the satisfaction of the mother's own, repressed needs. It also entails a tendency to smother the child with affection. The child will be aware of what is going on "intuitively," and will realize the truth emotionally — with her almost physical capacities for perception. The child will often feel unwell simply because the mother's behavior toward the child, intentionally represented by her as a sacrifice of her own needs, has in fact little relation to the child's needs. The mother's behavior meets the child's needs in only a "technical" sense: for example, she may rigidly adhere to child care instructions. Here the child's comprehension of the latent meaning of interaction is not yet distorted. The child merely simplifies the meanings. But once the mother has succeeded in getting the child to internalize, in a general way, the significance of her actions as sacrifice, the child, as the "victim," will be obliged to be grateful. And then the child will interpret the latent meaning of her interaction with her mother not only in a simplified, but also in a sys-

tematically distorted manner. The subsequent process of becoming neurotic can then be corrected or undone during therapy. In this instance we assume that the condition of transference makes it possible for the therapist to reconstruct the latent meaning of the child's interactions with the mother and to offer alternative interpretations of the interaction and its structure.

The above example represents a case of *pathogenic* socialization. A successful process of socialization (formulated in an idealized model) consists in making latent meanings more and more conscious.

2. The second type of condition has already been introduced while explaining the first type. As a result of pathological constraints, latent meanings may be represented on the intentional level as systematically distorted, fragmented, or displaced interpretations. At the level of individual biography we refer to these factors as neuroses or psychoses, at the level of history as ideologies, dogmas, myths, or whatever. In the example of interaction discussed above, these were the factors we dealt with. They are responsible for producing slips of the tongue, parapraxes, action compromises, and symptomatic actions, as well as for concealing the objective meaning of these distortions. However, their decoding is the prerequisite of a cure. Thus the model of actions resulting from successful therapy is implied by the reconstructions of meanings latent in symptomatic behavior. It is implicit in the linguistic structure of interaction texts. Here we come upon the therapeutic potential of language. Once again we notice that it is the attitude acting subjects take toward latent meanings which may cause pathological deformations. But latent structures of meaning are not themselves pathological. Above all else, in the face of this fundamentally important distinction, we consider any talk about "damaged" or "destroyed language," or references to repression as "excommunication," to be muddled, if not in fact misleading.

3. Interpretive accomplishments and decodings of meanings naturally are also constitutive of the routine activities of everyday life. They are not a specifically scientific procedure. Objective hermeneutics, however, consists of a totally "impractical," detailed interpretation of the latent meaning of interaction texts. It involves the explication of "improbable readings" and of taken-for-granted assumptions. This is how the specific structures of interaction are made clear. In everyday life one proceeds in the opposite way: In interacting with others one attempts to make accurate conjectures about intentions and dispositions as quickly as possible. One responds to practical exigencies when accounting for the motives underlying everyday behavior. One pro-

ceeds similarly with respect to objective symbols which represent intentions. After all, one wants to achieve one's goals in practical life. But objective hermeneutics is to explicate structures of action with as much discrimination as possible.

Thus there are methods in everyday life for quickly decoding meanings and for understanding motives. These procedures generate the most probable interpretations. For the time being we shall refer to these interpretive methods of everyday life as features of practical action assuring its economy and efficiency. We include among these those basic systems of relevance that make intersubjective understanding possible. The phenomenological tradition within sociology has been particularly interested in them.

These features of practical action guarantee that, as a rule, the latent meanings of practical action are decoded "correctly" and without distortion (at least under the most likely sociohistorical conditions). But it must be taken into account that the interpretive methods of everyday life responsible for the achievement of economy and efficiency in action themselves rest upon background assumptions. They express the spirit of the age and the ideology of a particular stage of social development. They are deep-seated and historically specific patterns of interpretation, and in principle open to criticism. But within the sociocultural frame of reference found on a particular stage of social development, the features of practical action in question assure that an undistorted, essentially correct understanding of the meaning of interaction is achieved, albeit at a low level of explication. Therefore the understandings achieved in everyday life and within the framework of epochal assumptions cannot easily be criticized.

Interpretations of action in everyday life occur more or less naturally, without need for reflection. They reach their limit under unlikely conditions, for example, whenever actions have to be understood in an exceptional sense or whenever the standard interpretations of action have broken down because the underlying sociohistorical conditions have lost their validity. In any case, socialization *also* means the internalization of features of practical action in everyday life, which provide for its economy and efficiency.

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NOTES

1. The records of interactions discussed below originated in a research project on "Elternhaus und Schule (Home and School)," which was carried out at the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung under the direction of Ulrich Oevermann, Lothar Krappmann, and Kurt Kreppner. See Oevermann, Krappmann, and Kreppner, "Elternhaus und Schule," unpublished research proposal, Berlin 1968. The theoretical position advanced here is an elaboration of this earlier work.
2. On this point see the chapter by Ulrich Oevermann et al., "Beobachtungen zur Struktur der sozialisatorischen Interaktion," in M. Rainer Lepsius, ed., *Zwischenbilanz der Soziologie. Verhandlungen des 17. deutschen Soziologentages* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1976), pp. 274-295.
3. See Ulrich Oevermann, "Programmatische Überlegungen zu einer Theorie der Bildungsprozesse und zur Strategie der Sozialisationsforschung," in Klaus Hurrelmann, ed., *Sozialisation und Lebenslauf* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1976), pp. 34-52.
4. Ulrich Oevermann, "Sozialisationstheorie. Ansätze zu einer soziologischen Sozialisationstheorie und ihre Konsequenzen für die allgemeine soziologische Analyse," in Günther Lüschen, ed., *Deutsche Soziologie seit 1945*, [Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 21] (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1979), pp. 143-168.