Crafting Theory to Satisfy the Requirements of Interpretation

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Abstract

Just as Lee, Briggs, and Dennis [8] showed that positivism’s conception of “explanation” leads to requirements for positivist theory to satisfy, we show that a hermeneutical conception of “interpretation” leads to requirements for interpretive theory to satisfy. We refer to the hermeneutical philosopher Ricoeur’s model of the text, by which “the methodology of text-interpretation [serves] as a paradigm for interpretation in general” [12, p. 91]. Much as the meaning of a text is interpreted, the meaning of a person’s action is interpreted, where in both cases, the object of interpretation is an existing understanding. It exists in the form of not only the understanding originating with the author of a text or the person engaging in an action, but also the understanding that the observing interpretive researcher comes to hold – the interpretation. Explicit recognition of understanding in such forms leads to requirements that can strengthen interpretive theorizing.

1. Introduction

The theorizing that a positivist researcher performs is explanation. The theorizing that an interpretive researcher performs is interpretation. Lee, Briggs, and Dennis [8], in examining some past philosophical and methodological work on explanation, distilled a set of requirements that explanation poses for positivist theory to satisfy. In this essay, in examining some past philosophical and methodological work on interpretation, we distill a set of requirements that interpretation poses for interpretive theory to satisfy.

Interpretive research in information systems has taken a variety of forms. Action research that conceptualizes problems in an organization as understood by the organizational participants themselves can be regarded as interpretive [2]. Ethnographic studies, especially when conducted in the traditions of cultural anthropology, are interpretive [1][14]. Case studies and grounded-theory studies of information systems in social settings can (but need not) be interpretive [7][15][16]. The research literature in information systems includes a large and still expanding number of interpretive studies, including articles and books on interpretive research methods.

In this essay, we draw attention to what some philosophers and social scientists have called “understanding” (often denoted as verstehen), which can refer to the meaning with which an author writes a text or the meaning with which a person deliberately performs an action. To interpret what the author means with his text is to interpret his understanding. To interpret what the person means with her action is to interpret her understanding. It is precisely the existence of such understanding – which calls for its interpretation – that gives the overriding purpose to and provides the name for “interpretive research.” The central role that understanding plays in interpretation can be implicit, even to the point of, unfortunately, being forgotten; however, its receiving explicit treatment can serve constructively to strengthen interpretive theorizing.

Schutz provides an example that plainly illustrates the need for interpretation [13, p. 263]: “The same overt behavior (say a tribal pageant as it can be captured by the movie-camera) may have an entirely different meaning to the performers. What interests the social scientist is merely whether it is a war dance, a barter trade, the reception of a friendly ambassador, or something else of this sort.” For a researcher, what requires interpretation is the understanding that the performers themselves have of their own actions.

In another example, people’s behaviors in not using a technology newly introduced to their organization can be consistent with different and incompatible research perspectives on what the new technology means to them. From one research perspective, these people can be interpreted as acting irresponsibly in resisting technology. From another research perspective, the same people can be interpreted as acting responsibly, where they understand that the technology – a new electronic medical records system being implemented in their health clinic – can endanger the lives of their patients [10]. Again, what requires interpretation is the
understanding that the people themselves have of their own actions.

How to interpret such understanding is a major research challenge. It has motivated entire fields of inquiry, including interpretive sociology, cultural anthropology, history, hermeneutics, and phenomenology.

Synonyms for such understanding include “subjective intention” [12], “subjective meaning” [3][13][17] and, when held by two or more persons interacting with each other, “inter-subjective understanding” [13] – where the adjective “subjective” emphatically does not refer to “the private, uncontrollable, and unverifiable intuition of the [researcher] or refers to his private value system” [13, pp. 264-265], but rather indicates that it is the meaning or understanding held by the human subject whom the researcher is observing.

The research significance of subjective meaning cannot be overstated. Subjective meaning does not exist in the subject matter investigated by the natural sciences, and therefore can be used to distinguish (and emancipate) social-science research from natural-science research. As explained by Schutz [13], people have meanings with which they understand one another, but atoms, molecules, and electrons have no comparable “meanings” with which they “understand” other atoms, molecules, and electrons. The ontological existence of such meaning therefore creates an additional research complication for the social sciences to handle, but that the natural sciences are conveniently free of and, therefore, can even be argued to be easier to conduct. Schutz explains that subjective meaning actually provides the foundation upon which the constructs of the social sciences are necessarily built [13, pp. 266-267]:

Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, namely constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene [i.e, the subjective meaning], whose behavior the social scientist has to observe and to explain in accordance with the procedural rules of his science.

The next, second section of this essay will apply Ricoeur’s “model of the text,” in which “meaningful action [is] considered as a text.” Ricoeur uses text as a foil or rhetorical device useful for drawing attention to understanding (namely, the understanding originating in and originally intended by the text’s author) and its interpretation. We will provide a précis of Ricoeur’s model of the text and how his conception of interpretation arises from it. We will also annotate the précis with related insights from other notable scholars.

In the third section of this essay, we will articulate, based on the philosophical and methodological discussion that precedes it, the requirements of interpretation that theory needs to satisfy. Rather than just enumerate the requirements, we will articulate them as we apply them to the interpretive theory that was developed in an instance of published information-systems research, namely, Orlikowski’s “Division Among than Ranks: The Social Implications of CASE Tools for Systems Developers” [11].

The fourth and final section will offer a succinct statement of the requirements that interpretation poses for good theory to satisfy.

2. Ricoeur’s “model of the text”

We review the main points in Ricoeur’s paradigm in which a person’s reading of another person’s text provides a paradigm for a person’s “reading” of another person’s action. Ricoeur summarizes his reasoning as follows [12, p. 93]:

This paradigm draws its main features from the status of the text itself as characterized by (1) the fixation of the meaning, (2) its dissociation from the mental intention of the author, (3) the display of nonostensive references, and (4) the universal range of its addressees.

Our review of these four points (each appears as the title of a subsection, below) takes us on an excursion into hermeneutic philosophy and social theory, the relevance of which to information systems research might not always be immediately apparent, but which we will explicitly establish by the end of this section of the essay. In this excursion, we will annotate Ricoeur’s main points with related insights from noted scholars in social theory: Max Weber (considered a founder of sociology), Anthony Giddens (known among information systems researchers for his structuration theory), Alfred Schutz (who introduced and clarified phenomenological philosophy for sociology), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (who authored the classic book, The Social Construction of Reality).

Our excursion regarding the third point – pertaining to “nonostensive references” – will be lengthy, owing to its major importance for crafting interpretive theory. Filling out Ricoeur’s own terse discussion, we introduce social structure and culture as examples of nonostensive references.
Following our review of the four points, we provide a fifth subsection that explicitly recognizes the function of theorizing in interpretation and reviews some of Ricoeur’s and Schutz’s ideas on validation.

### 2.1. The fixation of the meaning

Ricoeur’s conception of interpretation begins with his distinction between language and speech. Language, on the one hand, is a system consisting of signs (words) and rules by which one may relate them to each other (grammar). However, insofar as “signs in language refer only to other signs within the same system” [12, p. 92], they do not provide a language with any empirical content.

Language, as just a purely formal system, can be illustrated in the following way. Consider that a set of words from a human language can be inputted to a software translator – such as Babylon Translator, PROMT-Online, Google Translate or Microsoft Translator – for translation into another human language, the output of which could then be inputted to another software translator for translation into yet another human language, the output of which could then be inputted to yet another software translator, and so forth. The quality of these translations is not the point (and, indeed, without empirical referents for the words, such quality would be an inapplicable concept), but they are sufficient to illustrate Ricoeur’s characterization of language as a purely formal system.

Speech, on the other hand, is what Ricoeur calls a language event, which is what an information systems researcher would recognize as an instantiation of language, where words are given empirical referents through the act of a human being who speaks the words. Speech is fleeting and disappears, according to Ricoeur, but if a person writes his or her words, then what the person means with the words becomes inscribed, or fixed, in the resulting text. Furthermore, text can convey meaning inscribed in it even if the person who authored the text becomes no longer present.

Continuing this line of reasoning, Ricoeur poses that the fixation (which Ricoeur also calls “inscription”) of meaning occurs not only in the words that a person writes, but also in a person’s actions.

First, in the same way that language is a system of signs, devoid of content, behavior is a system of physical actions that, as “overt behavior (say a tribal pageant as it can be captured by the movie-camera)” (Schutz, op. cit.), are devoid of meaning. Ricoeur is scrupulous about referring not to action in general, but specifically to meaningful action (as reflected in this phrase from Ricoeur’s essay’s title, “Meaningful Action Considered as Text”). This echoes Weber in his essay on interpretive sociology [17, p. 162]:

*Action specifically significant for interpretive sociology is, in particular, behavior that: (1) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (2) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (3) can be intelligibly explained in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning. Emotional actions and “feelings” – say, “dignity,” “pride,” “envy,” “jealousy” – that are indirectly relevant for the course of the action, are also related in terms of subjective meaning to the outer world and, especially to the action of others.*

The term “meaningful action” is inseparable from “social action” [17, p. 159]:

*We shall speak of “social action” wherever human action is subjectively related in meaning to the behavior of others. An unintended collision of two cyclists, for example, shall not be called social action. But we will define as such their possible prior attempts to dodge one another or, after the accident, their possible altercation or negotiation about an amicable settlement. Social action is not the only kind of action significant for sociological causal explanation, but it is the primary object of an “interpretive” sociology.*

Second, to the extent that the same “overt behaviors” signify the same meanings to the persons interacting with each other (for instance, for these people, these overt behaviors have either the meaning of “a war dance, a barter trade, [or] the reception of a friendly ambassador” [13, op. cit.]), these overt behaviors function like “text” with meanings for the persons “writing” and “reading” it. In this sense, there is, in Ricoeur’s phrase, the “fixation of the meaning” in action – or more precisely, not just any action, but a person’s “social action” or “meaningful action.”

Equivalently stated, just as words from language, as a system of signs devoid of content, are inscribed with meaning upon their instantiation by a person in his or her speaking or writing them, we say that physical behaviors are likewise inscribed with a person’s subjective intention upon their instantiation by this person in his or her (inter)actions with others. In this sense, otherwise merely physical movements made by humans are rendered into meaningful, social
action. The fixation of the meaning in text thus provides a model for the fixation of meaning in action— in particular, social action.

2.2. The text’s dissociation from the mental intention of the author

In Ricoeur’s term “the fixation of the meaning,” the “meaning” refers to the one originating in and intended by the person who speaks to a listener, by the author who writes to a reader, or by the person who (inter)acts with another; however, there is also meaning on the other side— namely, the meaning construed by the listener, by the reader, or by the other person in the interaction. Perhaps, in ideal communication, the meaning intended and the meaning construed are the same, but in general, there is neither a guarantee that this will be the case nor even a necessity that this must be the case. Again, how this happens with text illustrates how this happens with action.

Regarding text, Ricoeur says [12, p. 95]: “The text’s career escapes the finite horizon of its author. What the text says now matters more than what the author meant to say, and every exegesis unfolds its procedures within the circumference of a meaning that has broken its moorings to the psychology of its author.” Likewise, regarding action, he says [12, p. 101]: “Our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend.” Ricoeur gives the example of a person’s action for which a record is made, where meanings assigned by others to this action could then be quite different from the person’s own. To Ricoeur’s example we can add police records, college transcripts, an employee’s annual performance appraisal, journalistic accounts, and even scholarly historical studies. In all of these examples, a person’s action can come to have meanings ascribed to it that he or she never intended and might never become aware of. These examples all involve what Ricoeur calls “the autonomization of action.”

A person’s action need not literally take the form of text, such as a record, for the autonomization of action to happen. Actions that people repeat in their interactions can, over time, lead to the emergence of “persisting patterns … which become the [virtual] documents of human action” [12, p. 101].

To elaborate Ricoeur’s reasoning, we add that in ethnography, where the culture of a people refers to their shared rules for behavior, the meaning that one person construes for another person’s action stems as much, if not more, from how the already existing culture situates the action as from how the latter person intends it. These are not deterministic rules, but rules that can shape or provide guidance for behavior, where they are “the rules of social life” described by Giddens [5, p. 21]; they can not only constrain but also enable actions. In this sense, culture itself is a virtual text into which the meanings of patterned actions, over time, become “sedimented” – a term used by Ricoeur in his essay [12, p. 102], by Berger and Luckmann [3, pp. 67-70], and by Giddens in [5, p. 22] – where the virtual text becomes instantiated through the action taken by a member of the culture (much as a language system is instantiated by a person once he or she speaks or writes words from the language).

In summary, subjective meaning takes the form of not only the meaning intended by the human subject inscribing or fixing it in an action, but also the changed and changing meanings later construed by others as the action escapes its originator and has effects that he or she did not intend. In the same way that a text undergoes dissociation from the mental intention of its author, a person’s action undergoes autonomization from the subjective meaning that the person intended with it, whereupon the action can signify a new meaning for others, who could be someone that the person is immediately interacting with, as well as whoever else subsequently encounters this action as a “record.”

2.3. The text’s display of nonostensive references

Interpretive researchers are typically mindful of the importance of what they call “context.” Ricoeur distinguishes between two forms of context [12, p. 102]: “A meaningful action is an action the importance of which goes ‘beyond’ its relevance to its initial situation.” If the first form of context for a meaningful action is “its initial situation,” then what is the second form of context that is “beyond” the initial situation? The first context is what Ricoeur means by an action’s “ostensive references”; the second context is what he means by “nonostensive references.” Again, the analogy to spoken discourse and then text clarifies this for action.

First, “in spoken discourse … what the dialogue ultimately refers to, is the situation common to the interlocutors” [12, p. 95]. This situation is the ostensive reference.

Second, “in the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference. For us, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts” [12, p. 96]. Ricoeur provides a sophisticated philosophical discussion of this point involving what he calls the world, which he carefully distinguishes from the welt. Consistent with his discussion and more plainly
illustrating it is our example of a text in the form of a scholarly article appearing in a peer reviewed scientific journal. The *ostensive* reference of this text is the empirical phenomenon that the text’s authors observed in, say, a particular laboratory experiment, all of which we consider to be what Ricoeur calls “its initial situation.” The meaning of this text, however, emerges not only immediately from this situation, but also mediatelty through other texts – the larger body of scientific literature forming the research stream of which this text is a product and to which it contributes. The larger scientific literature is the text’s *nonostensive* reference, without which the text of the scholarly article would, in a fundamental sense, be meaningless.

Another example is a text in the form of a judge’s written decision in a court case. Here, the text’s *ostensive* reference would be a recently transpired situation that the legal facts of the case describe, where the written decision’s *nonostensive* reference would be other texts – pertinent statutes and case law – a literature without which the text of the judge’s (or any judge’s) decision would, in a fundamental sense, be meaningless.

Third, “what would correspond in the field of action to the nonostensive references of a text?” Ricoeur continues [12, pp. 102-103]:

> An important action, we could say, develops meanings which can be actualized or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred. To say the same thing in different words, the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts. Its importance is its durable relevance and, in some cases, its omnitemporal relevance.

Ricoeur elaborates this point with a sophisticated philosophical discussion, referring to Hegel, Marx, and “superstructures.” Consistent with Ricoeur’s discussion and more plainly illustrating his notion of *nonostensive* reference, we present the notion of social structure, which we present in a way that is intellectually allied with Berger and Luckmann’s conception of the social construction of reality. We will tie “social structure” back to “nonostensive reference” shortly after we define the former.

A particularly clear form of social structure is kinship structure, provided by Gearing [4] in his book about the Fox Indians. Figures 1 and 2 [pp. 84-85] illustrate “Selected American kinship terms” and “Selected Fox [Indian] kinship terms in translation,” respectively. A kinship structure is a durable collection of roles, of the relationships between them, and of “the rules of social life” [5, op. cit.] pertaining to roles and relationships throughout the structure. Different rules are associated with different roles, where knowledge of the rules are shared by all members of the kinship structure, and where the *shared* knowledge forms the core of the group’s culture. Such rules can pertain to, among other things, what a role allows or enables its occupant to do, as well as what two different roles allow or enable their respective occupants (e.g., in Figure 1, the “Unc” role and the “EGO” role) to do with respect to each other.

A kinship structure, like any other social structure, remains more-or-less steadfast in the short run. In the long run, it can and does change, but its rate of change is much slower than the turnover of the individuals who enter, pass through, and leave it. Some organization structures, but likely few of them, can be as clearly delineated as the two kinship structures in Figures 1 and 2. In this way, kinship structure can serve as a model or paradigm for social structure in general.

The way in which we have conceptualized social structure is consistent with what Berger and Luckmann [3] call a “socially constructed reality” or a “social construction.” For Berger and Luckmann and for us, a social structure is *not* “socially constructed” by the people who, at a given moment, are occupying it. A social structure is – or more accurately, has been – formed over time by all the past generations of people who have passed through it. In the course of their having internalized it and externalized it (processes that Berger and Luckmann describe in detail and that Giddens later developed further in his structuration theory), they have contributed (most often not wittingly) to its formation over the course of its long-term evolution. Significantly, the term, to “socially construct,” appears nowhere in Berger and Luckmann’s book.

We note Giddens’ concept of “absent totality” as a feature of social structure [6, p. 61]:

> Structure here presumes the idea of an absent totality. To understand a sentence which a speaker utters means knowing an enormous range of rules and strategies of a syntactical and semantical kind, which are not contained within the speech act, but are nevertheless necessary to either understand it or to produce it. It is such a notion of structure (as an absent totality) which I hold to be important as a concept for the social sciences as a whole and basic to the notion of duality of structure.
In other words, when two people interact, for one of them to understand an action which the other person takes requires “knowing an enormous range of rules and strategies” of their shared culture and social structure, “which are not contained within this [action], but are nevertheless necessary to either understand it or to produce it.”

Worthy of note is that Gidden’s term, “absent totality,” comports perfectly with Ricoeur’s term, “nonostensive reference.”

What tangible difference does a social structure (of which kinship structure is an exemplary form) make as a nonostensive reference? Consider two people who occupy different roles in the same social structure and who are interacting with each other in a particular situation. The circumstances of this particular situation provide the immediate context or the ostensive reference of the subjective meanings that the two people inscribe in their social actions. The overarching social structure and culture provide the mediate context or the nonostensive reference, without which these actions would, in a fundamental sense, be meaningless and would never have had cause to materialize in the first place.

The interpretive importance of nonostensive reference comes out clearly in an example provided by Gearing in his book [4, op. cit.] about the Fox Indians. Figure 1 uses red circles to indicate both the “EGO” role, relative to which the remaining roles are designated, and an “Unc” (uncle) role in an “American” kinship structure; Figure 2 uses green circles to indicate both the “EGO” role and a “Fa” (father) role in a Fox kinship structure. Perhaps interestingly to an “American” observer, Figure 2 shows that a Fox person can have multiple fathers. Gearing explains:

Of course, a Fox, when he called two or more men by a single term, which we translate as “father,” did not thereby confuse his biological father and that man’s brother any more than Americans confuse their father’s sister and mother’s sister when they call both aunt; the single Fox term denoted a common set of obligations.

For a researcher to interpret interactions between two Fox persons in the two red-circled roles as one would interpret interactions between two “American” persons in the two red-circled roles would be just plain incorrect. For the Fox, occupants of all the “Fa” roles share a common set of obligations to the occupant of the “EGO” role – which are different from, in an “American” kinship structure, the obligations that occupants of all the “Unc” roles have vis-à-vis the occupant of the “EGO” role. Another example involves, in the Fox kinship structure, individuals in the roles of “Bro” and “Sis” who, unlike in the “American” kinship structure, may have completely different parents. The single Fox term for brother (or sister) denotes a common set of obligations that all Fox persons in a “Bro” role or a “Sis” role have regarding other people in another “Bro” role or “Sis” role. In both examples, knowledge of the social structure and its accompanying culture, as the nonostensive reference, would be required for an outside researcher of the Fox to properly interpret actions that he or she observes between occupants of “Fa” and “EGO” roles and between occupants of “Bro” and “Sis” roles.

An interpretive researcher who lacks knowledge of the nonostensive reference (here, the Fox kinship structure and the culture embedded in it) would not
be able to theorize adequately about the individuals he or she has observed, or about their society or organization in general, regardless of how copiously detailed and rich his observations, interviews, and documentary artifacts might be. Without knowledge of this nonostensive reference or absent totality, a researcher may not properly build an interpretation of the world he is studying.

In summary, just as, first, the body of scientific literature in which a particular scholarly article is written is the article’s nonostensive reference which gives it meaning and, second, just as a literature of statutes and case law is the nonostensive reference for a judge’s written decision without which it would be meaningless, we posit that a pre-existing social structure and its embedded culture, as nonostensive references, form a “literature” in which a social action is “written.” Interpretive researchers who take context seriously must therefore attend to a social actor’s nonostensive references, not just the actor’s ostensive references.

2.4. The universal range of the text’s addressees

Fortunately, of Ricoeur’s four main features of the model of the text, the fourth and final one can be succinctly described. On the one hand, in face-to-face dialog, “it is one thing for discourse to be addressed to an interlocutor equally present in the discourse situation,” but on the other hand, in written text, no interlocutor need be present, just “whoever knows how to read” [12, p. 97]. In the instance of an e-mail that the original recipient forwards (accidentally or not) to all of her colleagues working in the same corporation, it no longer matters what the original author of the e-mail meant to say or to whom. The meaning becomes what a reader construes not only immediately from the situation to which e-mail refers (the ostensive reference), but also mediately from the readers’ shared corporate culture and social structure (the nonostensive reference).

Ricoeur [12, p. 103] maintains that just as text has a potentially universal range of addressees, “the meaning of human action is also something which is addressed to an indefinite range of possible ‘readers.’ ” This follows Ricoeur’s earlier reasoning about how a text’s dissociation from the mental intention of the author provides a model for a meaningful action’s dissociation from the mental intention of the person taking the action. As a person’s action is communicated beyond the person himself or herself (such as through verbal accounts, videos, reputation, history, and even text), the action becomes available to be “read” by all those who encounter it – not only in the present, but also in the future. The “autonomization of action” separates the action not only from the actor, but also from the present.

2.5. Theorizing about the unobserved

Our excursion through the four main points of Ricoeur’s paradigm shows that interpretation involves more than just finding out what an action means to the person taking the action. The meaning that a person intends by her action with another person departs from her and, once out of her range and control, can mean something different for whoever subsequently encounters it. “Our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend” [12, op. cit.].

Interpretation thus includes, but must also go beyond, empirical reports that describe the immediate context, people’s actions, and the subjective meanings that these people intend by their actions. Also required of interpretation is that it provide an account of what Ricoeur calls the “effects” that these people’s meanings and actions later have, even if these particular people have no knowledge of the later effects. In transcending what actors themselves observe, interpretation is therefore also required to theorize. In this sense, a requirement for interpretive theory is that it account for the unobserved. To the extent that a researcher gathers data from interviews with actors and from artifacts (such as documents) that actors have created, what the researcher observes does not transcend what the actors observe.

Thus, by “the unobserved,” we are referring to more than just Giddens’ “absent totality” and Ricoeur’s “nonostensive reference.” We are also referring to social phenomena that emerge from people’s interactions. An example is the process by which an information technology newly introduced into a health clinic comes not to be used [10]. Consider a particular physician’s action to alter the course of the technology’s implementation, where his understanding of the technology as potentially endangering the lives of his patients is inscribed in his action, which then “develops meanings … actualized or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred” [12, op. cit.]. Thus the meaning of the event where he undertook this action “exceeds, overcomes, transcends the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts” [12, op. cit.].

How may we make theorizing in interpretation explicit and how may we assess the validity of the resulting interpretation? Ricoeur and Schutz each provide answers.
Ricoeur resumes his use of text interpretation as a model to address this [12, p. 106]:

*This intention [of the text] is something other than the sum of the individual meanings of the individual sentences. A text is more than a linear succession of sentences. It is a cumulative, holistic process. ... Therefore the kind of “plurivocity” which belongs to texts as texts is something other than the polysemny of individual words in ordinary language and the ambiguity of individual sentences. This plurivocity is typical of the text considered as a whole, open to several readings and to several constructions.*

Different hermeneutic circles – different nonlinear ways of sensibly relating the sentences to one another – lead to different readings that are possible of the same text. Ricoeur is quick to add that, where each such reading is an interpretation, “it is not true that all interpretations are equal” (p. 108) and each such interpretation is a guess, subject to validation, where “validation is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation” [12, p. 107]. To judge an interpretation, Ricoeur considers it feasible to develop “a general theory of validation in which juridical reasoning would be the fundamental link between validation in literary criticism and validation in the social sciences” [12, p. 110]. However, short of the development of a theory of validation along the lines of juridical reasoning, the hermeneutic circle itself entails validation, albeit always provisional. Each new sentence added to an existing hermeneutic circle of sentences provides a new occasion for validation: If the interpretation following from the existing hermeneutic circle is no longer sensible in light of the new observation of fact, then a new hermeneutic circle and a revised interpretive theory are called for.

Schutz, unlike Ricoeur, does not eschew reasoning borrowed from the natural and social sciences. For Schutz, people’s subjective meanings and intentions are “constructs made by the actors on the social scene” and the researcher’s interpretation consists of “constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene,” which Schutz describes as “the constructs of the social sciences ... whose behavior the social scientist has to observe and to explain in accordance with the procedural rules of his science” [13, op. cit.]. Lee [7], following Schutz, has operationalized these procedural rules. Lee and Hubona [9] show how the logic of deductive testing, in the form of *modus tollens*, can be used in assessing interpretive theories.

3. Requirements of interpretation illustrated with Orlikowski’s “Division among the ranks: The social implications of CASE tools for systems developers”

Orlikowski’s study [11] illuminates almost all the main points we have presented.

3.1. Requirement to account for the fixation or inscription of meaning

Orlikowski copiously documented the subjective meanings held by the actors – functional team members (business analysts) and technical team members – at Beta Consulting Corporation, a software development firm. Space limitations allow us to follow but one example [11, p. 204], about “CASE tools rigidly enforced by the technical team” where, in the words of a functional team member, “[It] drove people on the functional team to break the tools right and left.” The subjective meaning they inscribed in the action of breaking of the tools was described by Orlikowski as the functional team’s feeling of “loss of autonomy” and “frustration and tension.” Orlikowski observed that “a number of functional consultants described resorting to sabotage of the CASE tools in order to reassert their sense of control.” We note that, contrary to the research on “resistance to technology,” the actors’ own subjective meaning of the action (breaking the tools) was not negative, as if rooted in fear of technology or lack of technical literacy, but was positive, in following from the desire to get the job done and to reassert one’s own dignity (sense of control).
3.2. Requirement to account for the dissociation from the mental intention of the actor

Whatever meaning the functional team intended in their action of “break[ing] the tools right and left,” a different meaning for this action was construed by the technical team. “[Greater] access given [by the technical team] was very much on the technical team's terms”; “[t]hey did not give the functional team more powerful ids, which would have given the functional consultants control over when and how to use or bypass the tools”; the changes “only allowed [the functional consultants] to do a little more than they were able to do before their revolt”; and the technical consultants did not give the functional consultants “the option to choose when and how to use the tools.” The meaning that the technical team construed for the functional team’s action of breaking the tools was not that it was positive and constructive, but negative and destructive, thereby leading to their (the technical team’s) own action of preventing further such negative and destructive actions by the functional team.

The occurrence of contrary meanings that the same physical behavior (breaking the tools) had for different actors not only illustrates “the dissociation from the mental intention of the actor,” but also shows that diversity in subjective meanings can lead to the emergence of social phenomena that complicates (and enriches) subsequent theorizing.

3.3. Requirement to account for the display of nonostensive references

Orlikowski’s study not only accounted for social structure and culture, but also their history. She recounts that, in the late 1960s, there was no division of labor between functional and technical consultants. By the early 1970s, the greater “size and complexity of applications that Beta began to develop” [11, p. 200] for its clients encouraged technical specialization and the formation of technical roles, separate from functional roles. By the mid 1970s, information technology became so complex that “senior Beta management formally designated some individuals as the firm's technical ‘experts’ and a separate division within Beta was formed to house them.” By the late 1970s/early 1980s, “Beta personnel in local offices [were] formally differentiated by functional or technical expertise” [11, p. 201]. At this point, the technical experts “did not represent significant components on a project's critical path”; however, this was changed by the advent of CASE tools [11, p. 202]:

The division of labor on systems development projects had changed, with functional consultants relinquishing many technical tasks to the technical consultants, whose involvement in project activities had shifted from the periphery to the center.

In summary, the social structure at Beta started with no separate technical and functional roles, but then they evolved, where the accompanying culture’s “rules of social life” [5, op. cit.] made occupants of the functional roles dependent on the occupants of the technical roles, to the point where the latter were empowered to encroach upon, interfere with, and even direct the work of the latter.

The Beta social structure and culture, despite being an invisible “absent totality” or “nonostensive reference,” had tangible effects in how they set up interactions among the actors, including pitting them against each other. By theorizing about the social structure and the culture, Orlikowski’s interpretation accounts for the rationale behind the functional consultants’ action of breaking the tools, as well as the rationale behind the technical consultants’ action of only further restricting what the former could do. Orlikowski’s interpretive theory is as much, if not more so, about structure (as evidenced in her title, “Division among the ranks”) as about whatever the particular actors themselves meant, understood, and directly experienced.

3.4. Requirement to account for the universal range of the action’s addresses

Orlikowski states near the end of her study (p. 207):

In time, such resentment [from current functional consultants] may diminish as new functional consultants enter Beta and take the presence of a powerful technical team for granted. Not being aware of the prior division of labor, and not having been exposed to projects where technical consultants were [only] the ‘backroom guys,’ these functional consultants are unlikely to feel a loss of control, centrality, and territory.

Thus the functional consultants’ action of breaking the tools, in sparking conflict with the technical consultants and eliciting their counteractions, was a deed that escaped them (i.e., the functional consultants) and contributed to effects which they did not intend, thereby addressing future generations of new functional, as well as technical, consultants.
4. Discussion and conclusion

Orlikowski’s interpretive theorizing – indeed, all interpretive theorizing – could be further strengthened by (1) providing a diagram of the social structure that identifies roles and relates them to each other, as in Figures 1 and 2, (2) delineating the culture by specifying what Giddens calls “the rules of social life” or what Gearing calls the “common set of obligations,” and (3) providing material to allow readers to assess the validity of the interpretive theory. Regarding validity, Orlikowski could have presented an earlier, not just the final, version of her theory, as well as observations (“sentences,” in Ricoeur’s hermeneutic circle) that the earlier version could not account for, thereby requiring and motivating its revision into a subsequent or the final form. Presented with such material, a reader could make his or her own judgment about the interpretive theory’s current validity as well as know how to assess its validity in the light of any future evidence.

In conclusion, “interpretation,” no less than “explanation” [8], poses requirements for theory to satisfy. Interpretation requires the researcher to attend not only to the subjective meaning that a person intends in his or her action, but also to the meaning construed by the other person in the interaction, and to accept the existence of each such meaning as a fact. It requires the researcher to account for the immediate context, as well as the mediate context – Ricoeur’s nonostensive reference or Giddens’ absent totality, which we operationalized as social structure and culture. Without them, there would be no basis for meanings intended or construed by actors, or for meanings interpreted by outside researchers. Interpretation requires theory to tie together subjective meanings, social interactions, social structure, and culture, where the theory is subject to validation. Attending to each of these elements can strengthen interpretive theorizing.

5. References


