

Interest-Oriented Action

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Abstract

Sociology frequently presumes interest-oriented action but deconstructs interests. Here, we argue for more inquiry into the social conditions under which interest-oriented action is generated. We analyze how interest-oriented action is understood in classical sociology, rational choice theory, social exchange theory, and cultural sociology. These perspectives vary in the extent to which interests are an explanatory principle, how interests are considered, and how emergent social formations are explained. However, they share an implicit recognition that the question of when interest-oriented action emerges needs more attention. Rather than naturalizing interest-oriented action, or investigating how interests are constructed, the most productive direction for future sociological research on interests is to specify better when action oriented to interests becomes normative.

INTRODUCTION

Despite sociology's wariness of simple utilitarianism, the discipline is still informed by unreflective ideas that interests determine action. Sociologists regularly show how the dominant impose or protect their interests to the detriment of others throughout social life and analyze subordinates' challenge and resistance. However, "interests" is typically a fuzzy "proto-concept" in sociology (Swedberg 2005, p. 48; Barbalet 2012), so we have little explicit understanding of the empirical contexts in which interest-oriented action is normative, or of realistic alternatives.

Sociological assumptions about interests are often implicit and indistinct because the discipline is profoundly ambivalent about the topic (Martinelli 2004). Classical theorists saw interest-oriented action (broadly conceived) increasing at the expense of traditional and affective action as capitalism rationalized social life. But their work also challenges utilitarian individualism, questioning its scope and necessity, and critiquing its deleterious consequences. As a result, contemporary sociologists vary in their explicit emphasis on the explanatory power of interests. [Political scientists and economists assume more easily that action is oriented primarily to pursuing interests (Connolly 1983, ch. 2; Elster 1989b; Mansbridge 1990).]

Interest-oriented action and its mirror image, altruism, are explored most directly in several contemporary streams of social-psychological research, which treat them as subjective determinants in micro-social processes, but even in micro-sociology, other more pragmatist theories deflate their significance. And sociological approaches to interests in larger-scale processes are often indirect, examining them as outcomes of shifting cultural construction and contingent practical action that reshape goals and means. Sometimes interest-oriented action is implicitly dissolved as a theoretical category (DiMaggio 1988; Swedberg 2005, pp. 73–74).

We endorse Swedberg's (2003, 2005) call for clarity about interests and interest-oriented

action in contemporary sociological research: Our main objective is to advance that reassessment. We first examine classical questions and positions; we then discuss two micro-level theories of interests—rational choice and social exchange theory; finally, we examine how interest-oriented action is treated in cultural sociology. Given this wide view, our treatment is necessarily illustrative, not exhaustive, but we argue that these diverse perspectives all need better theorization of the social conditions that generate fields of interest-oriented action. Beyond the more commonly canvassed micro-sociological issue of how interests influence action, and the widespread concern with how interests are constructed, a clear prescriptive synthesis emerges. Sociologists should analyze and theorize when interest-oriented action happens, whether in micro-level interaction, in midrange analysis of institutional fields, or in macro-historical processes (Hirschman 1977, Friedland & Robertson 1990, Smelser 1998).

INTERESTS IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITION

Three questions help distinguish different positions on interest-oriented action: (a) How important are interests for understanding social action? (b) How are interests conceptualized? (c) How is micro-level interested action related to meso- and macro-social processes?

First, most sociologists adopt contradictory assumptions about the importance of interest-oriented action for sociological explanation. Simple and potentially tautological utilitarian postulates about the universality and explanatory power of egoistic, rational, self-interested action are rare, but some theorists do see interests as the driving force of social action and as fundamental to larger social forms (Hechter 1987, Coleman 1990, Hechter & Kanazawa 1997). Many more sociologists assume that powerful groups, at least, act this way most of the time. Most commonly, sociologists see interests as a major determinant of social action, but also situate them in a broader class of action

orientations (Weber 1978) and emphasize their varied social structuration in fields (e.g., Bourdieu 1998, Fligstein & McAdam 2011). Others downplay the explanatory significance of interests by emphasizing instead the shaping of action by higher-order ideas and values, or at least by emphasizing that action is subject to significant normative regulation (e.g., Campbell 1998, Meyer & Jepperson 2000, Smith 2003, Alexander 2006, Jepperson & Meyer 2011).

Second, when interest-oriented action is explicitly highlighted, scholars differ in the particularities and range of interests they consider—material/ideal, psychological/social, singular/multiple, short-term/long-term, individual/collective, etc. These variations give different contributions different emphases. For instance, considering collective over individual interests may invite puzzles about how interests are aggregated (e.g., Olson 1965) or about prior collective identity formation (e.g., Polletta & Jasper 2001). Similarly, theorists vary in treating interests as short-term and situational or long-term (Emerson 1976, p. 353; Barbalet 2012).

Scholars' varying assumptions about the importance of interest-oriented action and about how to understand substantive interests influence their positions on the third question: How are micro-level interest-oriented actions and meso- and macro-level social processes related? Are interests defined subjectively, before aggregating them to explain larger social formations, or are they derived more objectively from social context or social position?

These three questions help specify and differentiate theoretical and empirical approaches to understanding interest-oriented action. For example, Swedberg (2003, pp. 290–97; 2005) argues that interests are important for explaining action, that they should be understood in a substantively rich and multifaceted way, and that they should ultimately aggregate to explain meso- and macro-level social processes. He emphasizes qualities of awareness, motivation, and deliberation in action orientations, as

well as “resistance—and objectivity of the signpost as a social fact,” and the potential indeterminacy and unintended consequences of action (Swedberg 2005, p. 97).

Swedberg's analysis develops Weber's view that interests are subjective and substantively varied orientations (e.g., interests in salvation, honor, security, etc.), which can explain specific acts, rendering observable the meanings that guide them. Interested orientations are distinguished from traditional and affective orientations, but they can encompass value-rational goals—“the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior”—if such ends are pursued with deliberation (Weber 1978, p. 25). However, if one moves the analysis closer to utilitarian understandings, then instrumentally rational action in which “the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed” becomes more predominant in modernity, colonizing action in even putatively value-rational, affective, and traditional orientations (Weber 1978, p. 26; see also ch. 1).

Like Weber, pragmatist theorists understood interests in terms of a broader theory of action [e.g., James (1891) criticized utilitarianism as “insufficiently empirical” because of the individuality and subjectivity of value]. But they downplayed the theoretical significance of interests more than Weber. For James, interest (or desire) is the basis of valuation, which orients individual action (James 1891, p. 335; Perry 1909, p. 11), so his view tends to collapse Weber's differentiated typology of orientations in the moment of the individual act. Similarly, for Dewey (1932 [1998], p. 344), “any concrete case of the union of the self in action with an object and an end is called an interest,” so interests explain action only in the trivial sense that actions have objects. If interests were detached from the specific actions they oriented, they would still remain multifarious, individual, and highly context dependent. Interests are also shaped by surrounding situation: “[D]esire and interest are not given ready-made at the outset, . . . for desire always

emerges within a prior system of activities or interrelated energies. It arises within a field” (Dewey 1939, p. 53). Neither are interests independent of each other; rather, each is “a function of the set to which it belongs” in “definite existential contexts” (Dewey 1939, p. 18). But this contextual shaping of interests in action does not imply they may be explained by broad social contexts, nor that they are shaped in any systematic way. Thus, in Joas’s (1996, p. 133) later development, pragmatism becomes a theory of “situated creativity,” rather than an account of interests in action.

Other classical sociological challenges to simple utilitarianism broadened the context within which interest-oriented action was understood to be shaped. Marx, like Weber, saw interest-oriented action as an essential explanatory principle, but ultimately reducible largely to material interests objectively determined relative to a social position. Objective, collective, and contradictory, interests express systemic social features and represent tendencies for behavior and conflict inherent in social positions, so the direction of influence between macro- or meso-social processes and micro-level interested action is the opposite of that postulated by Weber. A corollary of this argument distinguishes people’s subjective aspirations from their real interests: what their action means when viewed inside the “objective situation” of social totality (Marx & Engels 1978, pp. 160–61; see also Lukacs 1971, p. 51). In this sense, action may be oriented to ends that undermine the actors’ objective interests as derived from social position; however, this argument relies on the epistemologically problematic notion that actors are therefore characterized by “false consciousness” (Marx 1967, pp. 166–67; see also Clegg 1989, pp. 111–15).

Interested action is less important theoretically for Durkheim than for Marx or Weber, but neither is it simply a characterization of the relationship between action and object, as it was for the pragmatists. For Durkheim, substantive interests are certainly varied, as for Weber and the pragmatists, and they become more

so with increasing social differentiation. However, even interest-oriented action results from the demands of solidarity as a “moral fact,” and macro-social context determines the importance of interest-oriented action. So, in complex societies with organic solidarity, “collective consciousness is increasingly reduced to the cult of the individual” so that interest-oriented action becomes more prevalent and individualism more central to moral discourse (Durkheim 1984, p. 338). But only in dysfunctional transitional social forms, and in the minds of utilitarians, is micro-level interest-oriented action simply egoistic determination and assessment of optimal ends and means. Durkheim argues this point forcibly regarding the noncontractual basis of contract, which challenges as unrealistic and unsustainable Spencer’s reduction of modern social relations to the “vast system of special contracts that link individuals . . . [in] the spontaneous agreement between individual interests” (Durkheim 1984, pp. 151–52; 1953).

Durkheim’s argument regarding complex societies extends to Weber’s methodological individualism. Weber (1978, p. 30) argued that, for actors pursuing their own interests,

the more strictly rational (*zweckrational*) their action is, the more they will tend to react similarly to the same situation. In this way there arise similarities, uniformities, and continuities in their attitudes and actions which are often far more stable than they would be if action were oriented to a system of norms.

But Durkheim (1984, p. 152) saw not predictability but disorganization:

For where interest alone reigns, as nothing arises to check the egoisms confronting one another, each self finds itself in relation to the other on a war footing. . . . Self-interest is, in fact, the least constant thing in the world. Today it is useful for me to unite with you; tomorrow the same reason will make me your enemy. Thus such a cause can give rise only to transitory links and associations of a fleeting kind.

For Weber, the pursuit of self-interest without normative regulation generates the stability of the “iron cage”; for Durkheim, the normless pursuit of self-interest threatened stable social relations.

These fundamentally different positions highlight a deep and persistent theoretical fissure. Is interest-oriented action a fundamental category of sociological analysis, essential for understanding larger-scale social processes, or is it a contingent consequence of those larger-scale social processes? At stake, as the quotations suggest, are assessments of the long-term possibilities and limits of cooperation and solidarity.

One sort of compromise is illustrated by Tocqueville’s (2002, p. 192) observation of Americans’ doctrine of “self-interest rightly understood,” in which “an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another.” In this view, the universality of interest-oriented action is given, but it can generate cooperative social processes and institutions. Compromising from the other direction, scholars posit that “action is determined by ultimate ends . . . that laid down norms determining [social] relations” (Parsons 1935, p. 295), but they also recognize that there is “no reason why . . . elements of self-interest should not be involved also” (Parsons 1940, p. 193). Although this perspective denies the universality of interest-oriented action, it still acknowledges it as one among numerous orientations potentially generated by institutions.

These contrasting positions and their related compromises underpin explicit investigation of interest-oriented action in rational choice theory and exchange theory, on the one hand, and implicit assumptions about interest-oriented action in cultural sociology, on the other.

RATIONAL CHOICE AND INTEREST-ORIENTED ACTION

Rational choice theory (*a*) makes interest-oriented actions of individuals a central explanatory principle, (*b*) is neutral in principle

about the substantive nature of those interests, and (*c*) relies on individual interests to explain interactional processes (e.g., game theory) and larger social formations (e.g., agency theory). Although not widely endorsed within sociology, it usefully clarifies frequently unacknowledged assumptions about interest-oriented action embedded in many studies of social processes, such as political participation and organizational authority. Moreover, debates and developments regarding the emergence of complex social institutions and the existence of disinterested action orientations point to more of an emerging sociological consensus on interest-oriented action than is usually recognized.

Interest-Oriented Action as an Explanatory Principle

In this view, as Elster (1989a, p. 13) puts it, “to explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals” (see also Satz & Ferejohn 1994). He critiques structuralist theory which “postulates a purpose without a purposive actor” (Elster 1982, p. 454). Rather than focusing on specific empirical interests of actors, though, explanatory mechanisms derive from rational choice principles—the decision rules that determine an actor’s choices among predefined sets of alternatives. In principle, actors calculate among alternative courses of action, making trade-offs and navigating the interface between preferences and constraints to choose the alternatives most compatible with their preferences. In the ideal type, rational choice is conducted with full information and allows transitive choices.

The attraction of this view is its recognition of human awareness, conscious motivation, and deliberation, qualities Swedberg highlights as characteristic of interest-oriented action. However, its austere presumption of the explanatory power of rational processes is often qualified, both theoretically and empirically (Hechter & Kanazawa 1997, Boudon 2003, Martinelli 2004).

Theoretically, for instance, rationality is likely cognitively bounded, and actors will satisfy rather than maximize (Simon 1956); moreover, some preferences may be intransitive and, thus, value-rational (Tversky 1969). In response to such challenges, as Smelser (1998, p. 3) points out, the usual theoretical strategy is to treat cognitive and interactional constraints on pure individual rational choice as parameters, “and ask, *given those parameters*, how will individuals behave rationally?”

Dissatisfied with this limitation, Smelser (1998, p. 5) points out that actors’ preferences are frequently ambivalent and unstable and may be expressed in “different and sometimes contradictory ways.” Ambivalence is especially characteristic of “social situations in which political, group, and emotional dependence is salient” (p. 13). At a minimum, this psychological postulate significantly enriches the range of psychic mechanisms that might influence presumed calculations and trade-offs in apparently interest-oriented action; for instance, they might include such dynamic emotional mechanisms as splitting, displacement, and projection. Thus, one result of interest-oriented action may be changes in goals and interests themselves. This makes analysis of meaning-making more important in empirical accounts of the operation of rational choice mechanisms.

Empirically, too, residual nonrationality often plays a significant explanatory role even in analyses normalizing rationality. For instance, Kiser & Bauer (2005, p. 234) modify instrumental accounts of bureaucratization framed largely in terms of rulers’ rational interests and monitoring capacities, suggesting that “values and emotions will be especially important . . . when instrumental motivations are ineffective.” This sort of empirically based qualification is also evident in explanations of strategic actors’ membership in voluntary interest groups. Some political and economic sociologists argue that selective rewards for membership will be necessary in large, diverse groups, but small, homogeneous groups can function on the basis of more undifferentiated and less instrumental collective identities

(e.g., Schlozman & Tierney 1986, pp. 123–31). Here, rational choice mechanisms are supplemented and qualified with nonrational accounts.

Substantive Neutrality of Interests

In principle, the theory is neutral about actors’ goals, given that tastes are revealed only in behavior (Samuelson 1938, Sen 1973). Actors reveal their preferences by choosing between alternatives, and their interests are inferred from those expressed preferences. Thus, unlike *verstehen*, meaning should be read directly from behavior. Rational choice theory and interpretive sociology observe the same activity, and both can use interest-based action to explain it. But it is the principled resistance to imputing intended meaning behind interested action that distinguishes the former approach.

Sometimes, though, meaning is reintroduced because individual rational choice becomes the robust, egoistic pursuit of personal satisfactions or well-being associated with utilitarianism (including, secondarily, control of processes and resources which allow that pursuit) (Coleman 1990, Archer & Tritter 2000, Udehn 2003). So despite the neutral theoretical principle of revealed preferences, which could include collective, altruistic, and value-rational preferences, interests are often considered egoistically independent of others’ goals and as involving primarily material satisfactions or control.

Sen (1977), however, rejects any necessary relationship between rational choice and egoism. First, he asserts that the primary stipulation of the theory is “internal consistency.” Choices are rational if they can be explained in terms of a preference relation “consistent with a revealed preference definition” and if all choices can be explained according to the most preferred alternatives “with respect to a postulated reference relation” (Sen 1977, pp. 323, 328). So there is no reason in principle why revealed preferences should not be altruistic or collective. But internal consistency is ultimately an “empty criterion” (Swedberg 2005, p. 80), an

attempt to fit similar instances (like altruism) to the “one all-purpose preference ordering” that determines every choice behavior. Sen’s alternative is a more complex and potentially realistic “meta-rankings” system in which action-sets composed of preferences are themselves ranked according to their preferred desirability (Sen 1977, pp. 328, 337). Thus, for instance, altruism can be rational according to the rational choice framework, but it requires that theorists admit a more “elaborate structure” of behavior into their models, including social identities (Sen 1977, p. 336; Swedberg 2005, pp. 86–87). Elster (1989b) makes an even stronger qualification of the egoistic utilitarian interpretation of rational choice, arguing that norm-oriented action is not reducible to a complex form of self-interest.

Even in preference-neutral, structured versions of rational choice, preferences are still understood at the level of the individual actor. Sen (1977, p. 334) addresses problems introduced by the economist’s “social moron” by adding further preferences to the actors themselves—for instance, “attitudes toward work which supersede the calculation of net gain from each unit of exertion” and thus allow commitment to the organization. Similarly, Elster (1989b, p. 115) remains puzzled about how to account for norms but suggests looking to emotions and the “psychological theory of conformity” to develop such accounts.

Explaining Emergent Social Formations

If we take boundedly rational individual action in pursuit of interests as a fundamental principle, how are macro- and meso-social processes and structures to be explained (Archer & Tritter 2000, pp. 7–9)? Interest-oriented actions of individuals may simply be aggregated to account for larger social processes, a view that many sociologists assume, despite theoretical commitments to some version of interactional or structural emergence. But this “parallel play” version of social action does not itself explain interaction or institutions.

Another possibility is that interaction—between individuals or groups—may be modeled strategically, as in prisoner’s dilemma games, in which interest-oriented action depends fundamentally on the actions of others. But as Swedberg (2005, p. 83) points out, this approach begs questions about the rules of the game and “the importance of institutions for the realization of interests.” So, for instance, in a creative rapprochement between game theory and cultural theory, Chwe (2001) argues that rituals function to resolve coordination problems in interest-oriented action by establishing common knowledge; here, cultural processes become conditions for strategic action.

In the least reductionist view, agency theory—in which principal-agent relations align actors’ interests with interactional trade-offs of rights and resources—can be developed to generate accounts of meso- and macro-level structures and processes (Kiser 1999, Shapiro 2005). Linked chains of principal-agent relations, along with the monitoring, compliance, and resistance relations they entail, may coalesce into significant institutional patterns, such as states, bureaucracies, and corporations (Coleman 1990). In this way, self-interested agency could ultimately build enduring but historically dynamic structures (Levi 1988, Hechter & Kanazawa 1997, Kiser & Bauer 2005).

However, as Adams (1999) among many others argues, agency theory assumes theories of valuation, affect, and signification. Coleman (1990) brackets these problems with his robust utilitarian assumptions about coherent hedonic selves, but they reemerge for theorists such as Sen and Elster who challenge the reduction of rational choice mechanisms to egoism and argue for preference neutrality. So understanding emergent interactional and macro-structural processes ultimately seems to require an independent account of the higher-order origins of relevant goals and preferences. Similarly, as we saw above, the postulate of preference neutrality can be empty or incoherent without attention to meaning; and a focus on rational choice processes, rather than preferences,

is also quickly qualified by an attention to meaning, both theoretically and empirically. As a result, many scholars argue that we must ask, “Why do people want what they want?” The self in self-interest is plural and historical, and to use the concept of self-interest, “it is necessary to know how individuals construct a self who figures out what action and/or objective is in their interest[;] . . . the interest of the self depends on the cultural context” (Wildavsky 1994, pp. 131, 140; cf. Douglas 1992, ch. 12; Swidler 2001; Adams 2010).

These issues of variable meaning-making and the social construction of the self emerge from some of the core assumptions of the discipline; how they are resolved shapes professional identities, normative practice, policy, and research programs. Many scholars view the oppositions between rational choice and culture, methodological individualism and structural emergence, as fundamental. But are these conceptual contrasts really contradictory?

In fact, different theorists on both sides of the divide propose similar ways forward, although an emerging consensus is rarely recognized. They argue that the significance and explanatory power of rational choice mechanisms rely on institutional conditions much more particular than originally considered, but nevertheless that certain conditions give those mechanisms for understanding interest-oriented action an important place. Satz & Ferejohn (1994, p. 72) argue that rational choice theory “gets its explanatory power from structure-generated interests and not from actual individual psychology,” so the actions of firms or political parties are more easily explained with rational choice postulates than are those of consumers or voters. Kiser & Bauer (2005, p. 244) suggest specifying “conditions under which noninstrumental motivations are likely to be important,” and Adams (2010, p. 254) suggests historicizing conditions of agency theory. Smelser (1998, p. 13) argues that rational choice mechanisms operate in restricted circumstances where “*relative* freedom of choice reigns,” whereas psychological ambivalence operates in other

institutional contexts. Wagner (2000, p. 33) sees rational choice mechanisms operating only in extreme conditions lacking “a common register of moral-political evaluation.”

All these scholars from widely different backgrounds suggest that specific institutional conditions affect the explanatory power of interest-oriented action, so identifying those conditions will rescue what they might variously describe as the full potential or the grain of truth in rational choice explanations. Interestingly, they offer different and perhaps even conflicting views of the conditions that make interest-oriented action important. For instance, whereas Smelser argues that rational choice explains action best when choice is possible and dependence minimized, Wagner suggests that it emerges in social crisis when no other coordinating options are available. This difference and others suggest that theorizing and exploring conditions for rational choice and interest-oriented action will be fruitful.

Understanding the social conditions for interest-oriented action is even more important if, as some social psychologists argue, self-interest is an influential norm, rather than a universal motive. Miller (1999, p. 1059) concludes that “people act and sound as though they are strongly motivated by their material self-interest because scientific theories and collective representations derived from those theories convince them that it is natural and normal to do so” (see also Holmes et al. 2002; cf. Eliasoph 1998, pp. 81–84), an argument illustrated by research showing that economics students learn to act in more self-interested ways than others (Marwell & Ames 1981, Frank et al. 1993). Simpson et al. (2006) suggest that cognitive dissonance theory provides a better explanation of such findings than does conformity to norms, but even so this reinterpretation presumes that conditions for interest-oriented action are important.

Social exchange theory and its related research programs make up another important scholarly tradition delving further into the interactional and normative shaping

of interest-oriented action, while retaining micro-level presuppositions.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY AND INTEREST-ORIENTED ACTION

The social exchange perspective answers the three questions above—How important is interest-oriented action? How are interests understood? And how are micro- and macro-social phenomena related?—in ways that tend to incorporate but expand on rational choice theories. Citing antecedents in the work of Homans (1974), Blau (1964), and Thibaut & Kelley (1959), exchange theorists emphasize features of the exchange relation more than the actors' interests in exchange, recognize the broader normative context forming interests, and make the emergence of macro-level exchange patterns a central concern.

Interest-Oriented Action as an Explanatory Principle

Exchange theorists do presume that actors are mostly oriented to their own interests in interaction (Whitmeyer & Cook 2002, pp. 271–72), but they differ from rational choice theorists in their conceptualization of how that orientation works and offer a more relational set of explanatory principles for its outcomes. Interest-oriented action is understood in terms of a behavioral psychology of learning, involves dependence and power in social relations, and depends on rewards and reinforcements in behavior over time, rather than calculation of expected returns in restricted exchange. Emerson (1976, p. 341) wanted to “reject prior calculation of returns as a defining feature of exchange in favor of a much broader base—social operant behavior,” which is not restricted to rational choice. He also preferred to focus on “longitudinal exchange relations versus ahistorical individual decisions” (p. 350). Exchange theory makes the “smallest unit of analysis *the more or less enduring relations that form between specific partners*” (Molm 1997, p. 12). So actors'

interests are inherently relational and inflected from the beginning with power and dependency (Molm et al. 2007, p. 208).

This turns what would otherwise be cognitive or relational parameters of pure rational choice into the objects of investigation. Exchange theorists thus explore different types of exchange (i.e., negotiated, reciprocal, generalized); exchange structures, such as networks and coalitions, as well as emergent distribution rules (e.g., rationality, altruism, competition, reciprocity, status consistency); and attributes of exchange relations, such as power and dependency, equity and distributive justice, and trust and commitment (Whitmeyer & Cook 2002; Molm 1997, ch. 2; Emerson 1976, pp. 352–53).

Nevertheless, the main presumption remains that human action is interest-oriented first of all. And exchange theory's commitment to rigorous and sustained experimental research, which can demonstrate how exchange conditions affect outcomes in precise, theoretically generalizable ways, incurs the cost of requiring a narrow understanding of motivation. Essentially, research design manages and controls for cognitive and emotional variability (as well as the meanings attached to objects of exchange, discussed below) even though “naturally occurring actors are complex and variable” (Whitmeyer & Cook 2002, p. 288). So the ambivalence, variable expression of motives, and resulting changeability of goals and interests that Smelser (1998) sees as problematic for rational choice theories are also problematic for exchange theory. Interest-oriented human nature is a null hypothesis, even as it is understood in more relational ways than in rational choice theory.

Substantive Neutrality of Interests

Like rational choice theory, exchange theory mostly adopts a neutral view of interests and is “not intended to provide a general theory of value” (Thye 2000, p. 415). Value is like economists' utility, “subjective psychological value (i.e., amount of reinforcement) an

individual derives from a good or service” (Emerson 1976, p. 348; Molm 1997, p. 14).

But because of this perspective’s more relational and longitudinal understanding of interest-oriented action, rewards and punishments are assessed relative to the actor’s situation (Molm 1997, p. 17), and exchange rules are considered emergent attributes of relations, or a “normative definition of the situation that forms among or is adopted by the participants in an exchange relation” (Emerson 1976, p. 352). Thus, actors’ “utility functions” are variable according to context, at least in principle (Whitmeyer & Cook 2002, pp. 287–88). And overall, exchange theorists following Emerson recognize more explicitly than many rational choice theorists that the theory requires “independent knowledge of what a person finds rewarding” (Emerson 1976, p. 343).

So exchange theorists recognize more explicitly than rational choice theorists how the “larger normative and social context” influences the dynamics of interest-oriented exchange relations they investigate (Thye 2000, p. 415). As Knottnerus (1994, p. 31) points out, experimental studies of exchange assume participants’ “motivational investment in resources.” For example, Thye (2000, pp. 426–27) examines how actors’ status influences this motivational investment, finding that “resources identical in monetary value were more highly prized when relevant to positive status characteristics.”

However, despite this explicit recognition of the explanatory importance of cultural frameworks and meaning-making processes constituting rewards and resources, experimental studies frequently make strong assumptions about meaning and value in simple games, raising the commonly noted doubt of external validity (Henrich et al. 2010). So “analyzing cultural constructions of ‘resources’” or contextually dependent cultural repertoires of different norms of exchange “would be an important condition for any applications” (Spillman 2002, p. 72).

Overall, exchange theory, like much of rational choice theory, treats interests as substantively neutral. It differs in its much

more explicit recognition of the independence of broader contextual determinants of interests and also in its somewhat longer-term, relational understanding of the shaping of interests in interaction. This more nuanced recognition of meso and macro conditions for interest-oriented action makes it a more plausible micro-sociological foundation than the frequently unacknowledged or inapplicable rational choice assumptions of many economic and political sociologists examining interest-oriented action in actually existing networks and organizations (Molm et al. 2012), though this affinity needs more attention. Explicit recognition of the importance of contextual conditions for interest-oriented action also generates explicit concern about theorizing the link between micro-level and macro-level social processes.

Explaining Emergent Social Formations

Emerson (1976, p. 356) thought that micro-level exchange theory should be extended to explain macro-level social processes and that it required conceptual bridges functioning just as “the competitive market does for economic exchange theory.” The question of how generalized, large-scale, cooperative social exchange (i.e., society) evolves and is sustained on the basis of micro-level processes posed a fruitful theoretical problem in subsequent research (Lawler et al. 2008). And this topic accrues greater significance from the finding that generalized exchange generates more social solidarity than restricted exchange (Molm et al. 2007).

Given the methodological commitments to precise but abstracted experimental treatments of exchange relations, the question of how large-scale cooperative exchange is possible is often addressed by developing models akin to models in evolutionary biology—essentially, producing simulations of the possibility of society.

Many scholars who pursue this line of investigation take a position close to rational choice theorists and demonstrate that,

within minor limits, “generalized exchange can emerge even among egoists” and in the absence of collective norms or altruism (Takahashi 2000, p. 1120). For instance, Bearman (1997, p. 1411) argues that “local rationality can . . . catenate exchanges into a robust global structure independent of cultural norms.” However, in the marriage exchange system he examines, extreme age bias in mate selection, with brides much younger than grooms, generates the observed but locally unrecognized patterns, so in this case, and perhaps in others, cultural norms do appear to be more influential than the argument suggests. Other scholars, in explaining how meso- and macro-social patterns and processes could emerge from micro-level exchange, assign an explicit role to independently specified cultural processes. For example, Mark (2002, p. 323) finds that “cultural transmission . . . creates an evolutionary force toward cooperation” even in the most unfavorable conditions, because disproportionate prior exposure to others’ cooperation increases one’s cultural fitness. Komter (2010, p. 460) reviews a wide variety of biological and social evidence that “mechanisms such as ‘strong reciprocity’, group selection, cultural norms and forms of gene-culture co-evolution” account for macro-social exchange patterns.

Despite this attention to the emergence of larger-scale social formations from micro-level exchange processes, it remains difficult to develop plausible and well-specified links showing how abstractly characterized structural processes account for naturally occurring historical processes [as, for example, Hechter & Kanazawa (1997), Kiser & Bauer (2005), and others attempt for rational choice theory]. According to Whitmeyer & Cook (2002, pp. 295, 296), this is because “macro processes almost always involve more than just exchange network processes” and because of “limited understanding of exchange network creation and transformation.” They note the additional impact of, for example, organizational authority relations, information access, opportunities for exchange, and real-life possibilities of exit from exchange

structures. The existence of a range of exit options (conscious and unconscious, practical and imaginary) in most real-life interactional exchange seems to impose an especially strong scope condition on the generality of many exchange theory findings, especially in large-scale settings.

Overall, exchange theory offers a more direct approach to understanding conditions for interest-oriented exchange, the issue demanding more attention in rational choice theory. Although interests remain central in exchange theory, processes of social learning and extended exchange replace short-term utility maximization. Although exchange theorists, like rational choice theorists, are neutral in principle about the nature of substantive interests, they recognize more explicitly the need for independent analysis of meaning and value in a larger normative context. And micro-macro links, conceptualized as the emergence of large-scale social formations from micro-level exchange principles, are a central concern (Stolte et al. 2001, Molm 2010).

However, exchange theory’s principled commitment to experimental inquiry (or its larger-scale analog, simulated modeling) inhibits fulfillment of its initial potential for understanding social conditions for interest-oriented action. Experimental design largely neglects ambivalent, complex, and variable interest orientations; it requires independent analysis of interpretive context to explain motivational investment; and it imposes overly strong scope conditions on broader applications beyond the experimental situation. These limitations cannot be addressed without substantive investigation of processes of meaning-making, based on a theory of action recognizing shifting and variable meanings of interest orientations, a theory of cultural categories and codes forming the interpretive context for varied motivational investment, and a theory of cultural production, all showing how the extended “landscapes of meaning” within which interest-oriented action is conducted generate various options for micro-level actions and interactions (Reed 2011, p. 152).

CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY AND INTEREST-ORIENTED ACTION

Investigations of meaning-making undertaken in cultural sociology are distinctive because (a) interest-oriented action is not a fundamental explanatory principle, (b) substantive meanings of action orientations are a central concern, and (c) macro- and meso-level social processes shape emergent interest orientations at the micro level (for overviews, see Jacobs & Hanrahan 2005, Alexander et al. 2012, Hall et al. 2010).

Interest-Oriented Action as an Explanatory Principle

Cultural perspectives challenge assumptions that interest-oriented action is a fundamental explanatory principle in several ways. First, they typically assume multiple and shifting orientations of action, including traditional, affective, and normative orientations irreducible to interest orientations (Swidler 1986, Alexander 1988). This assumption is consistent with and sometimes explicitly derived from pragmatists' diffuse, situationally based understanding of interests in action, discussed above. Differentiated action orientations characterize even arenas conventionally understood as strategic: the economic (e.g., Zelizer 1997, Spillman 2012b) and political (e.g., Polletta & Jasper 2001, Perrin 2006).

Second, cultural theorists usually understand strategic means and goals as the outcome of discursive or organizational cultural construction, and thus as objects of explanation. For instance, Sahlins (1981, p. 68) develops a semiotic theory of interest by combining cultural signification, as derived from relationships in a total scheme of signs, with intentional action. A symbolic object acquires differential interest to various subjects according to its place in their established life schemes (cf. Geertz 1973, pp. 193–233). For Bourdieu (2000), interests are constituted in the logic of fields and defined by positions in relation to other field positions. Here, the idea of interests condenses processes outside the actor and the immediate moment, becoming a post hoc interpretation

of the meaning of practices. Others derive interests more directly from actors' cultural identities. Here, identities define interests, and interests presume and express identities (e.g., Espeland 1998, Brubaker & Cooper 2000). Rather than treating interest-oriented action as an explanatory principle, cultural sociology shows the interpretive context for motivational investment and disinvestment in interests.

For instance, the pursuit of political interests in both conventional and unconventional ways requires actors' investment in identities and goals that are created and sustained in processes of meaning-making, which cultural sociologists explore in depth (e.g., Spillman 1997, Smith 2005, Spillman & Faeges 2005, Alexander 2006, Armstrong & Bernstein 2008, Berezin 2009). Similarly, many economic sociologists explore the constitutive effects of meaning-making processes (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Campbell 1998, Spillman 2012a). Other conventionally strategic domains of actions are also analyzed for the cultural construction of interests, such as organizations (e.g., Dobbin 1994, Hallett & Ventresca 2006) and stratification (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, 1991; Lamont 1992; Lizardo & Skiles 2009).

Conversely, strategy is discovered in realms of action conventionally thought to be primarily normative or expressive. The cultural construction of means and ends of interest-oriented action is analyzed alongside expressive dimensions in volunteer, philanthropic, professional, and commemorative settings (e.g., Larson 2005, Lichterman 2005, Healy 2006, Eliasoph 2011, Olick et al. 2012). Similarly, sociologists often analyze strategic alongside expressive action in the creation and reception of art (e.g., Griswold 1981, Becker 1982, DiMaggio 1982, Zolberg 1990) and popular culture (e.g., Grazian 2003, Peterson & Anand 2004, Molotch 2005, Bielby & Harrington 2008).

Substantive Neutrality of Interests

Like rational choice and exchange theory, cultural theory does not privilege any particular interests. It emphasizes longer-term, collective

specifications of interests more strongly, but this is a matter of degree. It is most distinctive for examining empirically the particular meanings of interests, following Weber on the importance of understanding alongside explanation. Just as Weber (1958, p. 114) analyzes an “obstacle of values” influencing labor supply in India where rational choice theory might see only a revealed preference for more leisure, and Geertz’s (1973, pp. 412–53) thick description of a Balinese cockfight, unlike a game-theoretic account, explores what victory means, criteria of adequacy for cultural explanation include detailed hermeneutic attention to understanding particular interests as cultural objects (Griswold 1987, Alexander 2004).

Because of this requirement, cultural sociologists develop and debate different ways of systematically deepening analysis of meaning-making, and as a result cultural sociology’s conceptual language and core concerns differ markedly from those of rational choice and exchange theory. Approaches drawing on semiotics analyze cultural forms such as codes, narrative, and genre (Jacobs 1996, Alexander 2004, Smith 2005, Polletta 2006, Weber et al. 2008, Tavory & Swidler 2009, Lena 2012). Various theories of cognition support investigation of categories and boundaries (DiMaggio 1997, Zerubavel 1997, Cerulo 2002, Lamont & Molnar 2002, Lizardo & Strand 2010). Theories of ritual and of performance provide analytic tools for understanding semiformalized processes of collective expression (Kertzer 1988, MacKenzie & Millo 2003, McCormick 2009, Alexander 2010). And, drawing directly on pragmatism, interactionist perspectives suggest finer-grained analysis of informal meaning-making practices (Fine & Sandstrom 1993, Swidler 2001, Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003, McDonnell 2010).

So, interests orienting action are potentially infinite in cultural sociology as in rational choice and exchange theories, but whereas the latter simply bracket substantive meaning, cultural sociologists elaborate ways of better understanding what specific interests mean in discursive and interactional context.

Explaining Emergent Social Formations

Whereas rational choice and exchange theories infer from micro-level interest orientations to larger-scale social processes, cultural sociologists infer from higher level context to emergent interest orientations at the micro level. Cultural sociology’s analysis of contextual factors making particular interests meaningful begins to explain the conditions for interest-oriented action assumed in rational choice theory and the possibility of motivational investment that exchange theory presumes.

Cultural sociologists account for specific meso- and macro-social changes and innovations in terms of other society- and group-level processes, generally placing little explanatory weight on actors’ agency in pursuing their interests (though actors’ subjective understandings do constitute evidence for broader processes). Such explanations may be exogenous or endogenous (with cultural processes leading to cultural outcomes) (Kaufman 2004). Debates about these different lines of explanation also make core concerns markedly different from more social-psychological perspectives. For example, “production of culture” perspectives emphasize the historical influence of organizational and network structure on meaning-making possibilities (Peterson & Anand 2004), in contrast to scholars who treat attributes of culture—like codes, boundaries, ritual, or normative practice—as explanatory (Alexander 2004). Although many cultural sociologists now view exogenous and endogenous explanation as complementary, the resonance of this issue demonstrates that scaling up explanation to emergent social formations from actors’ interests is not a preoccupation of cultural theory, just as understanding particular interests does not resonate in rational choice and exchange theory debates.

Conversely, though, cultural sociologists are intermittently challenged to theorize actor-level agency and innovation, on the assumption that explanation in terms of higher level context devalues agency or presumes

stasis (e.g., Bourdieu 1977, DiMaggio 1988, Sewell 1992), supposedly leaving actors unable to demonstrate the awareness, motivation, and deliberation characteristic of interest-oriented action. Indeed, cultural sociologists often ignore particularities of strategizing when interest-oriented action is at issue, focusing more on antecedents of interest orientations than tactical accounts of their contingent outcomes.

This limitation is mitigated if higher-level contextual explanations also include specific attention to meaning-making processes, as they often do. Because tactics of interest-oriented action rely on strategic assessments of agonistic fields and resources mobilized in pursuit of goals constituted as meaningful within those fields, thick description can show how strategic goals and perceptions of resources may change in the course of interest-oriented action (e.g., McLean 2007, Smilde 2007, Bandelj 2008). The many cultural sociologists who implicitly or explicitly adopt pragmatist micro-sociological foundations address strategic agency in this way. Nevertheless, to the extent that cultural accounts do typically underemphasize straightforward tactical explanation, analysis of interest-oriented action could be deepened by linking analytically sophisticated examination of active meaning-making—e.g., in transposition of cultural codes (Sewell 1992), “figural action” (Wuthnow 1989), or the “genre guess” (Smith 2005)—to experimental findings about tactical rationality or exchange solidarities. This connection could be built on discussions of strategic cultural agency in Emirbayer & Mische (1998), Fligstein (2001), and Jasper (2006). It could also provide a way to bring processes of meaning-making to the center of complementary structural accounts of change and innovation, which share with cultural sociology the recognition that “the difference between methodological individualism and social constructivism is . . . a matter of time scale,” and the predisposition to take the longer view (Padgett & Powell 2012, pp. 2–3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Whereas rational choice theory examines the implications of generalizing interest-oriented action, but requires elucidation of its conditions of emergence, cultural theory provides the tools to explain emergence of specific interest orientations and how they accrue significance. Whereas social exchange theory explores micro-interactional influences on interest-oriented action but its rigorous scope conditions inhibit its application to realistic social contexts, cultural theory trades precise scope conditions on general claims about interest-oriented action to examine how interests are constructed in complex macro- and meso-social processes. And whereas rational choice and exchange theory are neutral about the meaning of specific interests, bracketing explanation of motivational investment and disinvestment, cultural sociology offers an array of analytic approaches for systematic hermeneutic understanding of how interests become meaningful in particular contexts.

Even though cultural perspectives account for particular interests, they do not offer general explanation of when interest-oriented action dominates nonstrategic action orientations. Rational choice theory calls for such explanation, and social exchange theory sometimes addresses the question at an abstract micro-sociological level. Can cultural sociologists offer general theories of when interest-oriented action makes sense, without presuming, as other theories do, that it is primordial?

Cultural theory suggests, first, that interests provide a shared language, a vocabulary of motive, and norms for interaction, independent of psychological motivations or strategic benefits. Even—or especially—where interests conflict, there is, at the very least, a shared understanding that interaction partners have interests and a shared understanding of the field in which actors are competing. Such shared understandings may contrast with supposedly irrational tradition and emotion, but also, more importantly, with refusal or failure to engage in a field of strategic interaction. Interest-oriented

action is, perhaps paradoxically, one cultural form of interrelationship and solidarity, even though its sometimes destructive consequences may also undermine the value of the social engagement it encourages.

From this perspective, and considering that disengagement, tradition, and nonrational affect are alternative possibilities, the question of general conditions for interest-oriented action is a question about when interests become a plausible foundation for social engagement. What historical or institutional conditions generate variations in the frequency of action orientations to interests? We know that comparatively differentiated and complex social contexts encourage increasing interaction while simultaneously devaluing traditional and affective action orientations (as classical theorists variously highlighted). This suggests that more socially differentiated contexts will generate more relationships understood as involving interest-oriented action. Such action is likely more viable and more prevalent to the extent that it can express interrelationships in more

complex and differentiated social worlds. Interests thus become totems of and alibis for social solidarity. This hypothesis about when interest-oriented action becomes significant applies not only to historical variation, but also to comparative variation in contemporaneous contexts.

A cultural theory of interests developed along these lines would avoid rational choice theory's tendency to overgeneralize and apply to larger-scale and more realistic social settings than social exchange theory, while also allowing for incorporation of insights they offer about tactical and behavioral mechanisms influencing outcomes of interest-oriented action. It would build on cultural sociologists' wide-ranging studies of the cultural construction of particular interests, but avoid underemphasizing the general sociological significance of interest-oriented action. Most intriguingly, perhaps, it suggests that better understanding of interest-oriented action will demand much more systematic theoretical and empirical attention to the incidence and significance of active disengagement from agonistic fields.

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