

being concerned with either legislative reason or interpretive reason. Schleiermacher and Dilthey form the base of the former, and Heidegger, and later Gadamer (see chapter 3), established the latter. Schleiermacher was concerned with a method for establishing true meanings and avoiding false meanings. He regarded the interpreter as being able to provide a better understanding than could the author of the text. In his earlier work, Dilthey argued that interpretations would get nearer the truth over time as succeeding generations of intellectuals benefited from successive stages in the widening of cognitive horizons. He claimed that superior cultures produce superior interpreters. Both authors were claiming the path to true interpretations. Heidegger, on the other hand, could see no escape for interpreters from their location in space and time. Interpretation is not the preserve of the expert; it is part of everyday life, or at least of those occasions when understanding is required. Rather than being a search for truth, it is the opening up of possibilities.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism had its origins in the intellectual traditions of *hermeneutics* and *phenomenology*. Various terms have been used to identify this approach, such as anti-naturalist, anti-positivist or post-positivist. Its central tenet is that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matters of the natural and social sciences. The study of natural phenomena requires the scientist to invent concepts and theories to describe and explain; the scientist has to study nature, as it were, from the outside. Through the use of theories, the natural scientist makes choices about what is relevant to the problem under investigation. The study of social phenomena, on the other hand, requires an understanding of the social world which people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. However, people are constantly involved in interpreting their world – social situations, other people's behaviour, their own behaviour, and natural and humanly created objects. They develop meanings for their activities together, and they have ideas about what is relevant for making sense of these activities. In short, the social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives.

The difference²⁴ between the social and natural world is that the latter does not constitute itself as 'meaningful': the meanings it has are produced by men [sic] in the course of their practical life, and as a consequence of their endeavours to understand or explain it for themselves. Social life – of which these endeavours are a part – on the other hand, is *produced* by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstitution of frames of meaning whereby they organise their experiences. (Giddens 1974: 79)

The contributors to Interpretivism who have been selected for consideration have their roots in German intellectual traditions and in British ordinary language philosophy: Weber (1864–1920), Schütz (1899–1959) and Winch (1926–). While the publications of the latter two spill over into the contemporary period, their work has been regarded as pioneering and has become the inspiration for many contemporary writers.

While Weber followed in the hermeneutic tradition, he was also highly critical of it. He was concerned with establishing causal explanations with the result that his work is a blend of the Interpretive and Positivist approaches. Weber's fundamental methodological concern was with the conditions of and limits to establishing the validity of interpretive understanding. Like Dilthey, he set himself the task of devising an objective way of understanding the essentially subjective subject matter of sociology, of establishing an objective science of the subjective. It has been through the translation of his work that the term *verstehen* has become well known among English-speaking social scientists.

The major statement of Weber's position can be found in the passages in which he defined sociology and its methodological foundations (Weber 1962, 1964; Runciman 1977). He defined sociology as 'a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (Weber 1964: 88). This interpretive understanding is directed towards the subjective states of mind of social actors and the meanings which they have used as they engage in particular social action. However, understanding for Weber 'is not the subtle intuitive sympathy which philosophers favour – but intellectual, analytical and predictive explanation of action' (Sahay 1971: 68).

Weber distinguished between *action* and *social action*. *Action* refers to 'all human behaviour when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it' (1964: 88). 'By "social" action is meant an action in which the meaning intended by the agent or agents involve a relation to *another* person's behaviour and in which that relation determines the way in which the action proceeds' (Runciman 1977: 7). Therefore, for action to be regarded as social and to be of interest to the social scientist, the actor must attach subjective meaning to it and it must be directed towards the activities of other people. 'Social action, which includes both failure to act and passive acquiescence, may be oriented to the past, present, or expected future behaviour of others . . . The "others" may be individual persons, and may be known to the actor as such, or may constitute an indefinite plurality and may be entirely unknown as individuals' (Weber 1964: 112). This definition allows for the possibility of non-social overt action directed towards an inanimate object, such cases lying outside the interest of the social scientist.⁷ According to Weber, subjective

⁷ It is important to recognize that Weber's concept of *action* is not a new term for behaviour. Action is behaviour and motives brought together: behaviour is observed and motives are inferred.

meanings may be of three kinds: they may refer to the actual intended meanings used by a social actor; to the average or approximate meanings used by a number of social actors; or, they may be thought of as typical meanings attributed to a hypothetical social actor (1964: 96).

Drawing on Dilthey, Weber distinguished between four modes of understanding: two broad types – *rational* understanding and *empathetic* or *appreciative* understanding – and two versions of the rational type – *direct* and *motivational* understanding. 'In the sphere of action things are rationally evident chiefly when we attain a completely clear intellectual grasp of the action-elements in their intended context of meaning. Empathetic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional content in which the action took place' (Weber 1964: 90–1). *Direct* understanding of a human expression or activity is like grasping the meaning of a sentence, a thought, or a mathematical formula. It is an immediate, unambiguous, matter-of-fact kind of understanding which occurs in everyday situations and which does not require knowledge of a wider context. *Motivational* understanding of social action, on the other hand, is concerned with means and ends; it is the choice of a means to achieving some goal.

It was with this motivational form of rational action that Weber was primarily concerned. He regarded human action which lacks this rational character as being unintelligible. The statistical patterns produced by quantitative data, such as the relationship between educational attainment and occupational status, are not understandable on their own. Not only must the relevant action which links the two components of the relationship be specified, but the meaning that is attached to this action must also be identified. 'Statistical uniformities constitute understandable types of action . . . and thus constitute "sociological generalizations", only when they can be regarded as manifestations of the understandable subjective meaning of a course of social action' (Weber 1964: 100).

Weber's approach is clearly illustrated in his research on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). He became fascinated by a statistical correlation between occupation and religion, in particular, the different occupations of Protestant and Catholics.

A glance at the occupational statistics of any country of mixed religious composition brings to light with remarkable frequency . . . the fact that business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labour, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant. (Weber 1958: 35)

While Weber recognized that these differences might be explained in part by historical circumstances, such as the advantages of inherited wealth and the educational opportunities it affords, he argued that the explanation must be sought in the intrinsic character of the religious beliefs of

Protestants and Catholics. In looking for different kinds of motivation, he focused on differences in the meaning given to work. These differences, in turn, were seen to be derived from differences in theology. In short, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination (that God has already determined who will go to heaven and no amount of penitence or good works will alter this) created a problem of how to find out whether you have been chosen. The ability to live a pure, honest, non-indulgent life was seen to be a clue and this was accompanied by a view of work as a 'calling', as a way of serving, even worshipping God. The result of hard work and frugality gave the early Protestants the motivation and resources to both stimulate and take advantage of the capitalist economic revolution. This approach to work came to be known as the *Protestant work ethic*. However, in Catholicism, a 'calling' was to a specifically religious life and work was regarded as necessary for survival but not religious in character. According to Weber, all of the other major world religions lacked this meaning and hence motivation for work. Therefore, the explanation for the statistical correlation was to be found in the differences in religious beliefs which resulted in different meanings for work.

Weber defined a motive as 'a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question' (Weber 1964: 98). He acknowledged that motives can be both rational and non-rational, they can be formulated to give action the character of being a means to some end, or they can be associated with emotional (affectual) states. Only in the case of rational motives did he consider that it was possible to formulate sociological explanations.

For an explanation to be 'adequate on the level of meaning' it needs to identify what he called 'typical complexes of meaning' which are associated with 'coherent courses of conduct'. On the other hand, the causal adequacy of a sequence of events entails the probability that it will always occur in the same way in the future, i.e. that the components of the sequence have usually occurred together and can be expected to do so in the future.

If adequacy in respect to meaning is lacking, then no matter how high the degree of uniformity and how precisely its probability can be numerically determined, it is still an incomprehensible statistical probability, whether dealing with overt or subjective processes. On the other hand, even the most perfect adequacy on the level of meaning has causal significance from a sociological point of view only in so far as there is some kind of proof for the existence of a probability that action in fact normally takes the course which has been held to be meaningful. (Weber 1964: 99–100)

Weber regarded meaningful interpretations as plausible hypotheses which need to be tested. As experimentation is generally not available in the social sciences, he recommended the use of the comparative method in which experimental conditions are sought in natural situations. If this is

not possible, he suggested that the researcher will have to resort to an 'imaginary experiment' 'which consists in thinking away certain elements of a chain of motivation and working out the course of action which would then probably ensue, thus arriving at a causal judgment' (1964: 97).

While Weber's methodology is founded on meaningful social action, he regarded this as only one aspect of the sociologist's concerns. The discussion of his concept of sociology is only preparatory to his discussion of social relationships. He defined social relationships as 'the situation where two or more persons are engaged in conduct wherein each takes account of the behavior of the other in a meaningful way and is therefore oriented in these terms' (Weber 1962: 63). Weber was not primarily concerned with the actor's own subjective meaning but, rather, with the meaning of the situation for a constructed hypothetical actor. He was more particularly concerned with the effect on human behaviour not simply of meaning but of meaningful social relations. His ultimate concern was with large-scale uniformities.

While he was influenced by Hermeneutics, Weber dealt with different issues; he wished to understand and explain social action and social relationships rather than the interpretation of texts. Even although his own research dealt mainly with historical data, he adopted a sociological rather than a historical approach. He saw sociology as being concerned with general concepts and generalized uniformities, whereas he saw history dealing with individual actions (1962: 51).

In developing his version of *verstehen*, he gradually disengaged himself from hermeneutics by developing a view of understanding based on typical motives. He transformed the subjectivity of *verstehen* into understanding based on the construction of rational models of social action.

Weber's struggle was not about forcing a sociology thoroughly dedicated to objectivism to pay a little more attention to subjectivity and subjectively held values. On the contrary, his was the long and exhausting battle for the emancipation of social science from the relativism in which it floundered, burdened as it was with its idealist and German-hermeneutical legacy. (Bauman 1978: 87)

An aspect of Weber's approach, which has caused later sociologists some difficulties, was his willingness to treat as equivalent the meanings which the social actor attributes to his/her actions and the meanings an observer regards as adequate. This is not surprising given the origins of the hermeneutic tradition in the interpretation of ancient texts. However, his concerns were different from those of this tradition in that he considered that:

understanding involves the interpretive grasp of the meaning present in one of the following contexts: (a) as in the historical approach, the actual intended meaning for concrete individual action; or (b) as in cases of sociological mass phenomena the average of, or an approximation to, the actual

intended meaning; or (c) the meaning appropriate to a scientifically formulated pure type (an ideal type) of a common phenomenon. (Weber 1964: 96)

Hence, he was not particularly interested in the specific meanings social actors give to their actions but with approximations and abstractions. In any case, as he did not wish to confine himself to either contemporary or micro-situations he was forced to deal with the observer's interpretations. Nevertheless, he regarded such interpretations only as hypotheses to be tested. His work on the Protestant ethic dealt with the typical meaning given to work by the early Calvinists, not with the meaning given by Calvin himself or any one of his followers.

Weber's desire to link statistical uniformities with *verstehen* has led to a variety of interpretations of his version of Interpretivism. Positivists who have paid attention to his work have tended to regard the *verstehen* component as simply a potential source of hypotheses, while Interpretivists have tended to ignore his concern with statistical uniformities and causal explanation.

Weber seems to have gone too far in trying to meet the claims of positive science and hence landed himself in a position far less easily defensible than would have been the case had he stuck to arguing that there was some relationship between the logic of *verstehen* and the logic of scientific proof. What he does is try to relate *verstehen* to a specific kind of scientific proof based upon the demonstration of probabilities of a statistically determinable kind. This might have had the effect of giving sociology a certain respectability in scientific circles, but in the event the position was untenable and most of Weber's successors have therefore been forced to abandon either his concern with meaning or his tendencies towards scientific positivism. Neither of these positions does Weber justice and what is overlooked is that the whole argument about the two types of explanation is intended to lead into a discussion about truly sociological concepts (i.e. concepts which refer not merely to the meaning of action but to social relations and structures of social relations). (Rex 1971: 24)

As Weber never pursued methodological issues beyond the requirements of his own substantive work, he operated with many tacit assumptions and some of his concepts were not well developed. These aspects of Weber's work have been taken up sympathetically by Schütz (1963a,b, 1970, 1976), for whose work Weber and Husserl provided the foundations. Like Weber, he considered that 'the most serious question which the methodology of the social sciences has to answer is: How is it possible to form objective concepts and objectively verifiable theory of subjective meaning-structures?' (Schütz 1963a: 246), and he regarded the meanings and interpretations that people give to their actions and situations as being the distinguishing feature of social phenomena. Social reality consists of the

cultural objects and social institutions into which we all are born, within which we have to find our bearings, and with which we have to come to