

Interpretive Sociologies and Traditions of Hermeneutics

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1 Introduction

The subtitle of Schutz's main work promises "an introduction into Interpretive Sociology" (2004a: 3). In this light, Schutz aligns himself with a certain tradition (Endress 2006a: 42ff.).¹ Reading Schutz in the context of Max Weber is helpful if one wishes to highlight the connection with "Interpretive Sociology".² In contrast to other works, the following considerations will focus mainly on the difference between subjective and objective sense. For this purpose, the paragraphs concerning Weber's terms "objective and subjective chance" (§47, 2004a: 423ff.), as well as the difference between "objective and subjective sense" need to be taken into consideration (§49, 2004a: 429ff.; see also: §5 and §27, 2004a: 115ff., 268ff.).

Schutz distinguishes between a systematic and a genetic perspective on his theoretical interest (see Endress 2006a: 67f.). In one chapter of *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (2004a: 438) titled "*Gegenstandsgebiet und Verfahren der verstehenden Soziologie*", he writes:

The task of this science is initially and foremost [1] the description of processes of interpretation and establishment of sense executed by those living in the social world. This description may be empirical or eidetical, it may take individual or typical phenomena as its object, it may be executed with regards to a concrete situation of mundane sociality or at a high

¹The contours of Schutz's concept of "Interpretive Sociology" from 1932 are laid out in the fifth part of the "Meaningful Constructions" titled "On problems of Interpretive Sociology" (§§ 42–49), a rather neglected section in discussions of his work.

²There are already several studies on the relationship between both works which point out some of the differences between Weber and Schutz, for example, the missing significance of communicative (linguistic) processes or the difficulty of constitution which are not discussed by Weber. Also, questions regarding the problem of the formation of typologies are discussed (see for example Srubar 1979; also Endress 2006b: 31–37).

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grade of generality. Furthermore, Interpretive Sociology [2] wants to apply the achieved schemes of interpretation on exactly those cultural objects, constituted in those processes of establishment and interpretation of sense in the social world, in order to ‘understand’ those cultural objects via the interrogation of its constituting sense. (2004a: 438)

This dual strategy of a genetic and systematic development of the main argument is dealt with in the three paragraphs in the middle section and main part of *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. It begins (a) with the *constitutional analysis* of the phenomenon of sense, that is, the analysis of the genesis of structures of sense in the social world, and then shifts to (b) the structural analysis of the social world in order to show the necessary variations in the processes of establishment of sense formed by different social “interpretational perspectives” (2004a: 209).

With regard to the adoption of hermeneutical traditions as well as its reception for the pragmatic interests of research, one has to acknowledge an enormous pluralization within the tradition of Interpretive Sociology. This pluralization results mainly from the selectivity of the various receptions of that tradition, as well as from the compartmentalization of the relevant discussions and contexts of research. Still, we simply cannot review the whole spectrum of social scientific hermeneutics and hermeneutical or interpretational processes of qualitative social research in order to distil its synthesis. Considered against this background, the following reflections will provide a reminder of the fundamentally indivisible composition concerning the profile of Interpretive Sociology at the beginning of its developmental history. The explication of this complex profile of Interpretive Sociology beyond the continued trials of its current segmentation is based mainly on the recourse to Max Weber and Alfred Schutz.³

The focus of our inquiry may, therefore, be articulated as follows: we are concerned with the question of the relevance of the resource, the meaning, and the specific relation of subjective, intersubjective, and transsubjective structures of sense for Interpretive Sociology (Endress 2006b).

The continuing importance of analyzing sense structures by recourse to these three dimensions is obvious. It appears to be sufficient for our undertaking to single out four contexts of discussion in which those dimensions are vital:

- (a) It is initially valid for the discussion of Weber’s opus itself: the systematicity of the “sociological basic terms” in “Economy and Society” and its relevance for practical research; the relation of its tutorial representation to Weber’s material studies (Greshoff 2006; Endress 2006b; Breuer 2006);
- (b) furthermore, one has to mention the theoretical debate on the question of “trans-intentionality” which nowadays draws on the analysis of the consequences of action known as non- or unintended (Greshoff et al. 2003; Boeschen et al. 2006);

³At the core of the discussion are the manifold hermeneutic disputes between “objective” hermeneutics (Oevermann), “documentary interpretation” (Bohnsack), and the subject-oriented, socio-scientific hermeneutics, as, for example, the hermeneutics of the Sociology of Knowledge. Bohnsack explicitly claims a mediating position by using the “documentary method” and thus refers to Karl Mannheim, in contrast to the other two concepts.

- (c) the questioning of the relations of these structures of sense is further important for the discussion of the conceptual design of a contemporary Sociology of knowledge (cf. Knoblauch 2005);
- (d) finally, the argument above concerning the threefold structures of sense is valid – and this is of especially important concerning the given arguments – for the discussion of the design of qualitative social research and the meaning of the “subjective perspective” which remains highly controversial within this discussion (e.g. Hopf et al. 1999; Hitzler 2000, 2007; Bohnsack 2003; Reichertz 2007).

It was Hitzler who stated that “qualitative social research *grosso modo* is viewed as belonging to the realm of Interpretive sociology, without reflecting that its epistemological grounds concerning methodological as well as methodical standards are not all consented” (2007: [11]).⁴ Because of this pluralization one has to ask, what are the efforts of an ongoing fragmentation and conflict-ridden mutual delimitation among qualitative research methods and conceptual orientations within the tradition of Interpretive Sociology. The following discussion is devoted to this question discussing it from the viewpoint of research pragmatics.

2 An Unsolved Problem

In his fundamental criticism of Parsons from the 1960s onwards, it is Schutz’s aim to re-orientate the social sciences and even more sociology towards a hermeneutical profile. Since then, Schutz has functioned as a main point of reference for numerous variants of hermeneutic, interpretative or qualitative approaches in empirical social research. Of course, we should emphasize both the internal plurality of hermeneutical orientations within sociology itself and also the fact that the philosophical debate on hermeneutics continues unabated (and not only recently). In doing so, we help to problematize *a priori* monolithic and sometimes even reificational references to *the* ‘hermeneutical profile’ of *the* Interpretive Sociology.

The design of Schutz’s life-world analysis may be described as a “foundation of a phenomenologically based Interpretive Sociology” (Endress 2006a: 8). This conception of Interpretive Sociology profiles itself empirically both as a “structural analysis of the life-world” and as a sociology of knowledge (dito 81ff.). Furthermore, Schutz’s analysis of the “structures of the life-world” provides a dual perspective on the term “structure” since it points towards modes of orientation for action in structured contexts of interaction which he analyses

⁴While 20 years ago Matthiesen (1994) claimed that the overstressing of the communalities of the various ‘interpretative approaches’ serves as a substantially irrelevant mutual profiling, the situation nowadays is one of a forced parceling of the field of ‘interpretative approaches’ and research methods due to substantial differences concerning methodological as well as methodical aspects.

as compressions of structures of preceding and accompanying processes of habitualization, typification, institutionalisation, and legitimization— notions usually ignored by both subjectivistic abbreviations and objectivistic critics (see Matthiesen 1994: 80). Accordingly, the primary linguistic relation to the world is the analytically relevant starting point for a theory of the life-world.

Thus, already when writing *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967), Schutz acknowledged a certain dialectics as a starting point, i.e., the principal entanglement of subjective and social (intersubjective) processes of establishing sense. For Schutz, this central idea, which necessarily involves a cross reference between subjectivity and sociality, initiates the inescapable overlapping of philosophical and sociological analysis, as well as of constitutional analysis, general analysis of social structures, and empirically driven Interpretive Sociology. The simple fact that Schutz's venture proceeds from the intersubjectively structured social world shows that it is not appropriate to simply describe his position as a "methodological individualism".⁵

Schutz continues—in his own way—Husserl's program of an analysis of the life-world and "its general structure" (1970: 139). Husserl knew well that such a "general structure" is constitutive for the life-world "in all its relative features." Therefore, Husserl aimed at the explication of the "concrete life-world" in its "universal concreteness" (1970: 131, 139).⁶ *Universality in historical concreteness* might be the formula Schutz has appropriated for his foundational interests of Interpretive Sociology in recourse to Husserl.⁷ It is specifically the determination

⁵For Weber, such a classification requires a detailed explanation, but to an even greater extent it conceals the systematic form of Schutz's analyses, whose core lies, according to the position argued here, in the fundamental intersubjectivity of structures of meaning. The usual classification of Weber as well as Schutz as belonging to the perspective of methodological individualism has first of all to be commented on because the concept of methodological individualism (which itself also points to the already mentioned relation of the general to the concrete) has to be differentiated here. The core of the thesis of methodological individualism can be identified in the claim that all knowledge of social phenomena can be and has to be deduced and justified through knowledge about individualities, these being attitudes, interests, and actions of individuals (to follow a more recent usage: actors). Thus, methodological individualism is at the core a heuristic postulate. This methodological meaning of methodological individualism has to be carefully distinguished from any possible ontological meaning. Second, methodological individualism as a heuristic postulate can either be analyzed with a claim to totality (thus, each social phenomenon can be traced back to something individual) or merely in the sense of a heuristic instruction (hence, the "reductionist" endeavor should be emphasized as much as possible). Methodological individualism is not an ontological statement but a methodical, i.e., a research-pragmatic norm.

⁶See also Husserl's reflection in "Experience and Judgment" concerning both the "typical" and "indeterminate generality of anticipation," according to which "every real thing whatsoever has, as an object of possible experience, its general 'a priori,' a pre-knowledge that is an indeterminate generality but which remains identifiable as the same, as a type belonging a priori to a realm of a priori possibilities" (1973: 36).

⁷Husserl indeed attempted to thematize "the entire spatiotemporal world" in "the unity of a systematic survey" by "paying constant attention to the relativity of the surrounding life-worlds" (Husserl 1970: 147). Accordingly, this "systematic survey" has to proceed just "in the form of an iterated synthesis of relative, spatiotemporal life-worlds" (ibid.).

of this universality which might contain central problems in the clarification of the self-image of Interpretive Sociology.⁸

It is an elementary and basic sociological insight that “the individual act (*individuelle Einzelhandlung*) is always an integral element of a social sequence” (Oevermann 1986: 57). Or, to put it another way: “the subject is born into a historical and social world” (Reichert 1988: 220)—who would deny this? This assumption concerning a constitutive sociality should at least be indisputable among “understanding sociologists.”

Accordingly, their shared aim is an inquiry into causally adequate contexts of sense. This implies that men “are at all events driven to *interpret* what is going on.” Or, put differently, Interpretive Social Research essentially “has to reconstruct the *sense*: to reconstruct subjective sense and objectified sense” (Hitzler 2007: [13]). More contentious, however, are the conclusions that can be drawn from this basic insight promoted by the differing convictions regarding the self-image of Interpretive Sociology.

If we concentrate on the dominant concept, three distinct positions can be identified: variants of qualitative research referring to Schutz, “objective hermeneutics,” and, following Mannheim, the method of documentary interpretation.⁹ In his recent publications in particular, Bohnsack tries to re-design hermeneutical social research in the triangle of sociology of knowledge, “objective hermeneutics,” and documentary interpretation (exemplarily 2003). Speaking plainly and reduced to the juxtaposing of two positions, Hitzler even refers to a “schism between an eventually action-theoretical and interpretative paradigm here and a structure-theoretical and objectivistic paradigm there” (2007: [20]). This present situation bears the unmistakable traces of the history of its origins; this is due to the fact that the profiles of Interpretive Sociology developed independently. Therefore, Mannheim (and his dominant recourse to Marx, Hegel, and Lukács) and Schutz (with a significant reference to Weber and Husserl) are thought to be heading in different directions; although Schutz had not mentioned Mannheim until his later years. According to the usual prejudice in sociology, Mannheim, given his objectivistic tendency in the wake of Marx (Endress 2007), opposes the subjectivistic ‘list’ of Schutz in the wake of Weber.¹⁰

⁸It is therefore questionable whether this “concrete generality” aims at the explication of the world-constituting powers of consciousness and action of the actors (Phenomenology: Schutz, Berger/Luckmann), at the tacit general conventions concerning interactions (Ethnomethodology, analysis of conversation and typification), at the systems of symbols and interactions (Symbolic interactionism, hermeneutic sociology of knowledge: Blumer, Soeffner), at the socio-historical framework and social stratifications (documentary method, biography and generation research: Bohnsack, Hildenbrand, Rosenthal), at discourses and *dispositifs* (discourse analysis: Foucault), or at the sense generating latent structures of meaning (objective hermeneutics: Oevermann) (see also the list of options in Hitzler 2007: [18]).

⁹According to Bohnsack’s conception, it is the mediating position of the documentary interpretation (inspired by Mannheim) that is opposite to both the objectivism of objective hermeneutics and the subjectivism of social phenomenology following Schutz, and which therefore presents the only fully valid form of an interpretive approach (Bohnsack 2005).

¹⁰In this paper I cannot provide an extensive introduction to the respective influences of the works of Weber, Schutz, and Mannheim on qualitative research. For more on this, see my work on Weber, Schutz, and Mannheim (Endress 2006a, 2007, 2011).

Reflecting disciplinary contexts through the lens of theoretical schools, the aforementioned discussions and negotiations are objects of a ‘family conflict’. And as this dedramatizing analogy demonstrates – everything is at stake.¹¹ The determinations and demarcations of these positions are accordingly trenchant. This remains an unsatisfactory situation for theoretical, conceptual, as well as empirical reasons. Thus, the following considerations will provide certain evidence in order to yield a more inclusive understanding. In doing so, the following two sections will, firstly, provide some more theoretical remarks (Sect. 3) which, secondly, will be illustrated by the findings of an empirical case study (Sect. 4).

3 Comparative Aspects

In order to depict the aforementioned variations of Interpretive Sociology, we first need to highlight some of the mutual aspects of reference that appear essential:

1. First of all, every variant of Interpretive Sociology seeks to “reconstruct the references of sense for an action occurring and how that action occurred” as stated by Reichertz (1988: 22). This aim constitutes an early critique of “objective hermeneutics.” But such a task cannot be accomplished due to the impossibility of reaching beyond the intersubjective constellations of action and interpretation, as long as only intentionally present references of sense are taken into account. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann clearly state this in their “Social Construction” (1966: 72): “The typification of forms of action requires that these have an objective sense which in turn requires a linguistic objectification. [...] In principle, then, an action and its sense can be apprehended apart from its individual performances and the variable subjective processes associated with it”.
2. Again, it is evident that the reconstructive aim of sociology does not aim at a ‘clear’ consciousness of the carrying out of action, but “that the sociologist is

¹¹Concerning the questions of the possibility of socio-scientific interpretation, one can formulate some basic meta-theoretical rules concerning the conflict between Explanatory and Interpretive Sociology, which seem at any rate suitable to the delimitation of a perspective overlapping the objective space of possibility. These can actually be labeled according to their specific origin: *firstly*, as an explaining sociologist one cannot see the specific interpretative profile of Interpretive Sociology *ab ovo* as complete nonsense and at the same time systematically take into account the cultural embedment of any social action, *secondly*, as a hermeneutically oriented sociologist, one cannot argue on behalf of the ever typical character of social acting and at the same time dismiss any generalization in another theoretical language as factually wrong; *thirdly*, as an explaining sociologist one cannot center on the cultural framing of social acting and at the same time skip the theoretical level of the explication of typical structures of interpretation, and *fourthly*, as a hermeneutically oriented sociologist one cannot emphasize the constitutive relevance of language for the perception of reality and at the same time rule out *a priori* specific (scientific) language play as inadequate.

able to reconstruct *ex post*, what had meaning for the action” (Reichertz 1988: 220). In the first place, this argument seems to not be a critical stance towards “objective hermeneutics,” as Reichertz tries to locate it. The singular view on “what has become meaningful for the actor” (*ibid.*) is not sufficient for a reconstructive concern. Such a task is only accomplished if the corpus has been exhausted as far as possible, a corpus consisting of the meanings acted out and evinced by everyone involved in a given constellation of interaction or situation of action, co-producing “emergence.” Thus, one might say that it is possible to measure out the objective space of possible meanings opened by the course of interaction. Via this thought-experimental unfolding of possible contexts of an articulation (or forms of expression), it is possible to reconstruct the supporting processes of the reproduction of structures of sense, the selections of meanings out of the range of possible variants, and finally the ways by which definite and concrete misunderstandings took place.

3. Especially if one takes the subjective character of all forms of expression seriously, then a solely reconstructive understanding that orients itself towards and searches for the “subjectively meant sense” (of the author) does not suffice. Such a self-conception would in the end suppose a total availability of that sense. Furthermore, it would lead towards a reduction or even elimination of the expressive forms of its objects (e.g. texts) which constitutively exceed the intentionality of each author. By that, it would miss the fact that we are ‘told something’ by the objects. It would omit what a reference to the “subjectively meant sense” claims: to do justice to the actor.
4. In Schutz’s analysis (2004a: 89, 2004b: 285) the inconspicuousness of the ‘matter of course’ is the starting point for a phenomenologically founded Interpretive Sociology (cf. Endress 2006a: 81f., 66).¹² It is evident that Interpretive Sociology in the phenomenological tradition starts with an elementary process of dissociation; the critical analysis of the “epoché of the natural attitude” is made programmatic (Schutz 2003: 137f., 203ff.). As a result, Schutz’s phenomenologically founded Interpretive Sociology does not actually merge with a purely subsequent subscription, a plain description of the ‘matter of course’. This highlights the problematic horizon of Interpretive Sociology and ties its project immediately to the different traditions of (philosophical) hermeneutics.

It may be stated analogously that hermeneutics—as the doctrine of understanding—enlightens the unlikeliness at the heart of everyday understanding, which is only first and foremost taken for granted.¹³ This *epoché* connects

¹²See also Husserl’s clarification in the “Crisis”: “In advance there is the world, ever pregiven and undoubted in ontic certainty and self-verification” (1970: 186–7).

¹³To think hermeneutically, according to Gadamer (1974: 1061), to transfer a context from another ‘world’ into one’s own has always been perceived as a method of translation. Similarly, in Sociology the term has been used well before it came into fashion, as for example by Stephen P. Turner (1980) and Michael Callon (1986).

Schutz's approach with the "objective hermeneutics" so often scolded as a "hermeneutics of suspicion."¹⁴

5. A process analysis is also common to all the examined perspectives.¹⁵ Even if the analysis of the life-world focuses on the condensation of interaction orders, "objective hermeneutics" only dares to speak of the 'structures' of one case; if the 'history of formation' of the case is successively reconstructed, the development of a case structure hypothesis is formed by a rigorous sequencing in the following of the development of structure.¹⁶ Seen systematically, the theory of the life-world has to remain vigilant to the problem of structure in order to solve the problem of typification. Equally, "objective hermeneutics" has to take into account the individuality of the development of a case structure (and its laws), in order to identify the problem of structure in an analyzed case.¹⁷
6. Guided by such a concept of "structures of interpretation," social research, as understood in "objective hermeneutics", is of a certain interest from a Schutzian perspective: structures of interpretation are framed in "objective hermeneutics" as interpretations of problems of action (that is because "objective hermeneutics" departs from the insight into a dialectic of both constraints of decision and obligations of reason).

Taking all the aforementioned aspects into account, Schutz's life-world theory, as well as the basic notion of Interpretive Sociology, seems to provide the contours for empirical research. Hence, qualitative social research adequately transforms the basic methodological insight concerning the sociality of the social into a method.

Regarding the introductory qualification of the aim of Interpretive Sociology with respect to unveiling the universal in the historically specific, we may state: Weber's construction of a historical phenomenology of structures seeks to analyze using the methodological instrument of ideal (typical) constructions of concepts; Schutz looks to uncover the structures of life-worlds in their types; and the "objective hermeneutics" of Oevermann reconstructs the "inner context" of one case, referring to its individual structure or case structure (Fallstruktur).¹⁸

¹⁴Here, we are obviously dealing with the 'backstage', introduced by Goffman (1959) in a still concretistic manner. It would be nonsense, however, to use qualitative social research with the too far reaching and constrained idea that on each 'backstage' or 'behind the facade' is a hidden and supposedly 'true' reality which is constantly and fraudulently concealed and/or veiled by the front stage. Especially because such presumptions at once would have to assume strong (manifest) intentions they really should have been reduced in the tended process of distancing. But the contrary assumption of an in principle manifest reality is, given the afore-mentioned reasons, also not tenable.

¹⁵I omit here the call for and the practical recourse to sequence-analytic methods in Oevermann et al. (1979, 1980; Oevermann 1986), Luckmann (2007) and Soeffner (1989: 185ff., 1991a) as well as Bohnsack (1999: 35) and of course also Strauss; compare Soeffner (1991b: 5f).

¹⁶Matthiesen speaks of "a fundamentally dual, genetic structural concept" (1994: 83).

¹⁷Compare in the following the question of the concept of rule which is drawn on for the idea of a "generalization of structure in singular cases" by Oevermann.

¹⁸It has to be studied separately to what extent the difference of a reference to "implicit knowledge" and "objective (latent) structures of meaning" is relevant here (see Matthiesen 1994: 97f.).

4 Exemplary Empirical Analysis

Before we can draw conclusions concerning the variants of qualitative research, we would like to illustrate the presented conceptual considerations with an example of empirical research.¹⁹ Beginning with a few remarks concerning the procedure of qualitative social research in general, some findings of a case study regarding fraternities will be presented to demonstrate the effect of housing arrangements on maintaining individuality versus developing a communal identity.

The explanatory claim of any approach in the tradition of Interpretive Sociology articulates itself in a methodologically reflected circle of (1) exemplary case constructions in order to gain a primary interpretation in relation to the leading interest of explanation, (2) typological condensations based on sequential analysis, (3) contrasting typologies regarding these typological condensations and (4) an explication of the ‘case structure’. My suggestion of a four-step-procedure may be explained for a case of text data in general as following:

- Ad 1. On the basis of, for example, guided open interviews, single passages are chosen for each documented interview on the basis of an interpretative rating. Such a ‘case-related’ procedure is based on the objective data reconstructed out of the available material as well as of interview passages which, in the first place, are considered significant for the guiding research interest. Both sets of data are transferred for further orientation of research into a closed condensed text form called “anamnesis.” This step of analysis only operates with internal relations towards contrasting text sequences.
- Ad 2. Based on first typifying characteristics of the cases analyzed, further passages classified as relevant or significant are selected and interpreted in a separate sequential analysis²⁰ in order to gain a condensed case interpretation particularly focussing on the “solutions” for the explanatory problem of actions articulated in singular cases.²¹
- Ad 3. Those “solutions,” derived from the singular cases, are then typologically sharpened by contrasting them with the rest of the material. This is done in order to draw an ideal (typical) tableau of differentiated, objectively possible “solutions” which may occur while different actors are trying to solve a shared problem of action in the light of diverse life-world experiences and patterns of orientation.
- Ad 4. In an intensive scan through the empirical data one may explicate the objective problem of structure related to the explanatory interest motivating the

¹⁹For that purpose I will use a study concerning students in a city in the South of Germany who became members of a fraternity. The following empirical data about the students comes from a 2-year qualitative as well as quantitative research practical training at the University of Tuebingen.

²⁰A method of sequential analysis is methodically adequate insofar as a “meaningful construction” of a social world is to be reconstructed in detailed analytical steps.

²¹In order to validate the assumption of a case structure imprinting every interview sequence, singular text passages considered less relevant are analyzed in a case-intern contrasting.

research. But this explication may only offer a temporary answer—related to the current research interest as well as the manageable depth of the interpretation of the material at present. The cases examined can be understood as typical variants of a “solution,” meaning the coverage of the objective structural problem.

The exemplary case concerns the meaning of joining a present-day student fraternity. The analysis aimed at the student’s management of the theoretically substantial and empirically observable tension between the demands of self-actualization in an ‘individualized’ society, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rather intensive praxis of communal relationships (“Vergemeinschaftung”) typical of fraternities. The leading research question was to identify the structural problem of action the actors are confronted with in their daily life, and how they consider this problem resolvable?

Based on a pre-orientation in the field and on the comparisons between the conditions of living and everyday life in a fraternity and a shared apartment, the guiding hypothesis was – students have to tackle the problem of the tension between long lasting “life alliances” (as an intensive praxis of communal relationships (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and an only temporary life form (shared apartment/*Wohngemeinschaft*)). Therefore, the central empirical research interest may be formulated as follows: which types or structures of management of the tension between ‘life alliance’ and ‘shared apartment’ are identifiable on the level of the singular cases in the sample?

Not only is it assumed that the act of joining a fraternity is typically in need of legitimacy *vis a vis* other students, it is further assumed that such an institutionally fixed and permanent commitment as a life form involves a necessity of legitimacy for the students in shared apartments. In both respects one has to consider the strategies for coping as well as problem solving. The need for legitimacy may be illustrated as an ideal typical contrast between these two types of “fraternity” and “shared apartment”:

Fraternity	Shared apartment
Relatively high degree of institutionalization	Relatively low degree of institutionalization
High degree of commitment (“honor”)	Low degree of commitment (“functionality”)
Trans-generational life form	Group of peers
Hierarchical (“ <i>Alte Herren</i> ,” “ <i>Burschen</i> ,” “ <i>Füchse</i> ”)	Egalitarian
For the whole duration of studies	Temporary (change between shared apartments typical)
Network (e.g., concerning careers)	No networking context
Type: life alliance	Type: temporary community life (pragmatic arrangements)

In the single case analysis (steps 1 and 2) carried out with regard to the research question, different types of patterns of problem-solving and coping were identifiable: (a) a first type undergoes a process of conversion when entering a fraternity. While the student re-organizes his way of living (“a new life”), the frat serves as a substitute family with all indications of an over-identification with

this institution, leading to a life crisis when members are strongly criticised (and have to fear punishment). This type could be called “the censured child”. (b) A second type de-dramatizes the institutional order and accentuates the potential of design for the members of the fraternity. In its consequences, this de-institutionalisation leads to a radical subjectification (for example of the concept of “honor”) and therefore to a re-interpretation of its obligating character. (c) For a third type, the difference between “life alliance” and “shared apartment” disappears by the equation of frat membership and association of friendship. Here, the institutional character is counteracted by an analogy with friendship understood as private, voluntary and based on diffuse obligations. (d) A fourth type reacts by referring to everyday life. Here, fraternity life is only a special challenge ‘life in general’ confronts one with. Therefore, this type is highly unspecific. In this mode of distancing, a pragmatic ‘sporting’ attitude and a ‘pride’ in confronting challenges prevails – “the sportsman.”

During the third step of this analysis, that is the external contrasting of types, an institutional solution for the problem of action could be identified for two types (a and c), the other types could be described as an ‘individual’ coping form (b and d) for this problem—a problem which could not be taken to be present in the subject’s consciousness.

With the identification of the case related (internal) typological densification as well as with the adjoining (external) contrast, four forms of coping with a specific social action (entering a fraternity) and its ‘objective’ problem (reducing the tension between life alliance and shared apartment) could be reconstructed, enabling the structural explication of the phenomenon in question (step 4). A pragmatic research approach was taken whereby the specific potentiality of a hermeneutically operating sociology is documented: its research interest in uncovering the latent structures of sense, i.e., structures hidden for the actor. However, this approach does claim a final analysis only until further notice, since there may be more solutions than the four types identified.

The use of the four step procedure introduced at the beginning of this section for analyzing the empirical data just presented yields a number of results: following the first two steps, the material allows us to identify four types, i.e., typological densifications of case-specific realized (subjective) solutions of how students cope with a housing arrangement in relation to maintaining their individuality, on the one side, and developing a communal identification (cf. “the censored child” and “the sportsman”), on the other. Furthermore, the analysis, in its third step, generates ‘objective’ solutions to cope with the tension between striving for individuality and the quest for communal integration: the variants of over-identification and the distancing dissolution have been identified as typical patterns of coping between the pole types. Finally, in the fourth and last step the ‘objective’ structural problem of the ambivalence of linking “life alliances” with “shared apartments” is identifiable beyond the self-perception of the actors involved who in their subjective understanding of this situation identify an analogy.

The presented typification of the case structures helps us to understand the kind of hermeneutical tradition this type of interpretive sociology belongs to in two

ways: firstly, it is more than descriptive and goes beyond documenting first order types. Secondly, the typological densifications are formulated in reference to the everyday repertoire of interpretation (the “censored child”, “the sportsman”) and are therefore providing the plausibility of the interpretation. In other words, they meet Schutz’s criterion of linking scientific interpretations back to the horizon of everyday interpretations. It has to be seen as one dimension by which interpretive sociology documents its roots in socio-cultural life-world experience, i.e., to the lived experience of people in general.

5 Final Discussion

The two sections above tried to show the methodologically reflected circle central for a research strategy within the tradition of Interpretive Sociology and to demonstrate its fruitfulness with reference to an empirical case study. The findings supply starting points for a concluding critical discussion of one-sided readings of and pragmatic alignments with the approaches of Weber, Schutz, and Oevermann. These have been discussed before as three positions within the highly pluralized field of Interpretive sociology, superficially representing three ways of handling the dialectic entanglement of subjective and social (intersubjective) processes of sense-constitution.

5.1 *Against a Subjectivist Reading of Weber*

Besides Weber’s rejection of collective terms (see [Weber 1968](#): 13f.), which in my opinion is a posture shared by Schutz ([Endress 2006a](#): 32), Weber’s emphasis on the orientation of Interpretive Sociology towards the “subjectively meant sense” is especially relevant here.

Against an excessively exclusive interpretation of Weber’s sociology, it must be acknowledged that Weber had to deal with objective contexts and orders of sense throughout his historical-sociological studies.²² Hence, a one-sided predefinition of Weber’s sociology as exclusively “methodological individualism” is simply an abbreviation. A mere positioning in this tradition fails to do justice to the complex profile of Weber’s sociology, as it is led too exclusively by the exposition of the “fundamental terms of sociology” in “Economy and Society” and does not recognize sufficiently the implications regarding social relations, intersubjectively shared bases of definition for social action, social shapes, and legitimate orders (see [Endress 2006a](#): 23f., 37f., 42f.). Weber—like Schutz—assumes a basic intersubjectivity of social structures and

²²See exemplary the ‘protestant ethics’, Weber ([2002](#)); for a revised interpretation cf. [Endress \(2008b\)](#): 199–207).

structures of sense, a constitutive context of references of sociality and subjectivity (see Endress 2006a: 69).²³ Those hints alone suffice to repudiate the accusation of subjectivism in Schutz's work (see Bohnsack 2003: 550). Respectively, Schutz's approach has to be appropriately termed intersubjectively informed methodological individualism (Endress 2006a: 32, 45, 69).

5.2 *Against a Subjectivist Reading of Schutz*²⁴

The critique of a supposed subjectivistic-intentionalistic abbreviated profile of Schutz's Interpretive Sociology is not only found in authors like Habermas (1981. II: 194ff.) or Giddens (1976: 31, 33), but in Oevermann and Bohnsack, too. Bohnsack, for example, argues that in Schutz's work and in those of his successors "second-order" constructions remain "descriptive" and hence "uncritical towards the common sense" (Bohnsack 2003: 559). Because of this, Bohnsack further argues (2003: 560) that the phenomenological sociology of Schutz and Berger/Luckmann gains "no access to the *praxis* of action" since it "remains to a large extent inside the matter of course of the common sense," unable to reconstruct the implicit knowledge of the "milieu-specific knowledge of orientation" (ibid. 562). Such a critique may, however, only address certain alignments of Schutz's work in the context of different sociological hermeneutics.²⁵

Regarding this last critique, we already mentioned that for Schutz, the elemental dissociation of the object of research was obvious (and by this a certain closeness to Mannheim's highlighting of a process of dissociation remains necessary for the social scientist). Moreover, it was evident to Schutz, too, that the

²³Breuer (2006: 8) emphasizes by referring to recent contributions (see Endress 2006b; Greshoff 2006) that "Weber's Sociology also includes other dimensions beyond the subjectively meant sense" and "the actions of the concerned persons": the universe of 'social relationships' (1968: 26ff., 40ff.) which are grounded on intersubjective (mutual) dispositions and should be understood as self-contained structures; the sphere of 'legitimate systems' (1968: 31ff.) which are built upon 'trans-subjective' or even objective dispositions and lastly also the whole aggregate of non-intended, 'trans-intentional' consequences of action.

²⁴In this context, the converse critique of a virtually latent objectivism in Schutz and Berger/Luckmann has been ignored because of the special meaning of the processes of typification, see Hahn (1994: 21, 108f., 162, 193ff., 356f.). Giddens' accusation of determinism concerning Berger/Luckmann goes in a comparable direction (1976: 96 connected to 171: note 6).

²⁵See, for example, Kurt (2004) who promotes a subjectivistic-intentionalistic reduction of Interpretive Sociology adhering to Weber in the tradition of social phenomenology in an almost exemplary way. This positioning orients itself towards the goal formulated by Soeffner, according to whom the object of discussion is the "interpretation and understanding of the singular in respect to its typical and typifiable relations to general structures" (1989: 7ff., 66ff., 98ff.; also: 1991a). Lastly, this results in a surprising proximity of subjective, socially scientific hermeneutics and "objectivistic" as well as "epistemological" (methodological) positions like, e.g., in Emilio Betti, who, in contrast to Gadamer, sees understanding as a "recognition and reconstruction of sense" as originally intended by the author (Betti 1962: 11ff., 27f.).

social world is not produced by intentional consciousness (as Giddens (1976: 31) obviously implies in his hypothesis). This insight is the reason for the change of perspective following the second chapter of *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (2004a: 219f.). The fact that Schutz directs his analytical interest at the ‘subjective’ side of social reality is due to his preference for a definite research direction; he regularly analyzes the conditions of action, seldom their (intended or non-intended) consequences (with Giddens 1976: 31f.). Therefore, what is often identified as a lack in Schutz’s analysis does not necessarily imply conceptual or analytical deficits; it is rather caused by a prioritization in his analytical interest. Schutz sticks quite closely to the classical task of Interpretive Sociology, stating that it “primarily has to analyze the description of the interpretation and generation of sense, carried out by those living in the social world” (2004a: 438). We should emphasize, however, that Schutz says “primarily”, he did not write “exclusively”! This, he states, is because “beyond that [...] Interpretive Sociology wants to [...] get to the cultural objects which constitute themselves in the processes of generation and interpretation of sense in the social world, and ‘understand’ those cultural objects by inquiring back into their constituting sense” (ibid.). This second genetic task of Interpretive Sociology indicates the ‘objectivity’ of the social world being constituted through the effects of reciprocal relations. This objectivity is documented on the level of “imposed relevances” for social action (Schutz 2004b).

Extending this argument, it may be said, that in two further prominent variants of interpretative sociologies (both suspicious for their subjectivism, too)—in “symbolic interactionism” as well as in “grounded theory”—the subjectively meant sense (or the intentions) of the actors plays a primary or even constitutive part for the understanding of the action or interaction process. And, at least for Strauss, the work of Schutz was of crucial importance. In “symbolic interactionism” (mediated via Mead 1987), this orientation is marked by the secondary relevance of the “I,” as well as by the importance of the “generalized other”. In “grounded theory” the basic figures of “interaction patterns,” the “trajectories”, as more or less coordinated processes of the actions of multiple subjects, as well as the phenomenon of group participation, may be mentioned (Strauss 1997: 46ff., 150ff.; Soeffner 1991b: 10ff.).

5.3 Against an Objectivistically Sharpened Critique of “Objective Hermeneutics”

“Objective hermeneutics” makes the reconstruction of the aforementioned ‘objectivity’ its main research goal. Following “objective hermeneutics,” the “methods of understanding, action-theory based sociology [...] cannot consist in usual reproducing-hermeneutics and its central category of subjectively meant sense,” but needs to be founded “in a [...] type of reconstruction of objective sense” (Oevermann

1993: 108).²⁶ We already dealt with the first objection through our recourse to the founders of Interpretive Sociology Weber and Schutz. Regarding the plea for a reconstruction of ‘objective sense’ we may still ask: why is this plea made and which form should this plea take on in research?

What does the recourse to the “reality of objective or latent structures of sense, constituted by texts and its generating rules” mean? What does it mean “to determine” the sense of an “act in an objective way by valid rules of generating sense” (Oevermann 1993: 112f.)? The critique of “objective hermeneutics” refers to those positionings: either the concept of “latent structures of sense” or the concept of “rule” is criticized. This critique finally culminates in the accusation that “objective hermeneutics” are some kind of metaphysics (e.g. Reichertz 1988, 1994; Soeffner and Reichertz 2004: [6]). Does this critique remain?

Oevermann’s reference to rules, types of rules, and systems of rules (e.g. 1980: 23, 1986: 26) necessarily leads us to the question of what is meant by “rule”—the central problem. Oevermann (like Habermas) makes use of a ‘hard’ notion of rule, referring to criteria of clear identification as well as the fundamental possibility of justification. But if one starts with the notion that rules are always realized *in praxi* (context of usage), the following consideration will be plausible: actors rarely apply rules directly, but they have typical dispositions—their socio-historical *apriori*, if you like. Those dispositions enable repetitions of action (see Schutz’s idealisation of the “I can always again”) and, thus, make it possible that “the free action detaches itself [from the deciding subject] like an overripe fruit” (Schutz 2004a: 168, citing Bergson). Viewed in this light, it does not make sense to play dispositions (*habitus*) off against rules.

An enforced weighting of situational constellations over justification may open “objective hermeneutics” productively for contexts of action and processes of structuring (temporality). This would historically absorb the downright uncompromising reference to “rules” and sensitize “objective hermeneutics” for the typological level of empirical research as an adequate level of generalisation of Interpretive Sociology. Such an aperture might additionally be supported by a further methodological consideration. Despite Oevermann’s multiple explanations of the methodological self-understanding of “objective hermeneutics,” one might still argue that an objective space of possibilities which is developed quasi-playfully by a group of interpreters via “thought-experimental variation of contexts” (Oevermann et al. 1979: 417f.) may necessarily only be hypothetically valid. That is because such a claim for

²⁶The German original reads as follows: “Die Methoden einer sinnverstehenden handlungstheoretischen Soziologie können nicht in der üblichen Nachvollzugs-Hermeneutik mit der zentralen Kategorie des ‘subjektiv gemeinten Sinns’ bestehen, sie müssen in einem der objektiven Hermeneutik entsprechenden Typ der Rekonstruktion von objektivem Sinn fundiert sein”. From my point of view, the hermeneutics of the sociology of knowledge does not do justice to this when it is argued that “the sociology of knowledge [...] has to work historically reconstructive [...] with the single aim to establish the mechanisms of choice which are developed by the actors to reach certain goals” (Soeffner and Reichertz 2004: [24]). In my opinion, the same is also applicable when this position is argued: “The subject of the sociology of knowledge is societal knowledge ... as far as it is expressed by subjects and can be reconstructed” (ibid. [28]).

validity is firstly made at a given point in time and secondly framed by a specific group constellation. The reference to an “assumed system of rules” (Oevermann et al. 1980: 23) is contingent in its temporal as well as in its social (hence factual) dimensions.²⁷ And this might be valid especially for constellations of urged social change by which Sociology tends to characterize the present. Yet, especially under such conditions, “objective hermeneutics” might be conceived as a theory, methodology, and method that tries to ascertain what Luckmann, among others, called a “socio-historical *apriori*”: a trial to reconstruct the elements or aspects of systems of order or systems of sense; a reconstruction based on existing empirical (textual) data in which a “symbolic world of sense” is sedimented, out of which this data descends and by which its meaning is given.

These indications also provide the opportunity to argue against those critiques orientated to what they call the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Talking about a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” Ricœur (1974: 99, 148, 331) aims at an exposition of the hermeneutical venture rooted in Schleiermacher, who considered misunderstandings to be constitutive for any hermeneutics. Foucault makes the same argument when, following Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, he addresses the infinity and incompleteness of all interpretation and highlights the insult to the human mind that the structural infinity of perspectivalism represents (Foucault 1967: 730, 736). Since Foucault not only neglects Schleiermacher as a reference but retains a peculiar negativism that prevents him from seeing the optionality and potentiality of this infinity, we have to object to his account. Moreover, critiques of “objective hermeneutics” arguing in this tradition (e.g. Bohnsack 2003: 554ff.) fail because they equate its concern with Habermas’s insistence on supplementing hermeneutics with a critique of ideology. Instead, with his “hermeneutics of suspicion”, Ricœur wanted to identify a strategy of interpretation which not only suspects any immediate understanding of sense, but also attributes it to an unconscious will to power. Hence, Ricœur (1974: 18, 148ff.) shows no interest in Schleiermacher, but like Foucault (1967) focuses on Nietzsche (“will of power”), Freud (unconscious drives), and Marx (interests of classes) as representatives of a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” This focus, however, misses the specificity of “objective hermeneutics,” which seeks to position itself beyond both “Critical Theory” and “hermeneutics of depth.” This is also the reason why “objective hermeneutics” distances itself from the conclusions drawn by Habermas in his critique of Gadamer. In this critique every process of passing down from generation to generation (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*) is regarded as a result of “domination” and “force.” This is the reason why “maturity”, not “consent”, should function as the *telos* of understanding and why an appropriate “emancipatory epistemological interest,” i.e. hermeneutics in Gadamer’s sense, has to be supplemented by a critique of ideology (Habermas 1971a, b). This critique is definitely not the problem of “objective hermeneutics,” however, thus, the (honorable) title of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” does not apply.

²⁷A critique however that is, following to the already mentioned arguments, not adequate to devalue this method of interpretation in toto, yet this seems to be Bohnsack’s opinion (2003: 555, 558).

5.4 *Comparative Considerations*

The previous considerations may be summed up as follows: there is a triad of knowledge forms at work in the inner core of the discussed variants of Interpretive Sociology or qualitative social research methods:

- (a) Documentary interpretation aims at an “a-theoretical,” “conjunctive knowledge” that is to be reconstructed in order to analyze the process of “an acted-out and experienced construction” of reality (Bohnsack 2003: 562). This reconstruction centers around the “orienting frame” of actors, i.e. on “what” they say and “how” they say it (ibid. 563).²⁸
- (b) The different variants of life-world analysis originating from Schutz primarily orient themselves towards a descriptive, typologically condensed explicit knowledge of acting in order to narratively depict the historical concretion of the cases via a reconstruction of motives, attitudes, and self interpretations.
- (c) “Objective hermeneutics”, conversely, aims at the explication of knowledge of rules, particularly, on the designation of case constitutive universal rules. But, and this is essential for the discussion here, the case has rules, too, which help to typically cope with the dialectics between the force to decide and the obligation to predicate. To reconstruct this case specificity as “case typical” rules deviating from ‘universal’ rules serves to identify the concrete life praxis. Finally, “Objective hermeneutics” is concerned with the definition of principles of selection. Sequential analysis wants to show that a case “at every point in the sequence neglects and does not realize the principally open possibilities of the other in a characteristic, recognisable and predictable way” (Oevermann 1991: 280). The context of objectively reconstructable possibilities of action and the action actually chosen both form the center of the analytical interest of “objective hermeneutics” (see Hildenbrand 2004: 188) in a specific case typical way.²⁹

Considering the difference of intended and non-intended effects of action, we may illustrate the different analytical foci of life-world theory and “objective hermeneutics” as follows: whereas hermeneutics as informed by the sociology of knowledge aims at the reconstruction of intended effects of action, “objective hermeneutics” enquires into the genesis of non-intended effects of action by identifying the objectively possible horizons of sense (latent sense structures) (see Matthiesen 1994: 85f.). It is made clear, too, that the focus on genetic reconstruction might be the

²⁸Bohnsack includes Mannheim’s concept of social bearings and the focus on socialization of historical phenomena in his analysis here (see 2003: 562).

²⁹In these three forms of knowledge, the different structures of meaning can be specifically identified; thus, the documentary interpretation aims at the uncovering of intersubjective and ‘transsubjective’ structures of meaning, the phenomenologically oriented analysis of the life-world at the identification of subjective-intersubjective structures of meaning and objective hermeneutics at the analysis of subjective-trans-subjective structures of meaning.

primary task of “objective hermeneutics” compared to life-world theory.³⁰ And we may consider here (see Endress 2006b: 42f.) that the different accentuations in research pragmatics evolve from different contexts: approaches following Schutz’s operative method descend out of a theoretical context grounded in intentionality, the competence of actors, as well as in the analytical difference of acting out and action, while “objective hermeneutics” emerged out of contexts of empirical research, motivated by the “experience of a structural force, canalizing processes of education” (Matthiesen 1994: 89).

6 Historical Perspective

Viewed historically, the analyzed difference between “objective hermeneutics” and approaches of social research following Schutz’s interest in the subjectively meant sense reproduces the difference between hermeneutics following Schleiermacher on the one hand, and on the other hand the hermeneutics of Georg Friedrich Meier in his “Attempt at a General Art of Interpretation” of 1757 (Meier 1996). The latter relies on the principle of “hermeneutical equity (*aequitas hermeneutica*)” which declares what the author wanted to say to be the scale of interpretation. Viewed against this background, Meier’s hermeneutics appears as the precursor to similar considerations on the “anticipation of perfection” or a “principle of charity” elaborated by Gadamer, Quine, or Davidson.

On the contrary, Schleiermacher’s pragmatic orientation towards “speech” can be comprehended as the intersection of (objective-general) language and (subjective-individual) speaker. It is only in this mutuality of “grammatical” and “technical-psychological” interpretation that understanding—in the sense of an open (and therefore principally infinite) spiral movement—might be realised in order to “understand the speech equally as well as its author, finally even better than him” (cf. Schleiermacher 1977: 94, 104, 325, and 1985: 1308).³¹ Schleiermacher argues with a “stricter praxis” of hermeneutics by which “misunderstanding will resolve itself and understanding has to be wanted and sought for at every point” (1977: 92).

The difference between Meier’s primacy of comprehensibility and Schleiermacher’s priority of misunderstanding (resp. incomprehensibility) is identified as the historical origin of the aforementioned controversies concerning the form of Interpretive Sociology. Because Schleiermacher makes misunderstanding the

³⁰See in contrast to this the Grounded Theory which cannot be discussed here because of pragmatic reasons (for example Hildenbrand 2004: 178).

³¹Insofar as Schleiermacher sees general hermeneutics as having the double duty of grammatical as well as technical psychological interpretation and thus with handling the relation between the outside-totally of language use inside a language community on the one hand and the proof of an individual soul as an expression of the inner on the other hand. Oevermann’s objective hermeneutics thus follows a remarkable tradition. This is particularly correct because a dialectical understanding is seen as constitutive for a mutual relation of postulates for Schleiermacher as well.

sword of Damocles above the head of anybody working hermeneutically, every understanding has to start methodologically: “The business of hermeneutics has to start well before understanding gets uncertain—i. e., at the very beginning of every attempt to understand speech, because understanding usually gets uncertain insofar it is neglected before” (1985: 1272). This reflection should be read as a plea not to wait for the crisis but to anticipate it reflexively in the process of understanding. Therefore a sufficient reflexive type of Interpretive Sociology following the works of Weber and Schutz (see Endress 2008a) does not fall behind Schleiermacher’s insight that “misunderstanding will never resolve itself completely” (1977: 328).

Following this postulate, the foregoing analysis understands itself as self-reflective and historical. Yet, it does not aspire to this in the trivial sense of the structural incompleteness and tentativeness of any individual authorship, but rather in a systematic sense that remains conscious of the unavoidable infinity of scientific debates (Dilthey already spoke of an “infinite task” of understanding), whose renunciation would amount to an act of arbitrariness. Yet, this methodological status should by no means be understood to undermine its own claim of credit. Against the dominance of the temporal dimension of the past in Gadamer’s (1960) figure of a historically effective consciousness, the present has to be rehabilitated systematically—in the sense of a primacy of the present towards the past, both in a hermeneutical and a pragmatic respect. To understand the historically sedimented inventory of meaning, which surpasses a pointillist understanding of the present, in a factually adequate way means to identify the implicit structures of sense in a methodologically controlled way—not only regarding the enunciations of an author in an interview, but likewise regarding those of the observing, interpreting, and understanding sociologist.

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