

Agency at Work: A Dynamic Interpretive Approach to the Study of Action

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Roy's 1950s paper "Banana Time" is used as the basis for an exploration of the nature and relationship of agency and action. Roy's activity in playing his "game of work" is shown to be a feature of individual conduct that, despite possessing subjective meaning, is largely neglected by contemporary sociologists, mainly because of its covert character. What an examination of this aspect of his conduct suggests is the need to revise the conventional observational approach to the definition of the unit act by recognising that there may well be an additional actor's covert definition sitting within the accepted social definition and that it is therefore necessary to use the criterion of attentionality to identify the unit act. An analysis of Roy's game of work also helps to shed light on the possible relationship between action and agency, revealing that while the power of agency enables individuals to act, it is also frequently necessary for individuals to act in order to maintain or restore their power of agency. Finally, a consideration of the function fulfilled by Roy's game of work shows that a behaviourist-style stimulus-response analysis of conduct is not at odds either with voluntarism or the adoption of the actor's standpoint. This is because Roy demonstrates how actors are themselves lay behaviourists, fully aware of how they need to manipulate stimuli in order to produce desired responses in themselves.

Keywords: Agency; Definition of Action; Covert Action; Dynamic Interpretivism

Introduction

In 1959 David Roy published an article in the journal *Human Organization* entitled "Banana Time": Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction" that has subsequently come to acquire the status of a classic in the field of industrial sociology (Roy, 1959). Although the focus of the article was on the social and interactive functions performed by a ritual enacted by a group of workers (this features the contents of a lunch box, hence the significance of the title) it also includes an intriguing account of how Roy, who enrolled as a worker in order to conduct his research through participatory observation, struggled to adapt to the manual role allotted to him. The job in question was that of a clicker and involved operating a machine that used steel dies to punch out pieces of leather or plastic. The work was extremely simple and very repetitive with the result that the tedium of the twelve-hour job quickly led Roy to experience "the beast of monotony", leading to boredom and fatigue¹. These feelings were so acute that he considered abandoning the job and with it his projected programme of research. That he didn't in the end do so was because he discovered a way of coping with the intrinsic boredom of the task allotted to him by turning his actions into what he called his game of work. This involved alternating the colours of the items worked together with cleaning the die-head of the machine according to a set of rules

¹Roy described his work situation as "standing all day in one spot beside three old codgers in a dingy room looking out through barred windows at the bare walls of a brick warehouse, leg movements restricted to the shifting of body weight from one foot to the other, hand and arm movements confined, for the most part, to a simple repetitive sequence of place the die, punch the clicker, place the die, punch the clicker, and intellectual activity reduced to computing the hours to quitting time" (1959: p. 160).

that he invented. The effect of this was to invest the extremely simple movements that constituted the task in hand with a distinct meaning thereby providing for himself a system of rewards (albeit, as he admits, fairly minimal) linked to the mini-goals so created. Roy himself describes the game of work he created in this way as serving to create a "sequence of short-range production goals with achievement rewards in the form of activity change" (1959: p. 161). The effect of this was that instead of being confronted by a seemingly endless series of undifferentiated "happenings" Roy managed to create meaningful experiences for himself, and in this way he found that he could sustain an activity which previously he had experienced as so excruciatingly boring, and consequently tiring, that he had contemplated handing in his notice and abandoning the research. This account of Roy's experiences while undertaking research would appear at first glance to have no particular significance for sociology, except perhaps to serve as a warning of the difficulties that can be encountered when engaged in participatory observation. It is certainly not immediately obvious how a consideration of his experience might lead to significant insights into the nature of action and agency let alone the development of a novel perspective for their study. However these are precisely the claims that will be advanced here.

Action at Work

The first point of note about the events described by Roy is that they would not normally be recognised as constituting a phenomenon worthy of sociological investigation. Since his game of work is not part of an on-going social interaction, oriented towards others or indeed visible to others, it would not count as social action as this term is generally understood. But

then it is also unlikely to be recognised as action by those perspectives, currently popular in the discipline, that do focus on individual, non-interactive conduct, such as rational choice or rational action theory. For characteristically these perspectives only employ abstract models of human behaviour, taking little interest in the real subjective experience of actors, whilst also focusing exclusively on decision-taking. Hence, while such perspectives might be applied to an understanding of why Roy decided to take the job of clipper in the first place (and possibly even, had he been forced to abandon it, why he had done so), how he managed to handle the strains and stresses of the job itself would not be subject to investigation².

Yet there would seem to be no good reason for excluding what Roy recounts doing in his game of work from the subject matter of the discipline. For it does fall into the category of action as traditionally defined and understood. That is to say it meets Weber's requirement of being "*human behaviour to which the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning*" (1964: p. 88), while the fact that his behaviour is solitary in nature and neither oriented to others or observed by them would not appear to be a problem given that Weber's most famous example of action—that of the woodcutter chopping wood—is also an instance of an individual acting alone and presumably unobserved. Furthermore the fact that the conduct he describes was apparently covert, or at least not actually noticeable to others, would also not seem to be a problem given that, as Weber also asserts, action may be "*either overt or purely inward or subjective*" (1964: p. 88). One is thus left to wonder why, in this case, the kind of experience Roy recounts is typically not the subject of sociological attention. But then, despite Weber's remark, it is actually the case that almost none of the theoretical traditions that flourish in contemporary sociology concern themselves with covert conduct, focusing exclusively on that portion of an individual's behaviour which is overt and hence observable to others³. To what extent sociologists should be censured for this omission is debatable given that Weber himself appears to overlook the significance of his own observation when illustrating his interpretive method as he fails to provide any real examples of covert actions; that is ones resembling that provided by Roy⁴, apparently making the mistake of assuming that the concept covered no more than the deliberate absence of overt action⁵.

But then what is especially interesting about the behaviour Roy describes is that it is neither a simple example of overt or of covert action but rather a combination of the two, and hence it is a surprise to realise that Weber seems to have made the assumption—in which he was followed by Schutz (1967) among others - that all actions could be divided into the two simple categories of overt and covert rather than considering

the very real possibility that they might be a combination of the two. Now although Roy does not make it clear in his account to what extent it would be apparent to the casual observer that his actions as a clicker-operator followed his own distinctly patterned sequence, he does observe that he subsequently discovered that many of his fellow-workers employed similar strategies to his own game of work, something that he would presumably have discovered on his first day had this been an easily observable feature of their conduct. So here we have an example of a genuine action (or sequence of actions) which are partly overt in so far as Roy's fellow-workers, not to mention his supervisor, can clearly see that he is operating a clicker machine, whilst also being partly covert in the form of his game of work, a combination that presents special difficulties as long as one sticks to the conventional sociological approach to the identification of action⁶.

Identifying Action

A long-standing and stubborn problem at the heart of action theory has been that of how to successfully identify the unit act and in identifying it describe it correctly. Weber himself assumed that this could be achieved by a process of "*direct observational understanding*" (1964: p. 95) an assumption that is still prevalent in sociology today. And yet, as Schutz has observed, only the actor is really in a position to give an accurate description of what he or she could be said to be "doing" (1973: p. 22). Certainly if we applied Weber's famous formula to Roy's conduct we would be forced to conclude that he was "operating a clicker machine" much as Weber confidently declared that the woodcutter was "chopping wood" (an assertion that has a suspiciously tautological ring to it). But we know from Roy himself that this is an inadequate or at least incomplete description of what he was doing. Where therefore a consideration of Roy's experience appears to lead is to a reconsideration of the difficult problem of how to successfully identify and describe action. Clearly the danger with the conventional approach is the error of assuming that an individual's action consists of merely that portion which is overt and observable. But of course not only may this not be equivalent to all that an individual is "doing" it may not even be the portion that contains "subjective meaning", being performed habitually, as is currently the case for example with my typing of this article; for it is the covert portion—my thinking about what it is that I am typing—that represents the section of my conduct that really does possess "subjective meaning". As long therefore as sociologists consider it important to study action, as opposed that is to mere behaviour, there will always be a crucial issue that needs to be decided: notably, which portion of an individ-

²In principal phenomenological sociology, given its derivation from a philosophical tradition that focused on the description of experiences, ought to be a theoretical perspective that could indeed regard Roy's game of work as a phenomenon worthy of study. In reality however this strand of theorising, as it has influenced sociology, has tended to focus on shared knowledge and experience (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

³The decision-making that comprises the basic subject matter of rational action theory could be said to be largely covert in character since it presumably consists of mental processes. However, as noted, this theoretical perspective does not study real phenomena as such choosing to work with models of human action.

⁴As suggested below Weber could be said to supply real examples of covert action in what might be called his applied work, such as *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, even if he doesn't do this in his brief methodological statement.

⁵Schutz also observes that action may be covert and he gives the example of someone attempting to solve a scientific problem mentally. However he seems to forget about this example in his subsequent discussion where he follows Weber's lead in assuming that covert action equals inaction (1973: p. xxxiv and 20).

⁶In fact most true actions are likely to be partly covert in the manner of Roy's game. That is to say some crucial part of the action is likely to be occurring intra-subjectively in the form of cognitions, feelings or imaginings that are not apparent to an observer. One of the examples that Weber gives to illustrate understanding an action in terms of motive illustrates this point. He writes that we can understand the action of an individual "writ[ing] down the proposition twice two equals four" in the course of "balancing a ledger" (1964: p. 95). But of course only part of the relevant action here is overt: the actual writing in the ledger. The calculation itself is covert, since it occurs in the accountant's mind, not on the paper in front of him.

ual's conduct it is that is actually possessed of subjective meaning.

But then this does raise the question of quite how the term "subjective meaning" itself should be interpreted given its key role in serving to distinguish action from behaviour. Conventionally this is understood to refer to the intentions (or possibly goals or motives) that are presumed to be manifest in the action in question, and indeed it is usually the nature of the intention that serves to define the action, as in the claim that the woodcutter's action consists of "chopping wood". However, when we turn to consider Roy's activity we see that there are overlapping intentions underlying his conduct. His initial decision to take the job of a clipper was because of his intention to engage in participatory observation. On the other hand his game of work was undertaken with the intention of combating boredom and fatigue, while looking even more closely at his behaviour one could say that any one discrete action Roy performs is undertaken with the intention of completing the current game. Clearly one crucial difficulty with using intentionality as the principal means of defining action is that it is unclear where precisely the parameters should be drawn, given that conduct commonly embodies a variety of what might be considered overlapping intentions, with the consequence that it becomes difficult to know precisely how the action should be defined. Put succinctly one can say that a single act many embody many intentions, just as a single intention may guide many different actions. Hence in this case one could describe Roy's actions as a) playing the game of work; b) working as a clicker; c) undertaking participant observation⁷.

Yet a consideration of Roy's case can help resolve the problem of discriminating between multiple intentions. For although Roy is clearly doing (or performing) the job of a clicker, something he has undertaken in order to be in a position to engage in participatory observation, it would be more accurate to say that he is "playing his game of work" for that is what he is actually attending to. Hence attentionality can provide the key to discriminating between intentions and therefore between alternative descriptions of action. What is more, employing attentionality in this way has the considerable advantage of facilitating the process of distinguishing between action—viewed as containing subjective meaning in the sense of being "meaningfully oriented" (Weber, 1964: p. 116)—from habitual conduct. For while these cannot be distinguished in terms of intentionality (most habitual conduct manifests intention), they can be distinguished in terms of attentionality, since to attend to some aspect of one's conduct (that is to perform it "attentively") is by definition to imbue it with meaning, while to act inattentively is to act "without giving any thought to what one is doing". At the same time attention is a faculty that is limited by definition (it is difficult to "attend to" more than one thing at a time), whilst

there are no limits to the number of intentions that can be subsumed by any action or programme of actions. Consequently what Roy's example shows is that, succinctly expressed, we can say that what someone is "doing" at any one time is what they are "attending to"⁸. This does not mean of course that the actor is unaware of the other intentions that are also guiding, or perhaps one should say framing, the action in question. Hence a more precise definition of action would also include these. Thus, in Roy's case we could say that his action consisted of "*playing the game of work so that he could continue to perform the role of working as a clicker*"; or even "*playing the game of work so that he could continue to perform the role of working as a clicker in order that he could carry out his research*"; this particular nesting formulation of the nature of action being a more truthful manner of describing the conduct of actors than the more conventional, single-intention style definitions.

Essentially the problem of defining and delineating action comes down to the issue of how the continuing flow of human conduct is to be broken up into meaningful units, and there would seem to be only two feasible ways of doing this. The one—which currently dominates in the discipline—is to rely on situational or conventional institutional guidance in order to identify actions, and it is by employing this approach that it is possible to identify given classes of actions, such as greetings for example, or specific tasks, such as Roy's "working as a clicker". But the drawback with this approach is that it may not correspond to that which possesses subjective meaning for the actor concerned. This is not to say that the actor does not recognise that her activity has this meaning (that is to say has a conventional or socially agreed name or denotation), but that, when viewed from the actor's perspective, it lacks "meaningfulness". And the only way to ensure that conduct is divided up in a manner that accounts for this dimension is to employ the criterion of attention. It is however important to note that such a position implies recognition of the fact that which sections of an actor's conduct can be judged to constitute action and which behaviour (setting aside involuntary respondent behaviours) may change over time as attention is switched between different aspects of an actor's overall "doings"⁹.

Agency at Work

Having noted how Roy's conduct poses questions for the conventional approach to defining action it is time to observe that his game of work is actually more intimately related to the issue of agency than action per se. Or at least it is to that particular conception of agency that defines it as "*the capacity for willed (voluntary) action*" (Marshall, 1994: p. 7) or "*the socioculturally mediated capacity to act*" (Ahearn, 2001: p. 112) or what Campbell (2009) refers to as type 1 agency. For one of the most interesting features of Roy's game of work is the reason why he invented it in the first place, which was in order to maintain his power of agency; that is to say, his ability to initiate and carry through a course of action. This observation points to a crucial feature of human conduct that sociologists rarely acknowledge: the fact that action can fail. This basic fact of life is ignored by virtually all forms of action theory, with the actor's ability to perform actions treated as a taken-for-granted premise; for, as Stephen Fuchs notes, "*theorists assume that persons 'have agency'*" (2001: p. 27). So it is important to remember that actors routinely embark on programmes of action—as Roy did when he signed on as a clicker—only to find

⁷Schutz makes this point arguing that Weber grossly oversimplified the task of eliciting the intended meaning of an act given that this changes over time. "One cannot... speak simply of the intended meaning attached to an action... to become fully meaningful, it requires a date index specifying the moment of the meaning-interpretation" (1967: p. 65).

⁸It may be of course that an individual is not "acting" at all. That is to say they may not be 'attending to' anything (for example if they are day-dreaming or simply on auto-pilot), even though they can still be seen to be "behaving".

⁹It is also important to realize that which sections of an individual's conduct constitute action and which behaviour also change over time biographically, processes normally referred to under such headings as "learning" or "habitation".

that they are struggling to carry them out, given that there are inherent inescapable limits to any actor's power of agency (Campbell, 2011). To that extent action is necessarily a contingent phenomenon, dependent for its accomplishment on the presence of prerequisites, the nature of which need to be examined. It is an interesting observation on the state of contemporary sociology that the ability of individuals to interact successfully is not take-for-granted but subject to a detailed and extensive programme of research; so why, one wonders, is their ability to act not subject to a similar programme?

Roy recognised after only a short period in his new job that he might have to abandon it because boredom and fatigue were sapping his will to carry on. Had he done so this would have amounted to a failure of agency. He therefore took steps to maintain, or repair, this faculty by inventing the game of work. This, as he said, had the effect of imbuing his actions with meaning, or perhaps more accurately with meaningfulness since they already had a formal meaning in the sense of being a link in the chain of actions that resulted in the creation of a manufactured product. What turning them into a game achieved was to relate them directly to his own system of needs, providing some personal satisfaction and hence the motivation to continue with his allotted task. What is of special interest about this example is that it illustrates the manner in which actors can use their ability to manipulate meaning to control their behaviour. As we can see in this instance the degree of freedom that individuals possess to use their meaning-manipulating skills to define their immediate environment is not necessarily at odds with the more formal social definitions of situations with which sociologists are familiar. In that respect Roy was not defining his situation differently from the way in which others defined it: he was still working as a clicker. He had merely constructed a purely personal action-related definition of his situation, one that could as it were sit inside his formal social situation. It is also important to note, in view of the prevailing tendency in sociology to judge all cultural phenomena to be not merely social but shared, that Roy's game was his own invention, and although no doubt he applied some highly general ideas about the nature of games in order to construct it, it still remained his game, one entirely invented by him.

This example is also revealing when considered from the perspective of the other interpretation given to the concept of agency, that which stresses its meaning as the "*capacity of individuals to act independently of structural constraints*" (Abercrombie et al., 1984: p. 6) or "*independently of the determining constraints of social structure*" (Jary & Jary, 1991: p. 10). Roy's conduct as a clipper was clearly 'constrained' by social structure in the form of the occupational role he occupied, set as it was within the formal institutional context of a factory workplace. And yet he managed to innovate in this context all the same, not merely renegotiating the meaning of the activity that he was required to undertake but actually re-arranging the order in which its individual actions were performed. In other words Roy succeeded in creating a space for himself, one in which he could be creative and express something of his personality, within the context of the highly structured role that he had no choice but to act out. No choice that is once he had committed himself to it. For of course the constraint that Roy experienced in this connection was self-imposed, having entered into it voluntarily. He was not, as some of his fellow workers may have been, effectively forced to work as a clipper in a factory by the need to earn a living. However, having made the decision to

adopt this role, his freedom to act was then powerfully constrained. In other words it was as a consequence of the manner in which he exercised his power of choice in the past that he subsequently experienced considerable constraint on his freedom to act in the present. This is a significant observation because it shows how agency is an essentially self-limiting faculty and that actors will always experience some constraint on their freedom as a direct consequence of their very exercise of that freedom. Indeed what Roy's experience in this respect demonstrates is the need for an adequate theory of action to go beyond simply focusing on how individuals exercise their ability to make choices, together with their reasons and motives for doing so, to include how they manage to accomplish actions once they have embarked on them. For it could be argued that for many people the central problem they face in their lives is less what choices to make than how to successfully accomplish those programmes of action to which they are already committed.

Agency in Action

The above discussion helps to shed light on what has long been recognised as something of a problem in sociology theory, namely the relationship between agency and action. If we use Roy's experience as a guide we can say that while it is necessary to possess the power of agency in order to be able to undertake actions it is also sometimes necessary for an individual to undertake actions with the express purpose of maintaining or restoring the power of agency. What is distinctive about this particular class of actions, which for convenience we might call agency management or control actions, is that they tend to take the form of creating goals or outcomes that in turn help to supply the motivation necessary to initiate or complete a programme of action, and as such the normal process of explanation is reversed. For conventionally one explains an action by seeking the goal (or sometimes the motive) that underlies it, as Weber does when he says that "*we understand the chopping of wood... if we know that the woodchopper is working for a wage or chopping a supply of firewood for his own use*" (1964: p. 95). But understanding agency management actions requires that one explains the goals actors have selected in terms of the action that they serve to maintain, as for example when Roy says that he "*created a sequence of short-range production goals*" (1959: p. 161) for himself by inventing his game of work. In other words agency management actions all have the same goal, which is to maintain or increase the power of agency. Hence in these cases one explains goals in terms of actions rather than vice versa.

But then understanding agency management or control actions also requires that one abandons the logical or cognitive bias that for so long has dominated the investigation of meaning in action theory. Traditionally sociologists have interpreted Weber's recommendation that one should understand actions by placing them in a more inclusive context of meaning as implying that they should be considered as if they were connected rationally, principally in a means-end manner, as in the quote given above concerning the woodcutter's actions. Yet in order to make sense of Roy's invention of the game of work contextual understanding requires the application not of a means-end framework but of a dynamic or behavioural one; specifically an appreciation of the role that actions can have as stimuli that produce a gratifying response. Indeed it is important to note

that there is no logical connection between Roy's game and his activity as a clicker (in the way that it is sometimes claimed that beliefs and values are logically connected with actions). The connection is a dynamic or behavioural one in which Roy's game has to be seen not as a means to an end but rather as an end in itself. That is to say as an autotelic activity, one performed for the intrinsic satisfaction it provides. Unfortunately the application of such a behavioural model has, from the very beginnings of action theory, been seen as at odds with both voluntarism and the adoption of the actor's frame of reference. And indeed Weber himself refers to understanding action that is a response to a stimulus as "*affectually determined and thus in a certain sense irrational*" (1964: p. 95, italics added). Yet it is clear from Roy's example that this is not necessarily the case, as in this instance a behavioural perspective is included in the subjective standpoint employed by the actor. Consequently in understanding the action in question as constituting a stimulus-response pattern one is not stepping outside the actor's frame of reference. This is because Roy reveals himself to be something of a lay behaviourist, knowing full well what kind of stimuli he needed to invent in order to produce the desired response in himself. Indeed it was because Roy understood how his behaviour was controlled by stimuli that he was able to exercise voluntary control over his actions. It follows from this example that sociologists are wrong to assume that a behaviourist-style analysis is at odds with an interpretivist and voluntaristic approach to the study of action. The reason they are not incompatible is because human beings are different from animals. For one thing they can use knowledge and foresight to re-arrange their environment so as to adjust the stimuli to which they are exposed. But then crucially humans do not so much respond to stimuli as respond to their meanings and because individuals have some control over these meanings it is possible for them to use this control to influence their responses, as Roy did in this case. The movements that he was required to undertake in order to fulfil his role as a clipper are the stimuli in question, together with the objects themselves—principally the pieces of plastic—that he was required to manipulate. By using his own capacity to create meaning to impose a pattern on these movements as well as inventing a set sequence in which the plastic pieces were processed Roy managed to change the nature of these stimuli and hence his own response to the activity. So we can see that Roy's actions in inventing the game of work followed first from his monitoring of his own behaviour, and his clear recognition of the various behavioural cues that indicated fatigue and boredom on his part, and then second, from his understanding of the nature of the stimuli he needed to create in order to alter his own behavioural condition in a manner that would produce a re-energised state.

It can be seen from this that there is no contradiction between an interpretive analysis of the meaning of an actor's conduct and a behavioural analysis in terms of cause and effect. To suggest, as some sociologists have done, that sociology should

be concerned with "*understanding action rather than observing behaviour*" (Silverman, 1970: p. 126) is to fail to recognise that actors are observers of their own behaviour and, as lay behaviourists, endeavour to control their environment, and hence the stimuli to which they are exposed, in order to control themselves. It is also to overlook the fact that while it may be true to suggest that a full-blooded behavioural perspective has no room for an interpretive analysis of meaning the reverse is not the case, if only because action is actually a form of behaviour¹⁰. But then given that what individuals do has always comprised not simply a combination of action and behaviour but an integrated pattern of conduct in which these two forms are intimately interlinked it was always mistaken to imagine that one could successfully be examined without reference to the other. The value of a dynamic interpretive approach to the study of human action therefore is that it involves recognising that actors regularly manipulate both stimuli and their meanings in order to control their conduct.

Objections

There are two possible objections that might be raised against the suggestion that a consideration of Roy's account of his experience as a clipper could form the basis for a revised approach to the study of action and agency. One is that the activity that he describes engaging in is relatively rare and hence not significant enough to warrant its use as a justification for a novel theoretical perspective, while the second is that the phenomenon concerned, although of interest, really belongs to the discipline of psychology rather than sociology. However, a little reflection reveals that neither of these really has much force. In the first place it is clear that Roy's experience was not in any way unique. Indeed as he notes he subsequently discovered that many of his fellow workers had devised similar, if not necessarily identical, strategies to his own game of work in order that they too might be able to perform their allotted roles successfully, suggesting that the phenomenon in question is not isolated or unusual but on the contrary commonplace. That is to say this form of behaviour is something that people have in common even if it is not something that they could necessarily be said to share. Indeed it would seem highly probable that agency control actions of this kind occur whenever and wherever individuals find that their ability to successfully initiate or accomplish actions is in doubt¹¹. Then of course there is the interesting question of the cultural resources available for actors to draw upon in order to re-define or re-negotiate both the meaning of their own actions and the stimuli they encounter in their environment. Where this material comes from and how it is employed in the processes of action accomplishment is clearly a matter of some interest to sociologists. But then what also suggests that this should not be regarded as by any means a purely psychological phenomenon is the fact that actors do not simply use their ability to manipulate meaning in order to accomplish action in small-scale or short-lived sequences of action. For the manipulation of meaning in order to sustain agency and hence the accomplishment of programmes of action can occur at any level, from the briefest of actions up to a complete programme for life. Weber himself supplies examples of the latter in the course of his discussion of the problems that Calvinists faced in their determination to stick to their exceptionally demanding regime of ascetic self-control. These efforts were, as he suggests, consistently undermined by doubts about

¹⁰To contrast action with behaviour is not to imply the necessity of employing contrasting descriptive schemes or paradigms (let alone incompatible epistemologies and methodologies); it is merely to refer to empirically differentiated forms of conduct.

¹¹This is not to say that such individualistic and covert or co-overt actions are the only means of combating threats to agency. Indeed the main thrust of Roy's article is his account of how his fellow-workers combated their experiences of boredom and monotony by developing their own interactive "games". These were not however, as he notes, in place of covert definitions like his game of work but rather in addition to them.

their status as members of the elect. In other words their ability to act was threatened, not by boredom and fatigue as in Roy's case, but by paralyzing panic, despair and "*the anxious fear of death*" (Weber, 1965: p. 107). Consequently they were advised to view any doubts they experienced as the work of the devil and exhorted to consider themselves saved in order to generate the self-confidence necessary to cope with the "*daily struggle of life*" (ibid, 111). In other words, just like Roy, they worked to impose a definition upon the situation in which they found themselves that served the function of maintaining their power of agency. All of which suggests that in arguing for the need to study essentially intra-subjective or covert processes, the most that could be claimed is that one is recognizing sociology's necessary dependence on psychology rather than actually reducing the former to the latter.

Methodological Significance

One final observation worth noting is that a dynamic interpretive approach to the study of action carries with it a clear implication concerning the appropriate method for studying action, one that counters the skepticism that has so often been expressed concerning the accuracy of actors' reports of their conduct, a skepticism that has led some sociologists to claim that self-reports can tell us little or nothing about the events they purport to describe (Mills, 1940; Semin & Manstead, 1983; and Gilbert & Abell, 1983). But then, in line with the argument advanced above, there is bound to be a disjunction between people's actions and their reports of them if anything other than the actors' own descriptions are employed for the purposes of identifying what counts as their actions. The particular advantage of a dynamic interpretive approach that employs an attentional criterion for identifying action is that this means there are excellent reasons for believing that actors are able to give full and accurate descriptions of what they are doing. The reason for this confidence is that people generally know what it is that they have been attending to or consciously doing. Whilst they may well find difficulty in reporting some aspects of their behaviour and perhaps in some instances also find it difficult to specify exactly what their intentions, motives or purposes might have been, they will always know what has been the focus of their consciousness. For as White says, "*to ask a person what he (sic) is doing now is usually to ask what is at present occupying his (sic) whole energies, that is what he (sic) is consciously doing. It is, therefore, a question which he (sic) can immediately answer*" (1964: p. 70)¹². Individuals will, for the same reason, find it relatively easy to report on past actions, provided that is they are not too far in the past. This is because there is ample evidence to suggest that people remember what they attend to whilst correspondingly forgetting that which they never attended to properly in the first place. This is a maxim that applies to one's own conduct just as much as to events in the external environment. Thus it is, once again, that by definition, actors should have little difficulty recovering details about their former actions whilst being unable to report very much

about their previous behaviour¹³. It follows from this that studying action requires the investigator to always ask respondents what it is that they are or have been attending to, or concentrating on, and never prejudge the nature of their actions by naming them in the questioning process itself. They can then be confident not only of the respondent's ability to answer but also that the answer will itself be a true description of the action in question.

Conclusion

One sociologist's personal account of the way in which he resolved a difficulty encountered in the process of undertaking research has been taken as the material for a reexamination of the way in which both action and agency are conventionally conceptualized within sociology. Although not normally included in the subject-matter of the discipline it is argued that personal covert, semi-covert (or co-overt) activities, such as Roy's game of work, represent a vital dimension of all actions or programmes of action; indeed that they frequently constitute the essence of subjective meaning and hence not only that their study should be included in any genuine theory of action but that their significance for the successful accomplishment of what are conventionally identified as social actions needs to be acknowledged. However it is argued that it is necessary to recognize, if this crucial phenomenon is to be the subject of sociological analysis, that action can only be adequately identified and defined by the actor and consequently should be equated with that portion of an actor's conduct to which he or she is paying attention, the employment of an attentional criterion helping to resolve many of the ambiguities that are inherent in the use of intentionality alone. Approaching the study of action in this way also helps to shed light on the manner in which agency and action are interrelated, focusing attention on the way in which actions help to maintain agency as well as agency actions, the distinctive category of agency control actions being the fact that goals are explicable in terms of the actions they serve to maintain rather than vice versa. This then in turn points to the necessity, if the manner in which action is accomplished is to be fully understood, of applying a dynamic behavioural analysis, one that focuses on stimuli and their responses—together with motivational structures in general—rather than simply the eliciting of meaning. However this does not imply any rejection of the actor's perspective, let alone any abandonment of the assumption of voluntarism, given that the nature of this dynamic understanding is derived directly from the actor's own account.

Weber described sociology as a science that "*attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.*" (1964: p. 88), yet sadly the history of the discipline suggests that this prescription has not been followed with "*interpretive understanding*" and "*causal explanation*" effectively going their separate ways. The consequence of this division has been that the ability to act voluntarily has been equated with the freedom to make choices or construct meaning and hence with thought and reasoning, whilst emotion, effort and imagination have been allotted little or no role in this process, being seen as primarily associated with deterministic assumptions about the nature of human conduct. Yet as the example of Roy's game of work clearly shows the ability of individuals to act is just as dependent on the capacity to emote and to imagine as it is upon

¹²This is still true even if an individual has not been acting at all, as they should have little difficulty in reporting this fact, via some formula such as, "*Oh, I wasn't doing anything, I was just day-dreaming.*"

¹³As Stendhal observed, "*It is very difficult to describe from memory what was natural in your behaviour; it is easier to evoke what was artificial or affected since the effort needed to put on an act also engraves it in memory.*" (Elster 1983: p. 52. Italics in original).

the ability to reason; a mistake that sociologists would not have made had they concentrated on studying action-making instead of decision-making or meaning-making. That is to say if they had taken the actor's definition of the situation rather than the conventional social definition as their starting point and concentrated on studying the "meaningfulness" rather than simply "the meaning" of action. A dynamic interpretive approach to the study of action aims to redress these deficiencies by seeking to understand action not by placing it in a larger framework of meanings, but rather through an examination of its constituent elements, and hence to shed light on how precisely individuals really do manage to act.

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