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Interpretation, Explanation and Theories of Meaning

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Abstract

We use the work of Clifford Geertz to examine long-standing questions about the relationship between interpretation and explanation. We extract from Geertz's work explanatory theories of what we are calling *meaning* and *meaningfulness*. We argue that making explicit interpretivists' implicit theories about how these differing kinds of cultural experience work clarifies what interpretivists like Geertz are doing, but also allows us to examine the strengths and weaknesses of theories that underlie interpretive practice. We find that Geertz was more of a generalizing theorist of culture than he claimed to be and that the theories he worked with provide fruitful elements for an ongoing, theoretically-guided research program into how culture works.

Keywords: Interpretation; explanation; meaning; culture; theory; Clifford Geertz.

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The battles between interpretive and explanatory sociologies have subsided into occasional skirmishes, but a murky haze still hangs over the battlefield. We hope to dispel some of the haze, but more importantly to build on the ground the combatants have cleared. We begin by clarifying the varied uses of the concept of interpretation, examining interpretivists claims to provide an alternative for or a supplement to conventional sociological explanation. Then we extract the explanatory claims that lie buried in the most significant kinds of interpretive work, using those to develop the rudiments of a substantive theory of "meaningfulness" — of what constitutes cultural meaning and what makes some cultural texts or practices more meaningful than others.

To some extent the debate between interpretation and explanation is a matter of misunderstandings on both sides. As several commentators have noted, in many cases the interpretivists contrast their own approach to an outmoded notion of "positivism" — one that assumes, for example, that "facts" are objective realities investigators need only observe, or one that disallows human motives as objects of inquiry in favor of the study of supposedly objective "behavior". But even if we dispense with the bad philosophy of science on both sides and start from more epistemologically adequate approaches to scientific explanation (such as those summarized by Suppe (1977),[1] there is still an arena where interpretation seems significantly different from conventional sociological explanation. Indeed, it is here that interpretation raises the most fruitful explanatory issues for the sociology of culture.

The argument for an interpretive social science was advanced most forcefully in the 1970s in Clifford Geertz's essay, "Thick Description", the lead essay in his influential collection, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and in Rabinow and Sullivan's edited collection, *Interpretive Social Science* (1979), particularly the important Charles Taylor essay, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (originally, 1971).

Both these sources put the case for interpretation in strong terms, opposing interpretation to explanation and insisting that conventional explanation is impossible or inappropriate for the social sciences. Many practitioners of interpretation insist, as Geertz (1983, p. 22) does, that interpretation is itself a distinctive *kind* of explanation: "Interpretive explanation — and it is a form of explanation, not just exalted glossography — trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are". Thus interpretation claims to be distinctive in explaining what social practices "mean" (we will explore alternative possible meanings of this claim later).

"Interpretation" has also introduced a distinctive method which has been enormously influential, particularly in cultural studies (Hunt, 1989; Swidler & Arditi, 1994; Bonnell & Hunt, 1999). Here a new definition of the task of social inquiry has joined with a distinctive method to

1. Suppe (1977) summarizes a mid-20th-century breakthrough in the philosophy of science: "Facts" that are well validated by prior theory and research can be used to adjudicate among theories, as long as the theories being adjudicated are not the same ones used to construct the measurements, procedures, or approaches to observation that constitute the facts. If economists and sociologists, for example, agree that the GINI coefficient is a reasonable measure of income inequality, they can use it to evaluate arguments about what policies increase or decrease that kind of inequality. Similarly, a great deal of prior research and theory may has been necessary to establish the existence of bacteria and to find ways of measuring the presence of particular bacterial strains. Once those "fact construction" theories and procedures are well-validated, they can be used to test other theories about bacteria. This is a "bootstrap" process in that matters of active theoretical and empirical debate at one period may later be accepted as validated "facts" that can be used to evaluate other theories. It is of course always possible that what are currently accepted as established facts will be reassessed in light of future research and theory.

produce exemplary studies which, as Thomas Kuhn's (1970) work suggests, anchor the claims of the new approach. As practical starting point, interpretation begins not with a behavioral pattern, institutional regularity, or historical outcome to be explained, but with a "text" to be interpreted. The crucial methodological innovation is treating some social practice or object — a ritual, performance, custom, or institution; a style of painting, a literary work, a kind of pottery, or a folk-tale — as a "text" to be "read".[2]

One basic idea of interpretation, then, is to make a foreign practice (the "text") intelligible, "explicating" it by adducing a broader pattern for which it is an element or microcosm. In the words of one analyst (Fay, 1975):

> An interpretive social science is one which attempts to uncover the sense of a given action, practice, or constitutive meaning; it does this by discovering the intentions and desires of particular actors, by uncovering the set of rules which give point to these sets of rules or practices, and by elucidating the basic conceptual scheme which orders experience in ways that the practices, actions, and experiences which the social scientist observes are made intelligible, by seeing how they fit into a whole structure which defines the nature and purpose of human life. In each of these types of explanation, the social scientist is redescribing an act or experience by setting it into progressively larger contexts of purpose and intelligibility [...] (p. 79).

This description of the basic practice of interpretation resembles Geertz's (1983), pithier image. According to Geertz's (1983): "The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (p. 58). But we might note that the more elaborated version of what this "figuring out" involves encompasses several distinct processes: Discovering the intentions and understandings of actors; uncovering the rules which make those intentions and understandings make sense; and finding a "basic conceptual scheme" which orders "practices, actions, and experiences" into a meaningful whole. All of these are accomplished by setting the text ("an act or experience") "into progressively larger contexts of purpose and intelligibility".

1 Is Interpretation Opposed to Explanation?

The first question to be answered about interpretation is where it fits among the various social science endeavors. Social scientists pursue explanation and description, and as normative thinkers they also engage in evaluation and prescription. One easy way to locate interpretation is simply to regard it as a kind of highly developed description. After all, anything one wanted to explain, from the structure of DNA, to the family structure of a given society, to a work of art would have to be described before it could be adequately explained (or before it could serve to explain something else).[3] And if the thing to be explained is a human institution, practice, or meaningful object, then perhaps describing the meaning of the practice to those who use it — "what the devil they think they are up to" — is a crucial step in explanation, establishing what the practice or object is. After all, if one is "explaining" the practice at contemporary weddings of the couple reciting personal vows to each other, it would help to have examples of such vows, and to know that the vows are not legally binding, that their language is not prescribed by some

2. In a brilliant essay, Biernacki (1999) points to the limitations of Geertz's metaphor of "reading" a text as a guide to interpretive practice, given wide historical variation in the experience and practice of reading.

3. Of course, description can be an end in itself — it is a fundamental objective in all of the sciences. (For the social sciences see, for example, Runciman, 1983).

formal liturgy, that that couples usually see them as public declarations of their love and mutual regard. Such interpretation would not constitute an explanation, but would be a necessary prelude to any adequate explanation — the kind of description necessary to establish the object of explanation (or an explanans) when explanation involves humanly meaningful objects or practices. One may thus make a strong claim for the necessity of interpretation as one stage in the process of social explanation, without seeing interpretation as a form of explanation in itself.

Proponents of interpretation do not, however, see it as simply description, as a stage in some higher order process of explanation. They insist instead, as Geertz does, that in the human sciences interpretation is itself a form of explanation, and indeed that it may be the only type of explanation appropriate to the human sciences. One version of this claim derives from Dilthey's (1991) and Weber's (1949) use of the method of "Verstehen" or "understanding". Here the insistence on interpretation derives from the claim that what social scientists study is meaningful action, and that meaningful action must be understood from the point of view of the actor. Interpretation is a fundamental kind of explanation in the human sciences because human understandings and intentions are essential causes of actions, and therefore human actions cannot be explained without understanding the intentions of those who act.[4]

This insertion of human intentions into any causal chain involving human actors, true to Weber's *verstehende* methodology, is nonetheless quite far from what contemporary interpretivists such as Geertz both preach and practice. First, the focus on intentions remains wedded to standard notions of causal chains, requiring an investigation of actors' thoughts and feelings to provide the causal links formed by human intentions. And second, the kind of interpretation it suggests, interpretation of the intentions and beliefs of actors, is nearly the inverse of the interpretive practices that have proved so fruitful for Geertz and other interpretivists.

2 What Interpretivists Do: Geertz Examined

Geertz's work is essential to these debates, not only because he remains the most eloquent spokesman for interpretation, but because his work has provided the "exemplars" (in the Kuhnian (1970) sense) that ground interpretation as a paradigm. And Geertz does not practice *Verstehen*. Both critics (e.g. Shankman, 1984) and Geertz himself have pointed out that Geertz's interpretive strategy is notably person-and-subjectivity free. Rather than being interested in the

4. Weber's assumption, in his methodological essays (1949), in *The Protestant Ethic* (1930), and in his explication of ideal types like the types of authority, was that if an analyst could describe the premises (the beliefs about reality, the motivations, and the interactions among actors making competing claims derived from shared meanings) one could use ordinary logic to see what the "logical and psychological" (Weber, 1930, p. 232) consequences of specific belief systems and world views might be. While Weber's ideal-type method meant that he never claimed to be analyzing the subjective thoughts of individuals, but rather distilled "historical individuals," his constructed ideal types generated explanatory claims by working out how persons who shared the beliefs and psychological experiences of ideal-typical cultural patterns would derive consequences for action. Geertz moved beyond this formulation by insisting that the analyst needed to understand the larger semiotic codes that make possible whatever specific meanings actors employ. What differentiates both Geertz's and Bellah's approach to culture from that of Parsons and many of his other students is that Bellah and Geertz embrace the primary role symbols play in constituting social life (see Bellah's brilliant essay on Durkheim in his "Introduction" to *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (1973) or his essay on "Symbolic Realism" in *Beyond Belief*, 1970). This position is even clearer in Geertz's (1973) work, where throughout *The Interpretation of Cultures* he defines religion, for example, as a "system of symbols which..." (pp. 90–94) or in "Thick Description" notes that "The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one" (p. 5).

mind of the actor,[5] Geertz takes a "semiotic" approach, starting from publicly visible symbolic behavior (Keesing, 1984; Ortner, 1984) like rituals, art forms, or performances, and working toward the larger, rule-like structure of meanings, the code, that makes possible particular intentions or meanings. Understanding an actor's intentions might require understanding the structure of meanings within which the actor lives, but Geertz is interested not in analyzing intentions but in discovering the semiotic structure that operates in some sense above or outside the heads of particular individuals. Indeed, it is not the meanings individuals intend to express, but the semiotic structures that allow others to derive meaning from what the actors say or do that interests Geertz.

Let us return to Geertz's description of interpretive explanation (1980):

> Interpretive explanation [...] trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are (p. 4).

Here the object of explanation is not an individual's action and the intents and intentions that drive that action, but the "meanings" of social institutions and practices. And what interpretation's practitioners, at least those of Geertz' persuasion,[6] explore when they practice interpretation is the broader pattern of meanings within which any given meaning or meaningful action can be situated.

Note at the outset how much this enterprise differs from the attempt to elucidate for purposes of explaining action the meanings that are in any given individual's or group's shared consciousness. First, Geertz develops a picture of the structured nature of meanings that is much richer and more elaborated than the meanings in any given individual's head are likely to be (see Martin, 2010). Geertz attempts to explicate the entire web of meanings that surrounds a given ritual or symbol, when individual members of a society, as anthropologists have repeatedly found, may know only a fraction of those meanings and may mobilize only a subset of the broader cultural meanings they are aware of (Swidler, 2001). Second, as Charles Taylor (1971) has suggested, the interpretive analyst may develop the meanings of a cultural practice with greater clarity than the original agent had. And finally, what Geertz (1973, p. 7) really wants to get at is not so much cultural content as the socially established "codes" that make things mean what they do. Geertz defines "the object of ethnography" as

> a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, *as a cultural category*, are as much nonwinks as winks are nontwitches) in

5. Varenne (1984, pp. 298–299) notes, however, that even Geertz's work is ambiguous on this point. Geertz intends to analyze not what individual actors think, but what collective resources they think with. Varenne argues that Geertz nonetheless continually returns to the difficulties of understanding individuals and their mental processes.

6. We leave aside here the broad literature on approaches to interpretation that insist on the reflexive role of the ethnographic observer (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus, 1986 and the review essay by Escobar, 1993). Geertz occasionally mentions himself, as when he describes bonding with other Balinese as they scrambled to escape a police raid on a cockfight, but he saw his enterprise as attempting to decipher faithfully and fully the symbolic systems through which others convey meanings. Even Geertz's wonderful, short *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1989), which takes up the problem of anthropological writing, is a discussion of how anthropologists create a sense of veridicality about ethnographic observations to which they are often the only witness.

> fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids (emphasis in original) (p. 7).

Thus the analyst's knowledge is bound to be different in both form and content from that of individual agents developing specific intentions within a world defined by those codes. Indeed, as Geertz makes evident, he is not much interested in explaining action. He is instead interested in culture, and culture for him is a supra-individual reality.

Interpretation is then a kind of explication of texts, not the empathetic understanding of individual (or even typical) motivations that Weber advocated. Indeed Geertz (1973, p. 11), while pressing forward the interpretive agenda, remained wary of subjectivity, avoiding confusion between his interpretive approach and the attempt to discover

> what the natives really think: [...]to say that culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them, is not to say that it is a psychological phenomenon, a characteristic of someone's mind, personality, cognitive structure, or whatever [...] (pp. 12–13).

Rather than trying to understand motives, Geertz seeks to analyze culture, and for him, "culture is public because meaning is" (p. 12). He seeks "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" (p. 5). But these enigmatical expressions — the exoticized cockfights, trance states, or orgiastic rituals around which Geertz often builds his analyses — matter because his goal is to decode the larger structures — the semiotic codes and associated experiences — in terms of which these particular rituals, symbols and practices can be meaningful to "those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they area". Once we can see how and in what sense these foreign, enigmatical rituals are meaningful, once they in some sense become meaningful to us, Geertz can be confident that he has penetrated a culture, that he has "explained" how those meanings work.

Thick description explains the "meaning" of social practices or institutions. But what about that meaning is to be explained? Is the object of explanation the origin of the practice, the meanings that originally brought it into being? Or is the question why people now participate in the practice, why they continue to find the text meaningful? Or is the question instead one about how they in fact experience their participation in the practice? Each of these might be the object of explanation, but explaining each of these different kinds of meanings of a practice would require different kinds of evidence and argument.

If the core question about the meaning of the practice is what currently allows its participants to find their participation meaningful (and one could ask, which participants? Those entering trance states or betting on a cockfight? Those watching the performance or game as part of the audience? Or those who share the wider culture but are not especially engaged in the specific practice?), there are several different ways this process of explicating meaning could be conceived as "explanation". We present these in ascending order of explanatory force. *First*, Geertz has presented thick description as a process of "translation": making foreign, exotic, or "enigmatical" expressions comprehensible to us. According to Geertz (1973):

> The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them (p. 24).

This image of interpretation as translation — conveying what people mean by their practices — recurs again and again in Geertz's work. Thus the Balinese concept of "*lek*", Geertz writes, is "variously translated or mistranslated ('shame' is the most common attempt); but what it really means is close to what we call stage fright" (1983, p. 64). We might think of this sort of translation simply as redescription, attempting to describe a native practice or institution in terms that the anthropologist's audience can understand.

The *second level* of Geertzian translation moves it closer to explanation. To translate adequately, for Geertz (1983), necessarily means to understand the complex workings of a system of cultural symbols, and ultimately of a whole way of life. It is the Balinese experience of personhood, their

> persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal expression to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically, or biographically, is muted in favor of his assigned place in the continuing and, so it is thought, never-changing pageant that is Balinese life [...] (p. 62),

that makes *lek*, the breaking of that illusion, a constant danger in Balinese social life. To translate any given cultural text is a kind of explanation in that only a larger context of meanings allows one to "translate" that particular term — that is, to understand why it has the particular meaning it does.

Interpretation also takes a third, more clearly explanatory form in Geertz's work. Here interpretation means working out the inner logic of an idea, text, or practice. This is what we might call the "strong form" of interpretation, but we shall see that there are serious ambiguities in the idea of a "logic" that somehow governs the relations among elements of a cultural system (Swidler, 2001). For example, Geertz's (1983, p. 67) discussion of the "social contextualization of persons" through Moroccan *nisbas* (qualifiers added to persons' names describing them as belonging to a tribe, kin group, or region) exfoliates into a description of the inner logic of a system of social classification: "[...] the nisba way of looking at persons — as though they were outlines waiting to be filled in — is not an isolated custom, but part of a total pattern of social life". Geertz (1983) goes on to argue that the social pattern implicit in the practices of using the nisba implies a particular conception of selfhood:

> To such a social pattern, a concept of selfhood which marks public identity contextually and relativistically, but yet does so in terms — tribal, territorial, linguistic, religious, familial — that grow out of the more private and settled arenas of life and have a deep and permanent resonance there, would seem particularly appropriate. Indeed, the social pattern would seem *virtually to create* this concept of selfhood, for it produces a situation where people interact with one another in terms of categories whose meaning is almost purely positional [...] leaving the substantive content of the categories, what they mean subjectively as experienced forms of life, aside (pp. 67–68, emphasis added).

The logic of a nisba system, establishing public identities while leaving undefined the personal features of selves that might affect social relationships, makes it ideal for negotiating individualized personal relationships.

> [B]y providing only a vacant sketch [...] of who the actors are [...] it leaves the rest, that is, almost everything, to be filled in by the process of interaction itself (p. 68).

One finds the same working out of the implications of cultural logic in many other places in Geertz's work. But this raises the question of what sort of claim is involved in arguing that a cultural logic is at work. This is a kind of explanation that goes far beyond the attempt to translate or explicate a particular text. Interpretation instead becomes the drawing of implications that become not only logical but causal connections among different elements of a cultural complex. One form such quasi-causal argument might take is the purely logical. Just as Weber used rational action as the baseline against which other forms of social action could be understood, Geertz might be arguing that some cultural conceptions logically imply others in a purely logical-deductive sense. But such an emphasis on the logical interrelations among ideas seems far from what Geertz intends.

Rather, Geertz often seems to argue that one element of a cultural complex implies and thus requires the others in a social rather than a purely logical sense. In "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali", for example, Geertz (1973), argues that

> to maintain the (relative) anonymization of individuals with whom one is in daily contact, to dampen the intimacy implicit in face-to-face relationships — in a word, to render consociates contemporaries — *it is necessary* to formalize relations with them to a fairly high degree, to confront them in a sociological middle distance where they are close enough to be identified but not so close as to be grasped (p. 399, emphasis added).

Here interpretation becomes strongly causal or explanatory in the sense that the various elements of a cultural complex imply or require each other. As Geertz (1973) summarizes his observations of Balinese conceptions of persons and time:

> Balinese social life lacks climax *because* it takes place in a motionless present, a vectorless now. Or, equally true, Balinese time lacks motion *because* Balinese social life lacks climax. The two imply one another, and both together imply and are implied by the Balinese contemporization of persons (p. 404, emphasis added).

Here causal statements — one idea exists "because" of another; one implies another — grow out of an interpretation of the inner logic of a cultural system.

In what does this causal logic consist? One possibility — the causally weakest — is simply that, as the analyst reconstructs a symbolic field, fitting the particular practice within it, the practice seems necessary or logical in the sense that it "fits with" the rest of the cultural field. But if the causal argument is any stronger, it also becomes more problematic. One possibility is an implied argument that cultural systems evolve over time, so that elements that do not fit with the rest of the culture are lost or abandoned. To be persuasive, such evolutionary arguments would have to be justified explicitly, and, more important, the nature of the fit that makes cultural practices compatible or incompatible would still have to be specified.[7] Finally, Geertz seems sometimes to be invoking a strong functionalism: cultural configurations have inner logics such that, for example, only one conception of self is compatible with a given organization of the relations among groups, or only one understanding of time could fit with the Balinese conception of the person. In that case, the causal claim would be strong; a given cultural configuration requires a particular cultural practice to be as it is. But why or how that fit is achieved remains obscure. Geertz seems at times to employ a kind of existential logic: there are

7. Note that Geertz explicitly rejects such evolutionary causal arguments.

certain fundamental human dilemmas — about the boundaries of the person, or about managing social interdependence — and the limited possible of ways of coping with these shape the logics of differing cultural systems.[8] Here we note only that unless the relationships of mutual implication among the elements of a cultural field are strictly logical ones, the idea that describing the configuration of the field also "explains" any one of its elements needs some greater justification than the assumption that because the field "fits together" it in some sense requires its elements to be as they are.

3 Theories of Meaningfulness

As Geertz and other interpretivists practice it, interpretation is eminently about particulars (Geertz's often misquoted title, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, clearly implies that one can study only "cultures", not "culture"), and emphatically not about general theory. What "theoretical formulations" there are "hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them" (Geertz, 1973, p. 25). Interpretation according to Geertz (p. 26) employs theory, but theory of a type that allows the analyst to penetrate particular cultures ever more deeply and insightfully: "the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them".

Despite Geertz's demurrals, however, a powerful set of general causal claims underlie the enterprise of interpretation as he and others (Darnton, 1984; Greenblatt, 1988; Hunt, 1992) actually practice it. These distinctive, strong, but unexamined arguments are necessary to the plausibility of any particular cultural interpretation, and left unexamined they cast doubt on the enterprise. Brought into the open, however, these claims, theoretical and empirical, show both how much we have learned about how culture works and where significant unresolved questions lie.

A claim to have interpreted a "text", as Geertz and other interpretivists actually proceed, is a claim to have explained how a given group of people could have found that particular text (ritual, idea, ceremony, etc.) *meaningful*. Note that we are not talking here about the "meaning" of the text — what Geertz himself says he is investigating. Rather we are drawing out the general theoretical arguments about cultural meaning upon which interpretivists' explorations of particular meanings depend.

4 Meaning and Meaningfulness

Here we want to give more careful attention to "meaning", a term that we, like Geertz, have used liberally but without specifying what we mean. While generations of philosophers and linguists have devoted themselves to explicating the meaning of meaning, we want to draw a simple — but for our purposes important — distinction between two concepts, which we will call "meaning" and "meaningfulness". Both are important for Geertz and other analysts' practice of interpretation, but they play somewhat different roles.

"Meaning", in the simplified terms we use here (leaving aside here meaning as intent or intention[9]), is best thought of as *matching*. Thus perceptions and experiences — or what *come*

8. Geertz's "existential" cultural logic is analyzed at greater length in Swidler (2001, pp. 194–196).

9. In an elegant paper, Hayes (1985) lays out the distinctive kind of explanation that accounts for action through understanding the intentions of actors. Starting from Alexander's (1983) reconstruction of Parsons' (1966)

to be perceptions and experiences, once they have been linked to some prior schema — have "meaning" insofar as they match some element already in our repertoires, of sounds, visual images, language, faces, ideas, structures, etc. Sometimes that "match" is, of course, a recognition of what is unfamiliar, against a background of what is known or expected, as when we recognize a new flavor as one we've never tasted before. Nonetheless, meaning — whether understanding another's utterance, or recognizing something in the world — is the process of matching it, even if imperfectly and with some stretching, to an existing cognitive (or emotional) schema (McDonnell et al., 2017; Sewell, 1992 & 2023).[10] All perception and understanding rely on such matching. As generations of psychological research have shown (Bruner et al., 1951; Fiske & Taylor, 1984, pp. 139–154), we assimilate perceptions and experiences to existing schemas, even when they are an imperfect fit (Taylor et al., 2019). When a perception cannot be fit to some schema, we literally can't "see" it, as with an out-of-focus picture. This matching is not straightforward (as when we observe other patrons in a restaurant and try to work out whether they are kin, friends, or romantic partners) and often not correct — the study of stereotypes and implicit bias, for example, reveal the extraordinary influence of prior expectations on perception — but what we hear, feel or see has meaning insofar as we match it to something, even if it is the wrong something.

The key feature of this sort of meaning making is that the matching is almost never exact. Of course, most of our perception of meaning is so routine and so seamless that we are never aware that it is happening, but as Bruner et al. (1951) demonstrated many decades ago, even ordinary perception is a matter of forming something like a hypothesis about what something is (what it matches in our existing schemas) and then confirming or "infirming" it. At the same time, the schemas to which we match things are always adjusting to accommodate new elements that do not exactly match existing schemas.[11] For Sewell (1992), the reproduction of structures involves abstracting a schema from the structure we perceive and instantiating it in a slightly new situation with somewhat different material resources. There is, according to Sewell, inevitable slippage between the existing structure and the schema abstracted from it.

attempt to integrate ideal and material factors in accounts of social action, Hayes proposes that action has two "subjective elements": "intents" (which make an action what it is — a wink vs. a twitch in Geertz's (1973) famous example, or waving goodbye vs. getting a kink out of one's wrist) and "intentions" — the actor's purpose in performing the action. In addition, an intentional action has objective elements: a "result" — – the "sequence of events" that makes the action what it is, and a "consequence," the sequence of events the result is intended to accomplish. In Hayes' (1985, pp. 5–6) example, "my intent in 'opening the window' is, in fact, to open the window (i.e. accomplish the result), while my intention is to cool the room (i.e., bring about the consequence)." Intent and result, which are "intrinsic to the unit act being described" ("my act cannot be described as 'opening the window' if in fact I do not bring about the state of affairs where the window is open" [Hayes, 1985, p. 6]), necessarily require both interpretive analysis of actors' meanings and "causal analysis" of the actual "objective" relations among events that constitute an act. But these could be subsumed under the task of description necessary to establish the elements of any explanation. Hayes (1985, p. 7) argues, however, that an interpretation of two other subjective elements—the actor's intentions and the actor's beliefs about consequences—often constitute an explanation of action.

10. See also the Wittgenstein-derived "prototype theory" of Rosch and colleagues in cognitive science (Rosch, 1983; Rosch & Mervis, 1975).

11. Here we draw on Inhelder & Piaget (1958) who described "assimilation" and "accommodation" as two interdependent aspects of the growth of schemas of all sorts. As a baby grasps an object, the baby's schema for grasping is fed and grows as it assimilates new kinds of objects. At the same time, the baby's grasp accommodates to various objects of differing shapes and sizes, so the baby's grasping becomes more refined, complex and specific. A similar process occurs as we assimilate new experiences into our existing schemas, and as we accommodate those schemas — thus broadening, differentiating, and refining them — to take account of new experiences.

Schemas are revised by "a crop planted in a newly cleared field or in a familiar field in a new spring" (p. 18).

If meaning is matching some perception to an existing schema, even as the schemas we possess are continually being stretched and adapted to accommodate new perceptions, then the complexities of these processes of matching are what we should focus on to understand the implicit theories of meaning interpretivists employ.

4.1 Meaningfulness

Drawing on Griswold's (1987) pioneering formulation of "meaning as metaphor", and subsequent extensions by Tavory (2014) and McDonnell et al. (2017), and others, we explore the idea of "meaningfulness" as central to the theory that underpins the work of Geertz and other interpretivists. If ordinary meaning is at bottom "matching" experience to existing schemas and associated expectations, less perfect matches are the experiences that we highlight as "meaningful". Meaningfulness is meaning intensified by the psychic effort involved in linking a perception or experience to a perceptual or emotional schema. This extra psychic effort heightens experience in the form of uncertainty, surprise, delight (Tavory, 2014 on humor), shock or horror, or the sense of enriched meaning Griswold (1987, p. 1112) attributes to metaphors such as Shakespeare's "Juliet is the sun": "their interaction produces a meaning that is more than the sum of the parts and that endures in that future references to both Juliet and to the sun will be colored by the previously established correspondence". While "Juliet is a girl" conveys ordinary meaning,[12] "Juliet is the sun" offers the extra jolt of meaning that we call meaningfulness. "Meaningfulness" as we understand it is a continuum, from the small surprises that make us notice something, to the unexpected turns that are fundamental to aesthetic experience. In everyday life meaningful experiences can range from ordinary ones that we "notice" (the sky at sunset), to perceptions that delight or appall us, to experiences of confusion or uncertainty that are uncomfortable or even overwhelming. For interpretive analysts like Geertz, we argue, the heightening of experience that creates meaningfulness is fundamental to the way they practice interpretation.

5 Excavating Theories of Meaningfulness in Geertz's Interpretative Strategy

As we shall see below, the concept of meaningfulness is fraught with theoretical difficulties, but putting these aside for the moment, we first explore the role that underlying theories of meaningfulness play in the theory and practice of interpretation.

When Geertz (1973, pp. 412–453) interprets the meaning of the Balinese cockfight, or Darnton (1984) the meaning of an eighteenth-century cat massacre, what general explanatory claims are involved? First, the analyst is claiming that the ritual, practice, or event to be interpreted was *meaningful* (in the sense of exciting, engaging, compelling) to a particular group of people. Perhaps interpretive analysts could focus on ordinary, taken-for-granted meanings, but it is striking how often they focus on intensified moments, moments that can be demonstrated to be particularly meaningful to their participants.[13] The claim of meaningfulness is an

12. Current questioning of gender categories may now have made calling Juliet a "girl" newly meaning*ful*: we notice the claim as problematic because it violates expectations and requires effort to process.

13. The conception of "meaningfulness" developed here is similar to Hochschild's (2003) "magnified moments," which can occur in the midst of ordinary life, when some experience or event takes on special significance, as when recognition of something perfectly ordinary — say a feeling of tenderness toward one's child — some-

empirical one — Geertz provides evidence that Balinese find cockfights engrossing; Darnton establishes that the cruel slaughter of cats, horrifying to a modern reader, provided hilarious fun for eighteenth-century apprentices. The need to "construe social expressions on their surface enigmatical" arises because these expressions are evidently meaningful to someone else while they are initially enigmatic to us. The need for translation arises because others find meaningfulness in experiences we find baffling.[14]

There is a strong explanatory claim here. While traditional cultural analysts (Ian Watt in *The Rise of The Novel* (1957), for example) sometimes tried to explain why particular people created certain kinds of culture at a given moment, the contemporary interpretivist explains something else. The interpretivist asks what about a group's experience, cultural presuppositions, or other symbolic orderings — "what the devil they think they are up to" — leads them to find the text meaningful. This is explanation in a strong and perfectly conventional causal sense. The object of explanation is the response of a given group of people to a particular text (that is, a ritual, practice, event, object, etc.). The explanation is an account of how the features of the text interact with features of the world view, experience, or semiotic code within which particular groups of people encounter the text to make it meaningful. Such attempts to account for the meaningfulness of a particular text or practice in a specific context depend, however, on a host of assumptions, arguments, and theories about the general properties and causes of meaningfulness.

5.1 Examining Implicit Theories of Meaningfulness

Now, let us start to examine some of the difficulties in the implicit conceptualization of "meaningfulness" most interpretivists use and, in the process, see how much hidden generalizing interpretivists already do.

First, we note the obvious: interpretivists focus their attention on meaningful group experiences, not on idiosyncratic individual responses. Part of the evidence that a ritual or practice is meaningful in a cultural sense is that it is shared by some group of people "those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are." Even when an interpretive analyst starts from a seemingly unique event or experience — Geertz's wonderful set-piece in "Thick Description" (1973, p. 7) about a dust-up between a Jewish merchant, Berber sheep raiders, and French authorities in colonial Morocco or Stephen Greenblatt's (1986) lively essay, "Fiction and Friction," about two 16th-Century French servant girls who fell in love — the specific incident unfurls to reveal broad layers of cultural meaning through which contemporaries understood it.

Interpretive works ask then why some group of people are excited, or satisfied, or engaged by some particular kind of cultural experience. Here meaningfulness is equated with active, usually out-of-the-ordinary responses — the excitement of play, the effervescence of religious ritual, the distanced intensity of aesthetic enjoyment. Thus, a second implicit claim an interpre-

how comes as a surprise.

14. However foreign a ritual or practice, we never find it truly incomprehensible. We instead misunderstand it in terms of the cultural schemas we ourselves have available, perhaps seeing the cockfight as animal cruelty run amok, or Balinese in a ritual trance as mentally ill, for example. If a Western observer of Balinese going into trance states pronounces them "crazy," the observer has found their behavior meaningful by fitting them into the observer's own schemas. Studies like Liebes and Katz (1991) on cross-cultural readings of "Dallas" or Griswold's (1987) on cross-cultural readings of Caribbean novels suggest that exploration of non-native readings of texts can be extraordinarily fruitful. Such cross-cultural readings highlight cultural meanings that the observer/audience brings to the text.

tation tries to establish is precisely what kind of engagement — what *kind* of meaningfulness — a given text evokes in its audience or participants. Darnton's analysis of the great cat massacre has to establish not only that apprentices slaughtered their mistresses' cats, but that this was seen as a hilarious prank, not, say, a solemn religious ritual. Geertz is always concerned to establish the kind of engagement a particular cultural moment evoked, first to demonstrate to readers who initially find the practice opaque that the natives find it meaningful, and second to establish what general domain of meaningfulness is involved.

Interpretation normally starts from practices or symbols that can be demonstrated to be meaningful to a particular group of people. It tries to establish, for example, that the practice is a regular one, that people respond to it strongly (the cockfight or the Rangda Barong play), or that it occurs widely (that, like Yoruba line carving or Moroccan poetic contests, it means enough to people that they persist in doing it), or that people consistently behave as if the practice were significant in their understanding of the world (like Balinese naming practices or their vulnerability to *lek*). Interpretation then establishes, usually without explicit analysis, in what way the object of interpretation is meaningful — whether it is serious or a joke, play or everyday business, a religious truth or an ordinary one, an aesthetic exercise or a practical one.

Geertz pioneered in describing the existence of different domains or modes of meaningfulness. His quartet of papers, "Religion as a Cultural System" (1973, pp. 87–125 [orig. 1966]), "Ideology as a Cultural System" (1973, pp. 193–233 [orig. 1963]), "Art as a Cultural System" (1983, pp. 94–120 [orig. 1976]), and "Common Sense as a Cultural System" (1983, pp. 73–93 [orig. 1975]), develop a broad conceptualization of general domains of meaningfulness which, he argues, subsist side by side, making different kinds of reality claims (Schütz, 1945), with individuals passing relatively easily from one domain to another. Geertz several times probed such matters as the ways religious realities enter everyday life ("religious belief in the midst of ritual, where it engulfs the total person, transporting him, so far as he is concerned, into another mode of existence, and religious belief as the pale, remembered reflection of that experience in the midst of everyday life are not precisely the same thing..." [Geertz, 1973, p. 120; see also pp. 110 ff.]); the nature of the common-sense perspective (Geertz, 1983); or how aesthetic practices affect the rest of life ("Nothing very measurable would happen to Yoruba society if carvers no longer concerned themselves with the fineness of line [...]. Just some things that were felt could not be said — and perhaps after a while, might no longer be felt — and life would be the greyer for it" (Geertz, 1983, p. 99).

Despite his careful parsing of the varied kinds of meaningfulness, however, Geertz leaves significant ambiguities about whether meaningfulness works differently in different domains. He has written perceptively about common sense, its attitude and style (Geertz, 1983, p. 84). But it remains unclear how interpretation would be practiced if the objects — the texts — upon which interpretation focused were not the heightened practices of religion and art but the ordinary, nearly invisible ones of common sense. In his essay on common sense, Geertz (1983) shows how religion shores up common sense by accounting for its failures, but the Zande belief in witchcraft is the text Geertz interprets to arrive at common sense. It is also less clear how one establishes the "meaningfulness" of common-sense beliefs for those who hold them, precisely because common sense arouses no distinctive passion, unless its strictures are violated. So perhaps "breaching experiments" of the sort Garfinkel (1967) employed could give interpretive analysts an empirical focus for interpreting common sense, but then it is the analyst (or the ethnomethodologist) who is creating the intense experiences that signal meaningfulness. Interpretivists tend to use intense engagement as the mark of meaningfulness, without considering that another interpretive strategy might be required for those things so unremarkable

as to arouse no particular reaction at all. The empirical indicators of true meaninglessness — something so incomprehensible as not to be apprehended at all — may be hard to distinguish from indicators of the unproblematically meaningful.

6 What Makes Culture More or Less Meaningful?

Distinctions among kinds of meaningfulness turn out to make a difference when we begin to make explicit the explanatory theories of meaningfulness that underlie interpretive analysis.

6.1 Meaningfulness and Fullness: Do More Meanings Create Greater Meaningfulness?

We start with the most obvious and one of the most important of Geertz's implicit theoretical arguments. In almost all of Geertz's work (and that of many other interpretivists), the technique of interpretation situates a particular "text" in an ever-widening context of other meanings (Biernacki, 1996). Indeed, this is what the term "thick description" implies. Hidden here is the assumption that the more we understand about how the people who find something meaningful live, think, or experience the world, the more fully we understand the meaningfulness of the ritual, symbol, or practice we observe. Another, closely-related but very different claim is that symbols are more resonant, more meaningful the more other meanings they can evoke ("meaningful" equals "meaning filled").

Let us take these implicit arguments in turn. First, is more really better in terms of understanding a practice's meaningfulness? Is a full understanding of meaning and meaningfulness simply cumulative? If we think about Geertz's (1973, pp. 412–453) most iconic piece, his exquisite analysis of the Balinese cock fight, might not the actual meanings for participants be much more partial than the meanings Geertz adduces? Perhaps most players follow the sport only for the excitement of watching a close match or because they have honed an appreciation of the attributes that make cocks good fighters and are genuinely ignorant of or indifferent to the wider cultural resonances of the cockfight (the slang that makes "cock" a word for "penis" or the Balinese fascination with animality, for example). Or perhaps these wider cultural resonances help account for why cockfighting originally developed in Bali, but explain nothing about its current meanings for those who follow it.[15] Or perhaps meaningfulness in some cultural experiences (the engrossed involvement of "deep play") is heightened when texts invoke fewer rather than more of participants' wider cultural concerns, becoming "purified" of extraneous associations, so that the Balinese cockfight succeeds in arousing its true aficionados in spite of, rather than because of, its resonances with other aspects of Balinese life.

Many interpretivists assume that texts are meaningful because they resonate with other elements of people's experience. Geertz seeks to show that Yoruba line carving, Moroccan poetic contests, Balinese cockfights, and other cultural texts he interprets resonate with a wider context of cultural meanings. But the ready success of soccer all over the world, or of Italian and American Westerns or of American soap operas in a huge variety of cultures far from their context of origin suggests at a minimum that this assumption needs investigation. While Liebes and Katz (1990) show that audiences with varied cultural assumptions found ways to make "Dallas" meaningful in their own cultural terms, the fact that these foreign-made products seem able to out-compete locally-made culture that must have many more cultural resonances surely

15. We need to consider the possibility of "dead meanings" — that is, practices that were once meaningful may be carried on out of habit or to express collective loyalties, while all their particular elements may have lost whatever meanings they originally possessed.

suggests that resonance with multiple other meanings is not the exclusive source of cultural meaningfulness.

We raise these alternative hypotheses not because we necessarily believe them, but because they point to the powerful assumptions that lie buried in the basic practices of interpretation. If more meanings don't make a text more meaningful, then analysts lose explanatory clarity by piling them on. But also, the implicit theory of meaningfulness that says that resonances or levels of meaning simply cumulate, making social texts more and more meaningful — rather than, for example, that differing meanings can compete, canceling each other out (Harding, 2010), or that one or two meanings are all the significance most social texts can carry — may be wrong. In any case, explicitly addressing the question of how multiple resonances of a social practice do or don't cumulate, when multiple meanings enhance or cancel each other out, clarifies the unexamined assumptions underlying interpretive practice.

A second, closely related argument is a *symbolic condensation* argument: that meaningfulness is enhanced when, as in poetry, symbols carry many meanings or levels of meaning simultaneously. This argument appears in Geertz's (1973) cockfight essay, where one suggestion about "deep play" is that the cockfight becomes deeper as it carries more kinds of social meanings — as it not only refers to sexuality and animality, but also embodies important village rivalries, stimulates larger wagers, and so forth. If we turn to literary critics' views, there is some evidence for such a proposition, so the novel resonated as a form because it simultaneously evoked multiple dilemmas of eighteenth-century middle-class life (Watt, 1957) or Shakespeare's plays endure because they deal with so many levels of human experience.

Griswold (1987) has argued explicitly that some novels have more capacity to carry meaning than others do. She suggests that such meaningfulness (which she calls "cultural power") might be measured by whether the novel can sustain many interpretations simultaneously while still being seen as a coherent whole.

There is another problem, however, with the argument that more layers of meaning make for more meaningfulness. The examples above, and the texts that interpretivists usually focus on, come from the realms of aesthetics and cultural play. It may be, however, that the kinds of intense response that signal meaningfulness when people watch a play, read a novel, or participate in a religious ritual are explained by very different factors than those that account for the meaningfulness of what people see as "real life" experiences. For example, everyday meanings may be more powerful when they are simpler and easier to apprehend. The creators of political slogans and the spin doctors of the political world certainly seem to have concluded that a simpler more unitary message will have more power.[16] So perhaps symbolic condensation works in the "set apart" domains of entertainment, art and play, while other principles govern ordinary, prosaic cultural realms. Indeed the very kind of unproblematic meaning that makes something easily comprehensible may undermine the ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning that make art, play, or religion especially meaningful. But whatever the conclusions we might ultimately draw about the sources of variation in meaningfulness of different kinds, making such arguments explicit and investigating them systematically would put interpretation on a more solid footing and also contribute to building strong, general arguments about culture.

A third, related question is how meaningfulness is related to recognition or familiarity, on the one hand, and to tension or surprise, on the other. Griswold (1987) argues that meaning is inherently a kind of metaphoric activity in the sense that it always involves an encounter between two elements: a text and the presuppositions and capacities of those who experience

16. Michael Schudson's excellent 1989 essay develops related arguments about what gives some cultural objects more "power" or "efficacy" than others.

that text. Following Richards (1936), she sees that conjuncture as a generative one that alters both elements of the encounter:

> When people experience a cultural object, read a book, for example, a societal tenor — a set of presuppositions, concerns, problems, and associations held by a particular social group in a particular historical and institutional context — interacts with the cultural vehicle, the symbols and characteristics of the cultural object at hand. The presuppositions generated by the tenor select, highlight, and suppress characteristics of the vehicle; the manifest and latent meanings of the vehicle trigger, organize, evoke, reflect, and seem to comment on attributes of the tenor. The more powerful the cultural object constituting the vehicle, the more aspects of the societal tenor it will seem to address (p. 112).

We have been arguing that the greater the stretch an audience must make to find a connection to the text, while still being able to make that connection, the more meaning is generated — so that meaningfulness is something like the energy expended to make a connection. Griswold's work is exemplary because it makes explicit what many culture analysts, inspired in part by literary theory about symbolic condensation, simply assume (1987, p. 1112): "More than simply a juxtaposition of societal tenor and cultural vehicle, metaphor demands action. As philosopher Arthur Danto has pointed out, the key aspect of a metaphor is the activity of a human mind attempting to fill in the gaps by finding the points of contact between tenor and vehicle."[17]

6.2 Meaningfulness and Form

Another source of meaningfulness hinted at above is the meaningfulness that comes from tension and uncertainty. In "Deep Play," in addition to adducing the many aspects of Balinese culture with which the cockfight resonates, Geertz (1973) emphasizes that cockfights are deeper — more intense, more exciting, and more satisfying — when the cocks are closely matched, the stakes are high, and the outcome is uncertain. Anyone who has snoozed through a mismatched Superbowl knows just what he means. Huizinga (1956) identified this element of tension about the outcome (along with rules limiting the way the outcome can be determined and the use of valued skills) as crucial to the satisfactions provided by games and play, and by culture in general.

Leonard Meyer, in his classic *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956) offers a paradigm for analyzing this kind of meaningfulness. Asking how even non-referential music can create intense experiences of meaningfulness, Meyer argues that music, like other aesthetic forms, draws on conventions — and within any musical piece sets up further expectations, for example, by laying out an initial musical theme — so that violations of those expectations create "tension." "Resolution" of those expectations (as in the completion of a chord sequence) creates aesthetic satisfaction. These small violations of conventionalized expectations (usually in a realm bounded somehow from "real" life) may account for a wide variety of the heightened experiences culture seems able to produce. Baxandall (1972), for example, does not simply argue that fifteenth-century Italian painters knew that their potential audiences were familiar with

17. McDonnell et al. (2017, p. 4) recognize this issue in their analysis of "resonance." They zero in on the difference between "resonance" as the encounter with familiar cultural meanings that are consonant with existing schemas, versus more active, effortful cultural engagement. Nonetheless, their focus on how cultural elements can be adapted for active problem-solving obscures the much broader conditions for meaningfulness.

the skill of gauging volumes and thus with a visual vocabulary for apprehending volumetric forms. He argues that the paintings heightened meaning by playing with volumes, creating unexpected or awkward volumetric relations. Similarly, movies and dramas work by exaggerating, distorting, or violating expectations, not simply by conforming to them.

In most of his work, Geertz is concerned to show that a given practice or symbolic form resonates with other elements of a culture, so he rarely attends to the ways culture might achieve its power precisely through its tension with established expectations. But if meaningfulness comes both when a text resonates with its context *and* when the text violates or is in tension with expectations, the interpretation of any given text becomes problematic. Perhaps the interpretivist focuses on discovering elements of the context that "fit" — that correspond to elements of the text and account for its meaning — when instead the analyst should be looking for the ways the text evokes recognition but also violates expectations to produce dramatic tension. In contrast to anthropologists' usual assumption that the cultural practices they witness are long established, or at least deeply resonant, such theories of meaningfulness might suggest that innovation is a continual feature of cultural life, that to get a response from an audience culture creators must always be doing something new (see Lieberson, 2000).

The cultural domains that evoke active engagement and intense response are often those of art, play, and to some extent religion, rather than that of common sense. The value of drawing out buried causal arguments about the sources of meaningfulness is to understand whether the same kinds of interpretive practice make sense across different cultural domains and whether we need not single, but multiple theories of meaningfulness.

Another argument often implicit in particular interpretations is that cultural texts are more meaningful when they embody powerful contradictions. Then it is not simple resonance with a context of other meanings, but heightening, clarifying, or simply articulating tensions in the broader culture that makes a particular text meaningful. Janice Radway's analysis of romance novels (Radway, 1984), Victor Turner's (1966 & 1967) analysis of ritual, Will Wright's (1975) interpretation of cowboy movies, and John Hewitt's (1989) or Bellah et al.'s (1985) analyses of Americans' preoccupation with community, all imply this theory of meaningfulness.

The argument that rituals or symbols are particularly meaningful when they express social or psychological contradictions and the argument that formal tension enhances aesthetic meaningfulness could certainly be made to work together. But these arguments about the social and cultural sources of meaningfulness do not mesh easily with the arguments about resonance or fit with a wider cultural context described above. And, to repeat our point, very different explanations of meaningfulness may apply to different cultural domains.

7 Conclusion

All these complexities should inspire both caution and hope — even exhilaration. The caution should come from realizing how much interpretation rests on general causal claims that have rarely been worked out theoretically or investigated empirically. The hope should come from realizing how much by way of tentative theory and evidence we already have about the very important question of the nature and causes of (varied kinds of) meaningfulness. And, finally, the exhilaration might come from entering a new domain of culture theory that would respect the enterprise of interpretation, valuing its power, without using it as an excuse to shy away from important tasks of causal explanation in the cultural realm.

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