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SUBJECTIVISM AND SOFT SYSTEMS METHODOLOGY — A CRITIQUE

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a focus of interest and debate within systems and OR concerning the nature of the social world within which action research takes place [1]. A number of authors, for example Ackoff, Churchman, Checkland and Eden [2] have argued, along broadly similar lines, that the social world is radically different from the physical world. The physical world consists of entities and structures which are independent of the observer's concepts but the social world consists only of the individual's concepts, constructs and intentions. There are no separable social objects or structures. This suggests that systems and OR have been guilty of inappropriately applying positivist theories and methodologies derived from the physical sciences. Instead, they should use 'interpretive' or 'subjectivist' methodologies concerned with explaining, articulating and changing people's perceptions and understandings. The clearest example of such a methodology is Checkland's soft systems methodology (SSM) [3] and there has been some debate concerning its relationship to the interpretive paradigm within sociology [4].

In this paper I wish to do a number of things. Firstly, I will briefly outline the nature of interpretive sociology and in particular show that it is not homogeneous but includes at least four substantively different strands of thought. Secondly, I shall examine the implications of its subjectivism for systems and illustrate this through Checkland's work. Thirdly, I shall present criticisms of subjectivism in general and the various different approaches in particular and show that it is not sustainable to the extent that it attempts to preclude any analysis of social structures beyond the individual consciousness. Finally, I will look at the soft systems methodology and argue that its use in order to bring about change is bound to be limited precisely because of its subjectivism.

Subjectivist methodologies are valuable, particularly as an antidote to positivist views, but are not in themselves sufficient for guiding social intervention.

Interpretive Sociology

The term interpretive sociology is rather broad and vague, embracing a number of differing viewpoints as we shall see. There is a central theme, however, which links them together and that is the recognition that, in studying humans as social beings, an observer has first to come to understand, to interpret, the speech or actions that are being observed. Nor, indeed, is this a trivial problem. Rather, it is seen as the fundamental process of social interaction itself. Ordinary members of society routinely carry out the very complex task of interpreting their own and other peoples' activities and in doing so form both the focus and the ultimate court of interpretive sociology.

This view of sociology is subjectivist in two senses. Firstly, it focuses on the idea of people as *subjects* — active, creative, individual; constantly involved in the *creation* of their social world through their interpretations and interactions — rather than *objects* — passive, fixed, undifferentiated; their behaviour determined by objective social forces. Secondly, it is subjectivist rather than objectivist in its prescriptions for social science. Broadly speaking, subjectivism denies that there can be objective descriptions or theories of the social world beyond an individual's consciousness. Such denials can be *ontological* and/or *epistemological*. They either deny the existence of structures other than the concepts of particular actors or they

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deny that sociological theories can have any greater claim to validity than the everyday concepts of lay members of society.

I shall outline four major positions within interpretive sociology and relate them together in terms of the extent to which they remain committed to the consciousness of the single individual subject experiencing the world. These four are firstly phenomenology, based on the philosophical work of Husserl and developed sociologically by Schutz; secondly ethnomethodology — a term originally coined by Garfinkel ('ethno' — in a particular culture, 'methodology' — rules for proceeding); thirdly, what is called "ordinary language philosophy" based on Wittgenstein's later work, and finally hermeneutics — the study of how we understand cultures — as developed by Gadamer from the work of Dilthey.

PHENOMENOLOGY   Husserl trained as a mathematician and became interested in the philosophical basis of the natural sciences. He saw that even mathematics and science were based on a whole host of unexamined assumptions, beliefs and values derived from the commonsense everyday world. He saw the task of philosophy as being to subject these beliefs to a far-reaching and radical critique and ultimately to ground science in evidence that was totally secure in itself. The method for achieving this ultimate certainty was not to seek evidence for our concepts in the outside world but to turn inwards, towards our own consciousness, and systematically cast doubt on all our normal beliefs and thoughts: to call into question the everyday assumptions that Husserl called the 'natural attitude'. This suspension of the beliefs of the natural attitude was termed by Husserl the *'phenomenological epoche'*, or bracketing. The aim is to become the ultimate, totally detached, observer; but not an observer of the world, rather an observer of one's own consciousness. For Husserl, the stream of consciousness itself was prior to, and structured, one's experience of the world.

"This ubiquitous detachment from any point of view regarding the objective world we term the *phenomenological epoche*. It is the methodology through which I come to understand myself as that ego and life of consciousness in which and through which the entire objective world exists for me, and is for me precisely as it is." [5]

Within this utterly detached viewpoint, Husserl believed, it was possible to *know*, with complete certainty, the structure of the phenomena that are experienced.

The most successful attempt to take a strictly phenomenological approach to sociology has been that of Schutz who based much of his work on Husserl. Schutz however, rather than bracket out the natural attitude of everyday life, made precisely this the very core of his work. For Schutz, the central concern of sociology was to understand and explain the *Lebenswelt* (lived world) — the way in which ordinary people routinely, and without conscious difficulty, make sense of and interpret their own and other people's actions. Schutz's other main source was Weber who was also concerned to analyse social action in terms of its meaning using the method of *Verstehen* — that is to come to understand a particular social act by placing oneself in the position of the actor and interpreting their action as one of a general type.

Schutz's views were in opposition to the positivist empiricism of, for example, Nagel and Hempel who wanted to maintain firstly the primacy of sensory observation over subjective introspection, and secondly that the foundations of the social sciences, i.e. the categories and meanings of the everyday world, were entirely unproblematic and could be taken for granted. For the positivist, therefore, if *Verstehen* were acceptable at all it was merely a heuristic device useful in the discovery phase of research whilst the validation of hypotheses should be in the form of empirical experimental tests. Schutz, besides objecting to the restriction that only sensory observation was to be valid, also wished to claim that *Verstehen* is, in a number of ways, fundamental to social science.

Firstly, rather than being purely a help in research, *Verstehen* is "the particular experiential form in which common-sense thinking takes cognizance of the social

cultural world" [6]. That is, it describes the very manner in which ordinary people make sense of their social surroundings. The social world — both other people and cultural objects — is experienced and understood as meaningful. Other people are not regarded as physical objects but fellow-humans whose activities are identified and interpreted according to common inter-subjective criteria. This leads to the second claim — that *Verstehen* is a methodological necessity since the object domain of the social sciences is inherently different from that of the natural sciences. Social reality consists of the specific meanings and structures of relevance of the people who hold them. "By a series of commonsense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives." [7] The social scientist cannot therefore arbitrarily impose constructs upon the social world since everyday constructs (called by Schutz 'first level constructs') already have a structure of their own relative to the social matrix in which the actor exists. This can be seen more clearly in relation to foreign or primitive cultures where it is apparent that the problem lies deeper than explaining *why* a particular action happened. It is first necessary to *identify* the act as a particular type of act and this depends upon the cultural tradition which defines both contexts and actions appropriate to them. As Habermas has said "it is not the perception of facts which is symbolically structured, but the facts as such." [8]

Thus for Schutz the interpretation and understanding of the meanings and actions of ordinary people was the primary task of sociology and *Verstehen* was its primary method. Yet he agreed that for sociology to be scientific it should rely on controlled verification and not private experiences such as empathy or intuition. He argues that the way to overcome this seeming contradiction of an objective analysis of subjective meanings is for the social scientist to create second-level constructs based on the first-level ones. Although we can occasionally *experience* other people's motivations directly, we generally account for behaviour in terms of generalised or typical patterns of action. Second-level constructs therefore will be systematic refinements leading to an objective system of ideal types which will serve both to explain the particular observation and also provide generally testable hypotheses.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY   This is a relatively recent approach originated by Garfinkel who was concerned to analyse the way lay actors order and make sense of their everyday world in terms of their own, semi-consciousness, stocks of knowledge. It is thus strongly related to Schutz's work but differs in two main ways. Firstly, it turns away from the emphasis on an individual's consciousness and concentrates on the *inter*-subjective *practices* through which actors construe their social environment. Secondly, it focuses on the actual practicalities of the way in which this is realised, paying particular attention to the role and use of language.

Much ethnomethodology appears to spend an inordinate amount of time discussing the most trivial phenomena in an entirely opaque manner. For example whole articles are written on the ways people can begin or terminate conversations [9]. But this reflects their view that the manifest order and stability of the everyday world is actually a very difficult and creative task, routinely carried out by lay actors who are not fully aware of how they do it. Much of the difficulty stems from the fact that most of the expressions used in everyday speech are highly indexical, that is to say, generally under-determined or context-dependent. A word like 'he' doesn't have an *a priori* referent. You can only discover who it is referring to by knowing the context within which it was used on a particular occasion. This is generally true of most expressions used in conversations. This means that conducting a successful conversation, for example, *is* an on-going accomplishment requiring a continual reflexive monitoring of the context and the rules which are seen as appropriate to a particular situation. Moreover, it means that the actual meaning of a particular action can only be determined by the actors, through their interaction, not by an external observer. The task of ethnomethodology, and therefore sociology, is to study the underlying methods which actors use in this process.

This attitude towards social reality leads to radical views on the place of sociology — for example the notion of 'ethnomethodological indifference'. This is the idea that it is not the task of sociologists to cure or remedy the indexicality of everyday life by applying some superior rationality. For ethnomethodologists, everyday rationality is different from but not inferior to scientific rationality. This is because they equate rationality with the idea of 'accountability' — that is the extent to which actors can account for or make rational their actions. An action is to be seen as rational if it is accountable, and an action is accountable if it conforms to the expectations of everyday life. This implies the further view that sociology itself is only a particular set of practices, accounting for the activities of those doing sociology and as such has no rational claim to epistemological primacy.

Clearly, taken to this level, such claims raise problems about the status of ethnomethodology itself. If sociology is only accountable practice then on what grounds should its validity be granted in the first place? Some authors see it as repairing the foundations of sociology by taking account of the expectations of lay actors on fundamental categories and empirical data so that, for example, in using crime and suicide statistics it is necessary to take into account the practices of the original collators of such data.

ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

This has been a major tradition in philosophy following the later work of Wittgenstein and was adopted as a basis for sociology by Winch [12].

Wittgenstein's early philosophy, culminating in the 'Tractatus' was an attempt to reveal the necessary and *a priori form* of language in the belief that language mirrored what was necessarily the case in the world. In laying out this form, he hoped both to reveal the structure of the world and the inherent limits of language itself. What could not be expressed in this form of language could not be expressed at all and presumably could not exist in the world either. This was summarised in his gnomic phrase "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent." So his early philosophy embodied a very objectivist and representational view of language — words gained their meaning by representing what was the case in the world [10].

His later philosophy, however, was in direct contrast to this. Words and phrases do not gain meaning by representing the world but by the way they are *used* in the activities and practices of everyday life. Words cannot have a clear and fixed definition. Rather, we learn the meaning of a word by learning how and when it can be used or better by learning the *rules* which govern its use. These rules, in turn, cannot be isolated but govern a complex system of speech and actions which as a whole constitute a particular practice. He calls such practices *language-games* since they are analogous to actual games. For example chess consists of objects, rules, terms and phrases, tactics and strategy etc. all of which are meaningful only in terms of each other and other similar practices. Chess itself only becomes meaningful if you understand the idea of a board game with pieces, and more generally the idea of the game. These were originally learnt not by definition but by demonstration and activity. All these various language games are connected together within a *form of life* and speaking and acting draw upon the whole of such a form of life [11]. Winch [12], following phenomenology, stresses the meaningfulness of human action and the necessity of grasping the everyday world but relates this, not to the structure of consciousness, but to the structures of a language-game. In particular, Winch equates meaningful action with that which is rule governed. Rules arise out of conduct and conduct can only be understood as an embodiment of certain rules. These rules are themselves only appropriate within a particular form of life and therefore the task of the sociologist is to come to understand a particular form of life, not in terms of the rules of sociology, but in terms of its own rules. Obviously this approach has clear parallels with the relativistic implications of ethnomethodology — forms of life are essentially self-contained

and autonomous, and sociology is merely another language-game with its own set of rules and procedures.

HERMENEUTICS   This is, in fact, the oldest of the subjectivist approaches and was the source of the idea of *Verstehen* that Weber and Schutz developed. Historically, it was developed by Dilthey and Schleyermacher [13] in the nineteenth century as the appropriate scientific method for the interpretation of historical texts. This was based on the now familiar claim that, whereas knowledge of the natural world (*Naturwissenschaften*) could be couched in terms of causal explanation (*erklären*), knowledge of human conduct or ideas (*Geisteswissenschaften*) could only be gained through subjective understanding (*Verstehen*).

As developed by Dilthey, *Verstehen* remained an essentially subjective and emphathetic re-enactment of another person's motives and as such was open to criticism in terms of its validity. However it has been reformulated by Gadamer so that *Verstehen* is no longer at the subjective, psychological level but is concerned with the analysis of frames of reference or traditions at the level of inter-subjective language. This is quite close to the position of Wittgenstein and Winch and it is useful to summarise Gadamer's hermeneutics in terms of the way it differs from this.

Firstly, whereas for Winch a form of life remains essentially self-contained and closed, for Gadamer this is not so. He maintains that it can be mediated through its very medium — that is language. Through linguistic dialogue we can not only grasp a particular tradition but translate its rules into another frame of reference.

Secondly, Gadamer adds a new dimension by emphasising that forms of life have a history. The rules of language allow us both to express ourselves and to interpret others but we must recognise that these rules themselves change over time within the wider socio-cultural tradition. This means, for example, that in interpreting historical documents we cannot get to the pure, original meaning but only the meaning for the interpreter relative to their frame of reference. In general, all interpretations will be limited by the specific socio-cultural position of the observer and this leads Gadamer to see tradition as a primary source of legitimacy and authority in judging the correctness of an interpretation.

Thirdly, Gadamer sees hermeneutics as an essentially practical activity of direct concern to the interpreter. For, in studying cultural objects such as beliefs or practices from other traditions in relation to our own we gain knowledge and understanding; and in studying our own tradition we are also studying our own self-development.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF   All these strands of subjectivist thought, although differing on certain substantive
SUBJECTIVISM   issues — especially whether they base their analysis on the individual subject or on the inter-subjective level of language — share certain important viewpoints: firstly, that the identification and understanding of people's beliefs, motivations and actions cannot be taken for granted since they form part of a humanly constructed domain which can only be understood in its own terms; secondly, that the terms that we take to describe social structures do not actually denote ontological and causally effective entities but can only refer to our own and others *concepts*, given meaning through the particular form of life in which they are embedded.

These implications are not always made explicit by these writers themselves. As we shall see later, it is one of the weaknesses of subjectivists that they often implicitly recognise an objective social world but are unable to deal with it adequately because of their subjectivism. However, we can see attempts to make them explicit in the work of Checkland who certainly regards himself as a subjectivist [15]. In examining his work, we will find both ontological claims that social structures external to the subject do not exist and epistemological claims that all views of the social world are equally valid.

Checkland initiates his own discussion of these problems by posing the question "What theories of social reality are implicit in the hard and soft systems methodology?" [16]. The possibilities that he envisages are summarised by asking:

> is sociology to be the study of objective social facts which transcend the individuals who make up society, or is it the study of the individual subjective understandings which persons acquire of their social situations? [17].

To frame the discussion in this form is to some extent illegitimate. It presupposes firstly, that there are only two possible answers to this question and secondly, that the two are mutually exclusive — there can be objective facts *or* subjective understandings but not both. Posed this way the question pre-empts certain answers — for example that there might be subjective understandings of objective facts or objective consequences of subjective actions. Many sociologists would say that sociology was precisely about the relationship between the two.

Checkland's answer to his question is:

> both hard (positivist) systems thinking and traditional management science assume that systems exist in the real world and can be unequivocally described . . . . *In contrast* to this paradigm of optimising (or satisficing), soft systems methodology embodies a paradigm of learning . . . . To this extent the methodology as a whole clearly articulates a phenomenological investigation into the meanings which actors in a situation attribute to the reality they perceive. [18, my emphasis]

Thus SSM is *contrasted* with positivism which makes both ontological and epistemological claims. The SSM therefore, presumably, rejects both claims although the only positive assertion — that it investigates meanings — does not, in itself, preclude either.

A more definite assertion is:

> the model of social reality implicit in the methodology . . . is that social reality, the reality of 'individuals', 'groups', 'organisations', 'roles', etc. *is not a given*, like fire engines, frogs and foxgloves, but is continuously constructed and reconstructed by communication between individuals. [19, my emphasis]

The implications seems to be that such things do not exist as such but it really depends on how one is to construe the words "(social reality) *is not a given*". Three possible, but quite different interpretations are:

(i) We cannot take for granted that such things exist — but they might;

(ii) We cannot take for granted the everyday meaning of such terms (i.e. as a given) but could develop theoretical constructs based on an understanding of such meanings;

(iii) the only meaning that can be attributed to such terms is that created by a particular individual in using them.

Focusing on particular words like this is not mere pedantry. The differences are fundamental and are not generally explicated elsewhere in Checkland's work, where we find objective social reality called into doubt but not actually rejected. [20]

The most definite assertion is in a recent paper:

> we have no access to what the world is, to ontology, only to descriptions of the world . . . that is to say, epistemology. . . . We should never say of something in the world: "it is a system", only: "it may be described as a system". [21]

Two things are worth noting. Firstly the statement itself is epistemological rather than ontological. It neither asserts nor denies what might exist but directs itself solely to our knowledge. This is as it must be. The view that we cannot know what exists logically precludes any such assertions or *denials*. Secondly the statement applies to the whole of reality — the physical as well as the social world — and so equally applies to natural science. Can we be any more certain of the independent reality of frogs and foxgloves?

According to Checkland therefore we cannot assume that models reflect reality; they must remain descriptions of descriptions. How are we to assess their validity?

Are some descriptions better or worse than others? Again the answer is a fairly clear 'no':

> There will thus never be a single (testable) account of a human activity system, only a set of possible accounts all valid according to some particular *Weltanschauung*." [22]

So, for Checkland, the only possible form of social research is the exploration of actors' *Weltanschauungen*. Sociologists can create theories but ultimately these are merely different accounts — no more or less valid than other accounts. The methodology is a tool to be used in this exploratory process — it is concerned exclusively with "models of perceptions, not models of complex reality." [23] Moreover, these models refer only to a single individual's perceptions or consciousness — a single individual's *Weltanscauung*. In terms of our four different strands the SSM is clearly based most strongly in the individual phenomenology of Schutz. It is also strongly idealist in its belief that changes in the world are brought about by changes in people's ideas.

A critique of subjectivism

INTRODUCTION   Firstly, a summary of the argument so far.

Positivist systems theory has been wrong in its assumptions concerning the social world. People's actions are only made meaningful by the interpretations which they and others attribute to them. This perspective has been elucidated by interpretive sociology which is essentially subjectivist. There are, however, substantive differences within the interpretive paradigm concerning the extent to which they emphasise the *ideas* of the *individual* subject as oppsed to the ideas *and activities* of *groups* of subjects. Subjectivism, taken seriously, has severe implications. These are illustrated in Checkland's work which maintains that the only valid role for systems is in explicating individual's ideas and perceptions. If Checkland's subjective idealism is correct, then there *can* only be ideas and changes in ideas and this process cannot be limited by any objective constraints. Theories concerning such constraints only reflect a particular *Weltanschauung* no more valid than any other. The central problem therefore is whether, in fact, this view is correct. Are the subjectivist arguments sound enough to preclude even the possibility of social structures outside the individual consciousness of descriptions which *are* more valid or less valid?

I expect my own view has been apparent throughout this paper, so I shall now make it explicit. Subjectivism is not strong enough to preclude this possibility and once the possibility is established then research can be undertaken to explore it and subjectivism must, in its turn, come to terms with the results. This is not to ignore subjectivism and return to positivism but to try to move in a different direction, accepting the meaningfulness of human action but also exploring its conditions and consequences.

The first step, however, is to put forward the arguments demonstrating the inadequacy of pure subjectivism. We can distinguish two versions of subjectivism which I shall label strong and weak. Strong subjectivism explicitly denies the possibility of objective knowledge of social structure while weak subjectivism, although emphasising the subject, implicitly accepts extra-individual structures. I shall argue that the strong version is logically inconsistent and does not therefore compel us to accept its conclusions, whilst the weaker version, which applies to the four positions outlined in the first section, already admits the possibility. I shall contrast and criticise these different approaches in order to develop the most fruitful way of combining them with a structural analysis.

The argument that *strong* subjectivism is logically inconsistent is very similar to Popper's argument concerning what he calls uncritical rationalism. [34] Namely, that the proposition includes itself within its own scope — i.e. is self-referential — and when applied to itself casts doubt on its own propositions. These propositions can be stated as:

(i) Social reality consists *only* of individual consciousnesses and their constructions.

(ii) These constructions are all equally valid and legitimate.

However, these propositions are themselves part of social reality and, therefore, by (ii) are no more valid or legitimate than any others. They do not therefore compel us to accept them — it is a matter of faith or choice or commitment just as is the adoption of a different set of propositions. Given that it is such a choice, there seem to me compelling reasons why it is better *not* to adopt them. Broadly, these reasons are that to adopt them would deny much that we experience in the world and preclude us questioning and possibly explaining the experiences. We experience the social world not as chaotic, but patterned, ordered and regular. Surely this is not a fortunate coincidence of individual constructions? We regularly experience the *resistance* of social reality. We cannot bring about what we want merely by thinking about it and often we are continually frustrated despite our best efforts. Surely there are causes and reasons for this which we can investigate? To limit ourselves to only considering people's conscious, commonsense understanding of the world is to accept today's equivalent of 'witches' and 'gods' as adequate explanations of people's actions. Whilst these constructs may well have *accounted* for the actions of historical subjects, must we be content with basing our actions on such distorted accounts of the world? Are we happy to accept the results of such beliefs (especially if we are designated the witch) and their modern equivalents such as racism and sexism? Can we not ask *why* and *how* rather than merely *what*?

INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

I shall begin by looking at the work of Schutz. As we have seen, he was primarily concerned to analyse the way in which individuals experienced their own and others actions in their everyday world. This involved focusing attention on the manner in which actors constituted such actions as meaningful. However, this concern with the consciousness of individuals did not mean that he denied the possibility of sociology going beyond the individual and attempting both to analyse the patterning of meanings between individuals and groups and to explore the effects of social and cultural factors.

"A further fundamental category of social life is the inequality of the distribution of knowledge . . . among individuals belonging to the group and also among the groups themselves. This fundamental category deserves to be made the central theme of a sociology of knowledge which is aware of its true task." [35]

"It is a task of the social sciences to investigate to what extent the different forms of systems of relevancy in the life-world . . . are socially and culturally conditioned." [36]

He does not, however, seriously come to terms with the nature and difficulty of this project even though he seems to assume the structural and institutional aspects of social reality as an ever-present background and limitation to the interpretive activity of social actors. Indeed, his attitude to such factors exhibits contradictions which stem directly from the inherent shortcomings of the subjectivist approach. For example, in contrast to the *primary reality* of our experience of other individuals,

social collectivities and institutionalised relations, however, are as such not entities within the province of meaning of everyday reality but constructs of commonsense thinking which have their reality in another subuniverse. [37]

Yet elsewhere he shows less doubt about their ontological status and demonstrates an almost positivist attitude:

[Every man] . . . is a member of a social structure into which he is born or which he has joined, and which existed before him and which will exist after him. Every total social system has structures of familial relationships, age groups and generations; it has divisions of labour and differentiation according to occupation; it has balances of power and dominion; leaders and those led. [38]

The most fundamental problem, both for us and for Schutz, is that becuase of his base in Husserl he has to remain locked into the idea of the individual's

intentional consciousness. That is, his analyses of the social world *per se* are always undertaken from the point of view of an individual experiencing ego *whose Lebenswelt* it is. For example, in a chapter entitled 'The Structure of the Social World', he begins:

> The world is now experienced, *by the individual, . . . as a social world . . . this social world is by no means homogeneous but exhibits a multiform structure. Each of its spheres or regions is both a way of perceiving and a way of understanding the subjective experiences of others. [39]*

It is clear in what follows that it is not the social world itself which is structured but the individual's *experience* of that world. The same approach is embodied in Schutz's concept of 'finite provinces of meaning' and the consequent existence of multiple realities. It is clear that these terms do not refer to some structuring of the social world as such but to the different ways or modes in which the individual experiences reality — or rather bestows reality on his experiences. Examples of these provinces of meaning are dreams and imageries, religious experience, scientific contemplation and above all the world of working in everyday life. Individuals switch from one mode to another but the modes are the same across all individuals.

> The paradox of communication [how to communicate phenomenological insights in ordinary language — JM] . . . exists only as long as we take what we have called the finite provinces of meaning as ontological, static entities objectively existing outside the stream of individual consciousness within which they operate. [40]

They thus seem, in some respects, to be the obverse of Wittgenstein's forms of life. Whereas the latter exist all the time but only for some people — i.e. those involved in a particular form of life — the former exist only for particular periods but for all people.

This individual approach leaves Schutz with no way of grasping the structural features of the social world, to which he himself refers [see 38 above] except as ideas and motivations within the individual's consciousness. Even though he admits they have a deeper and more pervasive effect he can only approach them in the same way as he would the interpretation of dreams and fantasies whose reality is equally assured by the experiencing consciousness.

Another fundamental problem is the nature of inter-subjectivity, for he has to try and explain its constitution purely on the basis of individual subjectivity — a task which Husserl faced and never managed fully to resolve in his concept of 'transcendental intersubjectivity'. This, according to Schutz, "exists purely in me, the mediating ego. It is constituted purely from the source of my intentionality, but in such a manner that it is the *same* transcendental intersubjectivity in every single human being." [41] The problem is, of course, how and why it happens to be the same in every human being — if indeed it is. Schutz, however, in reversing the Husserlian *epoche* and focusing on the taken-for-granted natural attitude to the social world cannot even approach this problem, as he (thankfully) admits:

> We shall be proceeding, then . . . with the understanding that we are deliberately leaving aside all problems of transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity' [even though] 'according to Husserl . . . a psychology of pure intersubjectivity . . [is] . . nothing less than a constitutive phenomenology of the natural standpoint'. [42]

All that is left for Schutz is to base his work on the constructions of everyday thought and the *assumption* that people's standpoints are interchangeable and their systems of relevancies congruent which together he calls the "general thesis or reciprocal perspectives". In other words, he has to assume precisely that which is in need of explanation because his subjectivist approach precludes the possibility of such an explanation. The way forward is by recognising that language is, in its very nature, *inter*-subjective. It exists, as a structure, outside of the individual and thereby allows the possibility of communication and reciprocal perspectives.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY   Ethnomethodology, in developing from Schutz's work, can be seen to represent a distinct advance. Firstly, it advances in recognising the importance of language not merely as a means of representation but as the essential medium in and through

which actors organise their actions and interactions; secondly, in moving away from the pure subjectivity of the ego towards a recognition that language and interaction are essentially inter-subjective — that they can only function because their categories and rules are public; thirdly, in stressing that social interaction is essentially an *activity* — the practical activity of making 'account-able' (i.e. able to be normatively accounted for) one's own and others' actions — and thereby focusing attention both on the temporal and contextual location of action and the constant reflexivity of the acting subject.

However, ethnomethodology has also led to radical claims concerning the nature and possibility of sociology as outlined above. I shall elaborate on these themes and then develop criticims firstly in terms of the restrictions of ethnomethodology's self-chosen sphere of operation and secondly in terms of its inherent philosophical problems.

In reacting against the positivist belief in the inherent objectivity and externality of the social world, enthnomethodologists stress that it is always the result of the active production of its members through their intersubjective practices. It is, therefore,

> the objective reality of social facts *as* an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life . . [that] . . is, for members doing sociology, a fundamental phenomenon. Because . . . it is practical sociology's fundamental phenomenon, it is the prevailing topic for ethnomethodological studies. [43, my emphasis]

At this point in Garfinkel's preface, social reality is still accepted and ethnomethodology is only a part of sociology — a practical approach. However, others go further and see social facts as only ongoing accomplishments:

> It is not that a real objective factual social world exists out there to which the members of society are subject but that the actors in the process of apprehending this world (which does not exist! JM) . . . externalise it and objectify it . . . . Social facts are the practical accomplishments of members' routine practices for apprehending the social world. [44]

Thus the normal topics of sociological enquiry, such as social structure or class, do not exist except as they are actually produced as constructs by members at a particular point in time. Sociology's task must therefore be to examine and account for the processes by which actors constitute and sustain their sense of social reality.

Whilst correct in emphasising that the social world *is* a product of human activity, it ignores the fact that once constituted such meanings and accounts have consequences beyond the immediacy of their production. The actions and speeches of actors do more than account for themselves, they affect others in ways which go beyond the intentions of the speaker. This blindness to consequences seems to stem from a deeper problem — namely that despite the proclaimed emphasis on everyday *activities*, ethnomethodologists in fact talk almost exclusively about *accounts* and *meanings* and to the extent that actions are discussed it is purely in terms of their ability to account and be accounted for. Indeed, for ethnomethodology, the notion of intentional activity — as in the commonsense but important idea of attempting to achieve something in the actor's world — seems to become totally lost. We are left with the rather hollow world in which all that happens is a perpetual accounting for the activities which account for the activities which . . . . Accounting for one's activities is an important feature of everyday life but surely it is secondary to the reasons, intentions and interests which actually account for our having to take any actions at all. Accounting for our actions will not pay the rent — unless you happen to work as an ethnomethodologist of course! The idea of *interests* is of central importance for with it comes the possibility of conflicts of interest and thereby also the use of *power* in the resolution of such conflicts. All of this is notably absent from the ethnomethodologists' discourse.

The second major lacuna within ethnomethodology is the neglect of one of its own propositions — the intersubjectivity of social action and meaning. The emphasis on the creativity and productivity of the actor in social interaction ignores the fact that this would not be possible without the *pre-existing* rules and resources which

actors are able (and sometimes unable through lack of power) to draw upon. It is like pointing out the novelty of a particular sentence without realising that the sentence is only meaningful, for both speaker and hearer, because of the whole syntactic and semantic structure of the language which existed before and outside of the individuals. This further precludes considering the distribution of resources, such as knowledge, opportunity, power, wealth etc., amongst the various actors. Nor can it analyse the way in which the actor utilises these various resources and is conditioned by lack of them. For example, the way in which status and power determine whose account is to count.

Finally, it provides no account of the origin and development of these rules and resources — in other words their reproduction and change through time. The basis for such an account can be seen by connecting up the consequences and conditions of action in the idea that a social act both draws on such rules and resources and at the same time reproduces them in the effects of its consequences.

It has been argued that such problems and questions are essentially illegitimate in that they do not take seriously enough the ethnomethodological position. For example, based on Garfinkel's argument that:

> [The ethnomethodological study is directed at the task of] discovering the formal properties of commonplace, practical commonsense actions, 'from within' actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings. The formal properties obtain their guarantees from no other source and in no other way. [45]

Filmer suggests that:

> The rules, then are only established as such by their ability to organise the settings of practical, everyday, commonsense actions . . . . Moreover, that the rules *have* organised them is evidenced by the coherence, rationality, sense and understandability of members' accounts of them [the settings-JM] . . . . The rules come from "the occasions of their use"; they are generated within the activities which they organise. [46, original emphasis]

Apart from the circular nature of the last argument, the idea that rules can only come into existence at the time of their actual use seems entirely unconvincing and is, indeed, clearly against Garfinkel's emphasis on the "'seen but unnoticed', expected, background features of everyday scenes [which] the member of a society uses . . . as a scheme of interpretation." [47] Clearly, these background expectancies are part of the conditions and resources which I have argued warrant an analysis in their own right.

I shall now briefly illustrate some of the above arguments with examples from the *practice* of ethnomethodology.

Firstly, with regard to the consequences of action, Garfinkel pays scant attention to the morality of the consequences of his own actions as an ethnomethodologist. His favourite method of experiment on people (despite strictures by other ethnomethodologists against treating the social world as an object) is to attempt 'disrupt their background expectancies'. This rather euphemistic phrase includes such activities as pretending, without explanation, that one is a stranger in one's own home; acting on the assumption that another person is continually lying and deceiving; or placing people in a situation where their understanding of events is consistently negated and they have no possibility of retreat. Garfinkel's own summary is adequate testimony to his 'ethnomethodological indifference' to their consequences:

> Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble . . . to produce and *sustain* bewilderment, consternation and confusion; to produce the socially structured effects of *anxiety, shame, guilt* and *indignation.* [48, my emphasis]

Garfinkel also ignores the necessary *conditions* for his own work — the political and economic factors which allow certain people to do theoretical, unproductive, work; the financial resources which are necessary; the privileged access to specialist knowledge and facilities as an academic; the privileged position of the researcher with respect to the victim etc. As Smart has pointed out:

> To pose such questions of Garfinkel's work is to draw attention to the question of the nature of the social world in which it is possible to do the work which he finds interesting; it is to emphasise that

there is more than a sense in which the social world exists, beyond the interpretive procedures by which a given sense of the social world is described and communicated. [49]

The single most fundamental difficulty with phenomenology and, to a lesser extent, ethnomethodology is that their approach begins with and remains firmly wedded to the individual subject. This leads to their resultant difficulties in trying to reconstitute the inter-subjectivity of language and communication. The way to proceed is, in fact, to reverse this direction, begin with language itself as an already-constituted, inter-subjective phenomenon and then to attempt to trace the way in which the subject is formed through an appropriation of this language. This approach is clear in the work of both Habermas and Maturana [59] who both stress that it also involves changing from viewing language as primarily representational and denotative towards emphasising its consensual and connotative aspects and origins. This serves to locate the next two areas I will discuss — Winch and hermeneutics — since both move away from individual subjectivity to concentrate on the inter-subjectivity of language.

As we have seen, Winch analyses meaningful action as that which obeys rules — rules which arise out of the activities of a particular language-game and which only gain their validity within that language-game. The language-game exists as part of a form of life external to the people who participate in it. It is not, therefore, the creation of a particular individual, and individual acts can be judged as conforming or not to the rules of the game. The task of sociology therefore consists of gaining a grasp of a particular language-game in its own terms. The explanation of an action involves identifying it as an instance of particular rules within the game not relating it to any prior cause be it one of natural law or individual motivation.

There are a number of criticisms of Winch's conception of meaning as rule, and Giddens outlines the most important [50]. Firstly, it is too restrictive since there are activities such as 'going for a walk' for which it is inappropriate to ask whether or not they are being done 'correctly'. Secondly, (and similarly to criticisms above) it ignores conflicts over the interpretation of the rules and the power relations involved in the resolution of such conflicts. Thirdly, it conflates the *meaning* of an action with the *actual occurrence* of such an action. To know that a command implies obedience is not the same as knowing whether or not it will be obeyed or as actually obeying it. Thus is it also necessary to have causal explanations for a particular act of obedience or disobedience.

As well as these, there are more serious problems which are inherent in the Wittgensteinian background that Winch adopts. Firstly, for Winch, language-games are essentially closed and self-contained in that the actions and accompanying rules and meanings cannot be analysed in terms of or even translated into other forms of language. This leads to the perennial problems of specifying the nature and validity of sociology — what is its language-game? How does this relate to the language-game under study? And how to avoid a total relativism? — and Winch's only answer is a rather vague reference to certain limiting conditions of human nature. Secondly, there is no historical dimension to his account and there seems no way that it *could* provide explanation or analysis of the development and change in forms of life or the later rejection of earlier beliefs.

Hermeneutics, in the hands of Gadamer, has close ties with Wittgenstein's work, as we saw above, but goes beyond it in a number of ways [51]. Traditions are not closed and self-contained, in the way that forms of life are seen to be, but are open to the possibility of understanding and interpretation from the perspective of another tradition. They are not ahistorical, but can be seen to develop and change, at least partly in relation to other traditions. Hermeneutics, as a method, is akin to assimilating a new language — interpretive judgements are always conditioned by the preconceptions and prejudgements of the interpreter but through the process of interpretation the structure of these preconceptions themselves becomes clearer. Interpretation is seen as an activity which involves a practical interest — the

development of the interpreter's self-understanding — and which must be conducted as a dialogue between the interpreter and the text or person that is the object of inquiry.

Gadamer claims that hermeneutics, when seen in this light, is not merely the *method* of social science but is the essential basis of all human communication — it is the very ontological condition of social being. Hermeneutics is universal. This means two things. Firstly, that it is equally at the base of the physical sciences — they too form traditions and working in them involves acquiring and using the preconceptions of that tradition. Secondly, that there is no possibility of escape from tradition — there can be no standpoint free from all presuppositions from which to create objective theories. Understanding and communication:

> are modes of social co-existence which, in the last formalization, is a community of dialogue. Nothing is exempt from this community, no experience of any kind. Neither the specialisation of modern science . . . nor material labour . . . nor political institutions of domination and administration . . . exist outside the universal medium of practical Reason (and un-Reason). [52]

Hermeneutics is seen, therefore, as necessarily the universal mode of philosophy. It is this claim for the universality of hermeneutics which is of most concern. We can agree that all experience does occur against and is to some extent created through a background of presuppositions but must we follow Gadamer in claiming that all theorising is therefore purely relative to its own tradition? The answer is 'no' for a number of reasons, some of which are arguments that have already been made in connection with other positions.

We begin by looking at Gadamer's model of hermeneutic dialogue. He proposes various criteria for judging the adequacy of an interpretation — its relation to the text itself; it's relation to the text's tradition or context and its relation to the interpreter's tradition — but none, significantly, concerning its correctness with regard to the author's intentions. This is because, for Gadamer, a text stands by itself, independent of its author, and its meaning is established in the interaction between the work and the interpreter and his tradition. It is true that a text goes beyond the conscious intentions of its author — it has effects on its own tradition and later traditions which the author could not predict or intend, and may well embody meanings and motivations of which the author is unconscious. However, to divorce interpretation totally from the idea of correctness can lead to an endless proliferation of different and irreconcilable interpretations. The adoption of a particular interpretation becomes arbitrary. Gadamer would appeal to the usefulness for the interpreter and conformity to its tradition but this leaves him no way to

> deal with comparisons of readings made from different traditions; nor . . . with differing versions of the same 'tradition' applied to the understanding of texts [53].

Giddens also brings out other problems. It is true that all our experiences of the world are always based on the presuppositions of our previous experience, and we therefore always move within another form of the hermeneutic circle, but if we accept Gadamer's relativism then this circle can only ever be the endless *replacement* of one idea with another rather than the fruitful *development* of ideas and theories. To overcome this relativism Giddens suggests that it is necessary to distinguish clearly between the *sense* and the *reference* of meaning. The hermeneutic problem of coming to understand the meaning or sense of an action or utterance in terms which are acceptable to the subject and their tradition is of primary importance, but this is logically separable from the problem of then judging the validity of the propositions which have been thus understood — their reference. There are, of course, tremendous philosophical difficulties involved in the latter but the distinction between sense and reference at least allows them to be addressed.

The claimed universality of hermeneutics has also been disputed by Habermas [54], who argues that there must be limits to the success of an approach based only on the conscious intentions of everyday speakers. Firstly, how can hermeneutics deal with communcation which is distorted or pathological in ways

of which the speakers are not aware? This can happen at two different levels. At the individual level, the speakers may well not be aware or conscious of the intentions or motivations which are actually guiding their linguistic and physical expressions. These are the kind of situations which psychoanalysis is aimed at — an uncovering of the *unconscious* pattern of distortions which manifests itself in the individual's actions. At the other level, Habermas argues that there are distortions within the actual structure of the language itself. At any point of time, within a particular society, the meanings available within the language itself will reflect the manifest beliefs of that society but may well thereby conceal underlying patterns and relationships:

> Language is also a medium of domination and social power. It serves to legitimate relations of organised force. In so far as the legitimations do not articulate the relations of force that they make possible, in so far as these relations are merely expressed in the legitimations, language is also ideological. Here it is not a question of deceptions within a language, but of deception with language as such. [55]

In both these cases the distortions are not merely contingent or random but can be shown to be related, in systematic ways, to on the one hand the individual's early experiences and on the other to the wider institutions and processes of that society. Hermeneutics is constrained by these limits but cannot, of itself, transcend them without resource to general empirical and theoretical knowledge unavailable to the normal speaker.

Habermas also approaches hermeneutics from a totally different direction in suggesting a general theory of the basic structures underlying meaning and its communication, paralleling Chomsky's work in reconstructing the deep structure of natural language. Chomsky's universal grammar involves propositions which must apply to all natural languages and in the same way Habermas wishes to construct a theory at a very general level concerning the presuppositions which must be inherent in *any* meaningful human interaction. Such a theory, which he has begun to develop under the term 'universal pragmatics' [56], would provide a structural underpinning for hermeneutics itself.

A critique of soft systems methodology

To the extent that the SSM embodies a subjectivist social theory, then I hope that it is apparent that it is subject to the same criticisms that I have made of interpretive sociology. However, the SSM is not itself a social theory but an action-oriented methodology. Its primary purpose is to facilitate taking action in the world in order to bring about change rather than explaining how the world is. I wish, therefore, in this section to examine the effects of its inherent subjectivism on its ability to bring about change. This is essentially the point of debate between Checkland and Jackson. [4,15]

Checkland analysed where the SSM should be located on Burrell and Morgan's two-dimensional typology of social science [25], arguing that it was located primarily in the interpretive paradigm but also, to some extent, in the radical subjective quadrant along with Critical Theory. The difference between the two quadrants being their position along the dimension concerned with regulation or radical change.

Jackson attacked this latter claim, arguing that the SSM should be seen as purely interpretive — that is subjectivist and *regulative*, i.e. incapable of bringing about radical change (the problematic nature of this term will be discussed below). This particular debate centres not on the subjectivism of the SSM (which both agree on) but the extent to which it can bring about change. I shall argue that this is a misplaced and unhelpful approach. For Jackson, it is a diversion from what should be his real target — subjectivism; and for Checkland, acceptance of these terms leads to contradictions within his own position.

Jackson's primary point is that the methodology takes as given the *status quo* in

terms of the unequal distribution of power, resources and personal abilities amongst the actors within a particular problem situation. Therefore the only consensus on desirable changes that could be reached would inevitably be one which does not radically alter the *status quo* against the interests of the dominant parties. The *possibility*, inherent within the methodology, of introducing radical ideas and proposals will not *in practice* ever occur. For it to do so, the methodology would have to bring about what Habermas called an 'ideal speech situation' in which such inequalities did not exist. This is impossible, Jackson argues, because of the methodology's subjectivism:

> the Checkland methodology, committed as it is to subjectivism, is not in a position to understand let alone to challenge these social arrangements. [26]

As a subjectivist methodology, it is aimed at exploring and elucidating people's *perceptions* of reality (rather than reality itself) not at explaining the origin of these ideas nor at trying to discover which are necessary, and therefore unchangeable, and which are contingent and so open to the possibility of change.

Jackson goes on to assert that the SSM cannot be seen as fundamentally similar to Critical Theory, both for the reasons outlined above and because:

> Habermas recognises that though the social world is created by man, it is not 'transparent' to him. It escapes him, takes on objective features and constrains him. Man is still in the grip of unconscious forces and his actions still have unintended consequences. [27]

As a slight digression, Jackson (and to some extent Checkland) misrepresent Mingers' paper. It did not seek *only* to reveal similarities but also to show important differences. In fact, it outlines most of Jackson's arguments. Also, it did not suggest that the *major* difference was political, merely that this was the most obvious.

Moving on to Checkland's reply [4], his first point is essentially a reiteration of the basic subjectivist view that it is illegitimate to refer to 'laws governing the operation of social systems' or 'objective social reality'. Rather it is a continual construction of communicating individuals. The methodology is a way of facilitating such social processes and as such could, in principle, lead to radical changes in the participants ideas. To deny this, he argues, is a logical error because it assumes *a priori* knowledge about the possible future outcome of a learning system.

His second point is that Jackson's demands for a commitment to unconstrained discussion are idealistic and utopian, particularly in terms of equalising the intellectual resouces of the participants, and should not therefore be made requirements of the methodology. This objection seems strange in the light of the following statement in 'Systems Thinking, Systems Practice':

> Another way to describe the methodology, in fact, is as a formal means of achieving the 'communicative competence' in unrestricted discussion which Habermas seeks. [29]

Finally, he argues that it could only be claimed that the methodology *inevitably* maintained the status quo if it could be shown that *Weltanschauungen* were *completely fixed* and not open to any change at all — clearly not a reasonable assertion.

To summarise, Jackson has tried to show that the SSM is regulative *as well as* subjectivist. That it cannot lead to radical change but must support the *status quo*. Checkland has argued that it is not possible to show this since peoples' ideas *can* change and these changes could, in principle, be radical enough to alter the *status quo*.

Much of this interchange is, I believe, misdirected in concentrating on the 'regulation/radical change' dimension. This comes about because of the preoccupation with locating the SSM on one particular typology which is itself problematic. In particular, the two dimensions (regulation/radical change and objective/subjective) are far from independent of each other if taken more seriously than mere guidelines. The regulation/change dimension is concerned with the nature of the social world and the social theorist's attitude towards it:

> sociology of regulation [refers to] the writings of theorists who are primarily concerned to provide

explanations of society in terms which emphasise its underlying unity and cohesiveness . . . the basic questions which it asks tend to focus upon the need to understand why society is maintained *as an entity* . . . . The sociology of radical change [is concerned with] explanations for the radical change, deep-seated structural conflict, modes of domination and structural contradiction . . . it is concerned with what is possible rather than with what is; with alternatives rather than with acceptance of the *status quo*. [30, my emphasis]

This dimension therefore *assumes* a basically objectivist stance. A thoroughgoing subjectivist would have to argue that this dimension was meaningless as one cannot change or maintain an entity that does not exist.

This basic contradiction is reflected in Jackson's and Checkland's arguments. Jackson begins by seeking to demonstrate that the methodology is subjectivist *and* regulative as though these were two separate tasks, when in fact he actually argues that it is regulative precisely *because* it is subjectivist [see 26 above]. Rather than be so concerned with showing that the methodology is purely interpretive, Jackson would do better to criticise subjectivism itself (which, in effect, most of his arguments are doing) for it is this which precludes the kind of social theorising that he desires.

Equally, by accepting the argument that Jackson sets out, Checkland ends up in a contradictory position. Whilst on the one hand, chastening Jackson for using terms such as 'social laws' and 'objective social reality' and insisting that social reality is not given but socially constructed, on the other he is happy discussing "what the situations *themselves* seemed *to demand*" [31, my emphasis] and *'the status quo'* as though there were a single, agreed upon social reality. To be able to discuss whether or not the methodology "might in the end confirm the *status quo* or radically change it" [32] makes both ontological and epistemological claims which directly contradict his subjectivist position.

Checkland goes on to 'partially construct' himself the argument that he thinks Jackson is making, namely that the methodology can bring about *no* change because it is based on the idea of *immovable Weltanschauungen*. Checkland can then argue that this is clearly fallacious — they can change and there is in principle no limit to such a change. This is to evade the issue. It is not being argued that the methodology cannot create any change at all. The use of any action-methodology in a problem situation, and indeed the mere presence of an analyst will change that situation in some way. The argument is precisely about whether there are, in fact, limits and constraints on the type and extent of such changes. Here we come to the crux of the matter. The arguments put forward in support of there being constraints — that there is an objective and constraining social structure involving an unequal distribution of resources and incompatible interests; that actors are to some extent unaware of the motivations and consequences of their actions etc. — all presuppose the possibility of objective social theories which subjectivism denies. Rather than deal with these arguments directly, Checkland can only respond:

The important point about the erecting of any such barrier [i.e. suggesting that the results will be constrained unless attempts are made to remove inequalities first — JM] to the use of *a learning system* is that it denies the nature of learning. The assumption of those who erect such barriers is that certain knowledge (concerning the stability of societal constraints, domination, etc.) is known absolutely. [33, original emphasis]

This reply assumes firstly that the methodology is the *only* learning system which can supply knowledge about the social world. Might there not be other learning systems which can supply knowledge *about the methodology*? The assumption is only valid to the extent that the subjectivist position itself is valid. Secondly, it is not necessary to assume *certain* knowledge. Knowledge is always provisional, but if a strong case can be made that a particular outcome is likely, then that is sufficient to warrant our taking action — in this case suggesting that the methodology as its stands may be limited in what it can achieve. It is not adequate to say we cannot be certain, so wait and see — the methodology may one day produce radical change. How long is it necessary to wait? An infinitely long time, presumably,

since the proposition that the methodology *is capable* of producing a particular outcome can never be refuted no matter how many times it actually does not.

In summary, I think it is legitimate to ask the question: Are there limits to the types and extent of change that the methodology can lead to? We can try to answer this question both theoretically by suggesting reasons why there might be and empirically in terms of what results actually occur. Here, as is admitted, the past results have been constrained. Although this is not, so far, conclusive it would be instructive to put it to the test by deliberately trying to bring about radical change. In any case, even if it does occasionally produce radical results the high proportion of conservative outcomes suggests that reflection on why this might be so would be valuable.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper has been to refute the implication, inherent in subjectivism, that social theory is inevitably limited to the exploration of individuals' commonsense and equally valid understandings and conceptions, without denying the importance of much of this work. This has been done by distinguishing between strong and weak subjectivism. Strong subjectivism is not logically consistent and does not therefore compel us to accept it. Most of the substantive work that has been discussed is weak in the sense that it actually smuggles in and depends on some kind of objective social structure which it cannot then deal with precisely because of its commitment to subjectivism.

In examining the work of Checkland as an example, we find that it is closest to the position of Schutz in that it is both individualist and idealist. The problems with this are firstly that meaning is not individually subjective but inter-subjective — the meaningfulness of speech and actions depends upon and reproduces a pre-existing inter-subjective structure. Without this there could be no communication. Secondly, the social world consists primarily, not of ideas, but of actions (including speech) and activities. These actions have both causes, some of which may not be understood by the actor, and consequences which will go beyond the actor's intentions. Moreover, these actions will be both enabled and constrained, in differing ways, by structures outside of the individual. Thirdly, people's differing interpretations are not all equally valid. We can distinguish between the sense of an action, within its own tradition, and the reference of an action which can be judged in terms of its validity. Even within a tradition, actions can either be successful — conforming to expectations and thereby bringing about what was intended — or unsuccessful because they were not appropriate or valid within their context of use.

Having established the *possibility* of non-subjective social theories, how can they be developed without a return to naive positivism? As actors and observers we perceive and experience the world as patterned and ordered. For positivists, this order reflects the world and is independent of the observer; for subjectivists it reflects the observer and is independent of the world. Surely, it is actually generated in the interaction between the observer and the observed, and in developing our understanding we continually move from one to the other and back again in an endless but hopefully convergent circle reflecting the complete inter-dependence of the two.

There are a number of current writers who are articulating such an approach. Firstly there is the modern development of realist theories [60] in which the concept of structure is seen as descriptive of something which is not observable, nor in an ultimate sense provable, but something which, *if it did exist*, would constitute a causal mechanism capable of generating what we actually perceive and experience. Secondly there is the work of Giddens, who has drawn on the work of modern French structuralists in developing his idea of structuration [57] — the process whereby actors draw upon structure in their actions and simultaneously reproduce