
JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN
ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Copyright © The Author(s), 2013
Volume 4, Number 2, Winter 2013
ISSN 2068 – 0317
<http://compaso.eu>



Motives in Social Organization

Editor's introduction to the Themed Issue

Richard Fitzgerald¹

The special issue brings together a range of discussions examining motives and accounts drawing on the pioneering work of C Wright Mills (1940, 2000). In addressing the classic sociological question of ‘how is social order achieved?’, Mills posited that the display and deployment of motives and accounts of reasoning about one’s or another’s actions are a prominent feature of the social order. For Mills the action of ascribing motives to people behaviour or claiming motives for some action revealed peoples routine socially based common sense reasoning and mundane theorising practices. In this way motives were not to be treated as windows into some inner mental state, indeed as he points out “There is no way to plumb behind verbalization into an individual and directly check our motive-mongering”(Mills 1967: 447), but as a form of social action. For Mills treating this psychological concept as a sociological one meant focusing on the way that motives for action were talked into being, how they were constructed, for whom and for what purpose. From this the analysis of verbalised motives provided a basis for recovering and examining typical vocabularies of motives as a constituent and essential part of examining social order. As such motives, and their fellow traveller accounts, provided a way of accessing the way society is perceived to be organized and how it is perceived to operate. Viewed this way the production of motives and accounts tells us much more about how social knowledge is organized, how people use common social knowledge about a society and its members when accounting for action, through routine reasoning that reveals a taken for granted social order.

It was the relationship between mundane reasoning about society and reasoned action in any particular instance that was the focus of Alan Blum and Peter McHugh’ (1971) discussion where they argued that the relationship between accounts and motives had a further level of complexity. They argued that vocabularies of motives rely upon a reciprocity of perspectives, not only in their display of versions of the world but also in

¹ University of Queensland, School of Journalism and Communication, Australia

providing accounts of action as reasoned action from the persons perspective. Motives thus serve to formulate for members their interactions as experiences framed in events and where others are thought to have biographies and to engage the world with them (Blum and McHugh 1971: 106). For Blum and McHugh motives needed to be seen as grounded in a reciprocity of perspectives through which provided a more detailed analytic focus on the ways in which motives were used as a resource for connecting an event with a biography (or social typification) and in accounting for that event through reasoned action.

It is of course not surprising that motives as social action was also taken up within ethnomethodology (Sharrock and Watson 1984) (and including work under the heading Membership Categorisation Analysis (Housley and Fitzgerald 2008), and Discursive Psychology (Potter and Edwards 2005) as part of the program of taking taken for granted resources and treating them as topics of inquiry. In turning this resource into a topic, motives or accounts were again not treated as directly connecting thought and action, but rather the production and work of motive giving became a topic of analytic interest in their own right (Berard 1998). Informed by this perspective, and the emergence of analytic approaches such as Membership Categorisation Analysis, Conversation Analysis Discursive Psychology and various forms of Discourse Analysis, the study of motives was able to focus on naturally occurring interaction and so providing an analysis grounded in the in situ local discursive organisation of motives and accounts. (Though not without its critics see Bruce and Wallis, 1983).

It is in this developing context that this special issue is positioned in which is highlighted the increasing range of studies and analytic approaches used in the study of the social organisation of motives but where each is grounded in the principles developed by Mills and Blum and McHugh. The special issue begins with Alan Blum who situates and revisits some of the ideas of his groundbreaking paper written with Peter McHugh. Here Blum notes that motives continue to lack a sustained focus in sociology but hints that this may be because of the difficulty in approaching this within social theory due to its constant perplexity. Kieran Bonner's discussion then picks up on the theme of motives by examining an instance from a news article where motives are given for some action. Bonner, draws upon Blum and McHugh 1971 paper to provide a more grounded understanding of Blum and McHugh's work. In the next paper Roxana Bratu using Discursive Psychology (DP) examines vocabularies of happiness, how happiness is ascribed or claimed and how it is organized within and through a moral order. In the following paper by Miriam Cihodariu and Lucian-Ştefan Dumitrescu the focus shifts to the subject of European immigration. Here the political discourse of right wing political parties across Europe are examined using forms of Discourse Analysis in order to explore the way justifications, rationalisations are rhetorically organized. From the political focus the next paper by Jennifer Doyle and Rose Melville shifts to examine the reported motivations of people who volunteer for high care foster children. Doyle and Melville draw upon Mills's notion of a vocabulary of motives to examine the motives expressed but also the way these motivations are embedded within moral organisation. Continuing with the study of children, Oltion Kadaifciu examines the construction of a vocabulary of

motives by deaf children within the class room. As Kadaifciu reminds us, while the study of motives tends to privilege and possibly assume a spoken medium, motives for action as a routine part of social action are constructed through mediums besides spoken language. Especially, as in this case, where Albanian sign language is in its infancy. In the final paper in the special issue section Alina Petra Marinescu-Nenciu examines the way motives are used in constructing a narrative around leaving a job. Taking a wider focus which includes motives amongst other reasoning activities, Marinescu-Nenciu explores the way people employ routine narrative patterns in constructing their reasoning.

From these interesting discussions it would be good to think that we are now at a point where we can examine the production of motives and accounts as social actions in ever more layers of sophistication. What seems particularly fruitful and is raised in a number of papers is the ways in which people locally configure or orient to motives within moral orders, norms and values. Here approaches such as discourse analysis, membership category analysis and discursive psychology have provided rich analytic observations underpinned through the theoretical work pioneered by Mills and Blum and McHugh.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this collection and the editors, especially Cosima Rughinis and Maria Rădan Gorska, for bringing this collection together and for providing a focused platform for this thought provoking area of research.

REFERENCES

- Berard, T. (1998). Attributions and avowals of motive in the study of deviance: Resource or topic? *Journal for the theory of social behaviour*, 28(2), 193-213.
- Blum, A. F., & McHugh, P. (1971). The social ascription of motives. *American Sociological Review*, 98-109.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (2005) 'Discursive Psychology, Mental States and Descriptions', in H. te Molder and J. Potter (eds) *Conversation and Cognition*, pp. 241-59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2008). Motives and social organization: sociological amnesia, psychological description and the analysis of accounts. *Qualitative Research*, 8(2), 237-256.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1940). Situated actions and vocabularies of motive. *American sociological review*, 5(6), 904-913.
- Mills, C.W. (1967) Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharrock, W. W., & Watson, D. R. (1984). What's the point of 'rescuing motives'??. *British Journal of Sociology*, 435-451.