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Institutional Repertoires. A Methodological Reassessment of Interviews in the Study of Professional Discourses

Cosmin TOTH¹

Abstract

The article puts forward a reassessment of the methodology employed in the interpretation of discourses elicited through the sociological interview technique, starting by examining the often taken for granted causal relationship between meaning and action. I start from discursive psychology theory and from some of the neo-institutionalism theories, arguing that there is no necessary link between people's actions and a mental universe defined as stable and coherent. Interviews are often analysed in order to reconstruct coherent mental universes from the responses of the participants. As an alternative methodological stance, I formulate the hypothesis that interview statements might be seen as activated repertoires previously acquired in various interactional arenas in which the individual takes part. These discourses provide justifications and explanations, which, through reiteration, become consolidated as institutional discursive repertoires. I support this hypothesis with empirical evidence from a research based on double round interviews with twelve school counsellors from Bucharest. The first round focused on the professional theories of school counsellors, while the second one was centred on the ways in which they have dealt with difficult cases. The comparative analysis of discourses from the first and second rounds reveals a loose coupling between the theories and the actual actions of counsellors. I argue that the observed loose coupling is the result of employing different institutional repertoires in order to respond to the discursive challenges posed by the interviewer.

Keywords: loose coupling, institutional repertoires, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, sociological interview.

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Introduction

Within the disciplines that study the organisational world, professional actions are often seen as being determined by the organisational and professional norms and procedures, and by the structure and culture of the organisation. Most of these disciplines address the issue of black boxes (Boudon, 2003) involved in the explanatory process, by referring, more or less explicitly, to the ways in which individuals deliberate, to their motivations and beliefs. This explanatory approach aims to reconstruct the cognitive universe of individuals. Accordingly, sociological interviews with organizational members are often geared towards accessing various stable elements of a subjective nature, such as attitudes, interests, motivations, values, or beliefs in order to provide a description or a model able to explain, or even predict, the behaviour of individuals in organisations.

In terms of research methodology, this approach rests on two major theoretical assumptions: (1) on the one hand, that there is a strong and direct link between these subjective elements and the actual actions; (2) on the other hand, that the sociologist can access this internal data using interviewing techniques.

This article challenges both assumptions by offering an alternative theoretical perspective, which is supported by empirical evidence resulted from an in-depth qualitative research conducted with twelve school counsellors from Bucharest. The first issue, concerning the relation between a clearly defined and stable interior universe and the individual actions within the organisational environment will be discussed from a neo-institutionalism perspective bringing into discussion the concept of loose coupling.

The second assumption will be discussed within the theoretical framework of situated actions (discursive psychology and discourse analysis) according to which the methodology guiding thematic interviews may lead to flawed conclusions. We will not assume such a standpoint, but we will, nevertheless, follow a situational perspective, formulating the hypothesis that different institutional arenas generate specific rhetoric. We will avoid a radical localist perspective by arguing that this rhetoric may be embedded in various repertoires, which are later activated selectively in the interview situation, in order to respond to the challenges posed by the interviewer's questions. Thus, we will argue that in the interview situation respondents may employ loosely couple alternative rhetoric. In order to do this, we will introduce the concept of institutional repertoires, which attempts to restore the trans-institutional value of discourses generated by an interview. This significantly redirects the focus from an analysis that tries to probe a stable and coherent 'inside' of the individual, which is seen as causal for behaviour towards a more or less rehearsed institutional rhetoric capable of generating loosely coupled organisational phenomena.

Meaning and action

Various forms of methodological individualism in sociology, openly states that the individual mental universe should be taken as a cause for human action. This position is rooted in the weberian definition of Sociology (Weber, 1947: 88) and in the notion of explanatory understanding (Weber 1947: 95-98). Building on the weberian paradigm, Boudon (2003) argues for an explanatory model that is able to eliminate the black boxes (the reconstruction of rationality) in favour of taking the *meaning* as a cause for individuals' actions (type III theory or cognitive theory of action).

Another sociological concept relying on causal assumptions is the definition of the situation. Thomas theorem refers precisely to the consequences that a subjective evaluation can have in the real world, implying in this way a causal relation between what the individual perceives, his actions, and the consequences of his actions (Thomas, 1932: 42) (Thomas, 1931: 189). Merton (1968: 466-467) also reaffirms this theorem's causal assumptions by using the notions of meaning and action. Discussing the Thomas theorem, Ball (1972) wonders how is it possible that sociological theories invoke it so often, while ignoring its causal implications. From such a perspective, when sociologists use qualitative data (particularly those obtained through interviews) employ more or less implicit assumptions concerning the causal relation between: meanings – operationalized as motives/reason, attitudes, and actual behaviours. Consequently, I wish to critically assess the methodological implications of a causal model that might be formulated as follows: people hold various theories about the world (*Weltanschauung*), comprising a fairly stable and coherent system of beliefs and attitudes (see the cognitive theory of action (Boudon, 2003)); in particular situations, these theories provide conceptual resources for the specific definitions of situations (Stebbins, 1971: 221); finally, the way in which the situation has been defined determines the action (Ball, 1972). I will further mention some theoretical approaches that critically assess such causal assumptions.

Bounded rationality and loose coupling

By introducing the concept of loose coupling, a number of neo-institutional theories have critically reassessed, from an empirical perspective, the link between meanings (intentions, motives, preferences, and beliefs) and action. Mayer and Rowan (1977) were the first to develop the notion of loose coupling in a macro structural analysis. In organisational theory, the concept of bounded rationality (Simon, 1955) and the ideas developed by the Carnegie School have inspired the neo-institutional approach in the political sciences. Within this line of thought the problem of loose coupling was analysed at the individual level. March (1986)

challenges some of the most important assumptions of rational choice theories (which employ a coherent and integrated decision and action system) and re-evaluates the relation between preferences/interests and action, pleading for empirical grounding. According to him, action is only partly determined by preferences. To the extent to which preferences and goals are 'unstable, incompletely evoked, inconsistent, imprecise', human action relies more on 'rules, traditions, hunches and the advice of the other' and 'we are prepared to act in ways that are inconsistent with our preferences and to maintain that inconsistency in the face of having it demonstrated' (March, 1986: 154-156). In the case of organisations, where the problem of the connection between objectives and action is more prominent, March and Olsen (1976: 57) show that the link between individual beliefs and actions can be significantly influenced by role constraints and by standard operating procedures.

Also, Orton and Weick (1990) review various approaches to the notion of loose coupling. Quoting Salancick (1975)*, Weick (1976:14-15) lists a number of prerequisites for loose coupling between intentions and action: intentions are not clear and unambiguous; consequences of action are not known; the means by which an intention is transformed into action are not known or in conflict; intentions are not known to a person at the time of selecting an action; there exists a set of multiple intentions which can determine a set of similar multiple actions. Assuming the possibility of loose coupling on the individual level has puzzling methodological implications, as far as what we elicit through interviews as statements concerning the interests, beliefs, and attitudes of respondents, actually might be loosely coupled with action.

The interview as a situated accomplishment

Beyond the question of establishing an empirical relation between subjective dispositions and action, there is the second problem that of the nature of the statements obtained from an interview. Alvesson (2003) identifies three methodological approaches to interviewing and analysing interview data: (1) the neopositivist or naturalist perspective; (2) the romantic, emotional perspective and (3) the localist, ethno-methodology perspective. Within the first, positivist approach, the interview guide as well as the interviewer are standardised 'technical means' for achieving a transfer of information, as 'clean' as possible, from the respondent to the researcher. The second perspective, of a phenomenological/interpretivist nature, is the 'romantic' view, which privileges authenticity and the genuine nature of information elicited through an interview. The emphasis is on obtaining information that is as close as possible to the interior life of the individual. The last perspective is of a constructivist, ethno-methodology and localist

* Weick(1976) is citing an unpublished manuscript of Salancick (1975): Notes on Loose Coupling: Linking Intentions to Actions

nature. One of the central features of this approach is that it rejects as irrelevant any probing of an individual's interior universe. According to this point of view, the legitimate object of study is not the mental state of the individual, but the local, situated and interactional construction of reality.

Different forms of discourse analysis have rejected, to varying degrees, the idea of accessing the mental states of an individual, on the count of it being irrelevant, impossible, or fundamentally erroneous. A particular case of discourse analysis is discursive psychology (Potter, 2003: 784). This approach is openly critical of a number of established concepts in psychology and social psychology which imply the existence of a cognitive, distinct and stable internal universe, such as: attitude, representation, attribution (Potter, 2003: 784). More precisely, the critique is aimed at seeing discourse as an 'expression' of intentions, thoughts and cognitive structures (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 242).

However, taking into account only the temporal and local setting of a discourse seems problematic even for some of those who embrace discourse analysis. Concepts such as 'interpretative repertoires', or 'institutional context' are theoretical solutions of a trans-situational nature that allow extrapolation from the interview situation to a wider social reality, without the assumption of a stable mental universe. Employing these concepts implies a departure from a firm contextual perspective, allowing for trans-situational explanatory factors. In this way it is possible to overcome the radical scepticism concerning the possibility of achieving social knowledge through interviews.

The idea of a connection between discourse, language and institutions is not novel. Mills (1940) speaks of specific vocabularies of motives in certain institutional settings. More recent discursive approaches (Drew & Heritage, 1992) take a similar stance by developing empirical research that describes the way in which people talk in different institutional areas. The defining features of institutional talk identified by Drew and Heritage (1992: 22) is a certain orientation of discourse towards an institutional task or identity, restrictions regarding the available types of discursive input, an inference framework and procedures which are institution specific. On the other hand, by reversing the relation, Philips, Lawrence & Hardy (2004) describe the ability of coherent, uncontested well-integrated discourses to create and sustain institutions.

Institutional repertoires

Relative to the approaches mentioned so far, I will attempt to follow and emphasise the process of *discourse institutionalisation*, and to evaluate the methodological consequences on interviewing by introducing the concept of *institutional repertoires*. The process of institutionalisation was originally described by Berger and Luckman (1966). According to them, habituation and typification are the initial stages of institutionalisation. On a discursive level, various rhetorical forms,

communication styles, metaphors or grammars may become the object of habitualization. These can be learned, rehearsed and then repeated in those discursive situations found suitable by an individual. They can also be observed, typified and mimicked by other participants. They can become repetitive, recursive behaviour patterns appropriate for particular wider contexts. In other words, they can be institutionalised and they can become institutions in themselves.

Within the realm of discourse analysis, the concept of ‘interpretive repertoires’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 149) is the closest notion to the idea of institutionalised discourses. The emphasis on recurrence makes this concept suitable for the study of discourse as institutionalised accomplishment: “Interpretive repertoires are *recurrently used* systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire, like empiricist and contingent repertoires, is constituted through *a limited range* of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes)”. In this context, I believe that the concept of institutional repertoires can capture the situated nature of discourse (acquired in specific arenas), as well as its institutional character (habituated, typified, able to impose costs, ready-made).

The inconsistency between various discourses in different contexts and the identification of a loose coupling between the beliefs and actions of the same person points toward alternative institutional repertoires that have been employed. Inside organisations, as well as outside them, individuals can be conceived as moving between different institutional arenas where they learn, use and (re)-construct discursive resources. Drawing from this, the first observation is that in an interview situation respondents might select discursive repertoires in order to answer questions, taking into account the interview context (the task presented by the interviewer, his identity, the phrasing of the questions and so on). The second observation is that these repertoires are of a recurrent nature. They have been previously used in interactions with other participants, in different situations. In other words, they should not be seen only as local accomplishments, but also as resources available to the respondent in various situations. The way in which one describes his/her own action here and now (in an interview) might be a discourse which was linked to previous actions, giving them meaning, and which will provide ground for future actions. On the other hand, talking about one’s own beliefs might be fostered previously in other arenas than those in which action is done and spoken.

The case of school counsellors. An exercise in discursive explanation

In what follows I will present the results of a research conducted between 2010 and 2011. I consider these relevant for drawing attention to the methodological risks connected to a telementalistic (Coulter, 2005: 80-81) approach, as well as an

argument for the explanatory relevance of institutional repertoires. The aim of the research was to analyse and compare school counsellor's theories about their own professional world (operationalized as: one's assumed professional missions and views, role perception, attitudes towards parents and pupils, etc.) with their actual decisions and professional actions. From the beginning, the stake of the research was to study how relevant is the presentation of attitudes, beliefs and values for the understanding of actual professional actions. Two rounds of interviews were carried out in order to understand the relationship between professional theories, the definition of a situation and the actual practices of school counsellors. The first round was dedicated to the professional theories, while the second one, based on the explicit demand of the interviewer, focused on the depiction of the ways in which certain difficult cases have been solved. The study involved twelve counsellors, each of them interviewed twice, selected according to their availability and openness in providing detailed information.

Round 1. The description of the professional Weltanschauung

Discourses in the first round were focused on themes such as: one's personal professional vision, conception of professional role, the definition of beneficiaries (parents, pupils, and teachers), the general depiction of the profession and its objectives. Discourses were compared by outlining a number of common features and differences, both in terms of coherence and structure. The most prominent common theme of these discourses was the negative depiction of parents. They have been portrayed as lowering their children's self-esteem, attributing too many tasks to the educational agents, having too many expectations from the school institution, lacking involvement and communication with their children. A second striking common theme concerned frequently invoked professional norms: the interdiction to carry out psychotherapy or to offer direct suggestions and the need to maintain confidentiality. On the other hand, there was a pronounced heterogeneity and hesitant statements regarding the leading professional mission taken on by counsellors. The missions described could be grouped in the following categories: communication facilitation, providing training for self-awareness skills, prevention, emotional support and conflict resolution. Significant variation was also noticed in the way counsellors generally defined the children/pupils. They described them as: either apathetic, lacking interest; either solely concerned with having fun; pragmatic, cynical, money oriented; or intelligent, hasty and precocious.

Round 2. Situation definition and plans for intervention and action

In the second round of interviews the counsellors were asked to select and describe a difficult case with which they had to deal with in individual office sessions. Next, I will present some data regarding the ways in which the respondents defined the situations and described the intervention plans and actual professional actions. To begin with, the interviewer asked for a description emphasising: the first impression, the initial diagnostic, the plans and intervention goals – as they emerged during the first meetings. Usually counsellors did not provide a specific structured definition of the case from the onset. In retrospect, for the early stages, counsellors only mention their intention of finding out more about the case. After the first two-three meetings, the counsellors state that they formulate the first hypothesis and the first complex psychological theories are built. A prominent shared feature of these stories was that most of the hypothesis concerned family dysfunctions and were phrased in a complex scientific language. When formulating intervention plans, a certain change is noticeable in the counsellors' discourse. Although the cases were described in a complex scientific language, when asked whether they have devised specific intervention plans, counsellors were hesitant in their answers and did not show clear and structured phrasing. Certain objectives are however mentioned in a significantly similar way across respondents. These concern: building self-esteem, developing self-awareness and increasing self-control. Sometimes it is noted that these goals are defined along the way, from one meeting to another, rather than from the beginning. Although various techniques are mentioned, their use is not framed by particular intervention plans. Regarding the description of actual actions/practices, counsellors mentioned that during the first meetings they have adopted a listening attitude, asking clarification questions and collecting information concerning the case. Often a contact with the parents is initiated (provided this did not already exist).

In the following sessions the counsellors start discussing the problems invoked by the pupil. The talks are focused on identifying behavioural solutions, finding the causes of the problem, understanding the feelings and thoughts of the pupil, and discussing any relevant event that might have occurred between the meetings. In many cases, the pupil is encouraged to analyse him / herself in various real or imagined situations and this analysis is then discussed with him/her. Particular techniques are mentioned in this context, such as: role-play and techniques for raising self-esteem and self-awareness. In the final part of the interview, the counsellors were asked to evaluate the efficiency of the intervention. Although all of them mention an improvement in the situation, their criteria for this assessment are not clearly specified. The observations and statements of the beneficiaries (pupil, parents, teachers) regarding the 'situation improvement' are invoked as

satisfying standards for assessing the effectiveness of the intervention. The catharsis effect is also invoked for this assessment. There is no clear formulation of the expected outcomes of the techniques employed. Next, we will try to present a specific way of analysing and interpreting the discourses generated through the interview.

Discourses as institutional repertoires. A discursive assessment of interviews

From the onset, two important remarks can be made regarding the interview data: (1) a certain structural difference between the discourses of the two rounds was observed. In the first round there is a wider diversity, while in the second one the discourses are more similar; (2) depending on similarity and coherence, there are two types of discourse. Certain facts/ideas are expressed by most of the counsellors immediately and in a coherent and similar manner, while some discourses are more hesitant and they are divergent/varied across the group.

The first remark implies the idea of a loose coupling, while the second observation suggests that discourses have different degrees of institutionalisation. We will put forward the hypothesis according to which the various institutional repertoires identified are generated in different interactional arenas, leading in this way to the possibility of a loose coupling between them. There are several important interactional arenas where counsellors' discourses can be developed, practiced, and institutionalised: the interactions between counsellors (more or less formal) (IC); the interactions between counsellors, teachers and the management of the institution where they are employed (ICTM); interactions with parents (IP); academic interactions, typical for higher education (AI); interactions while attending training programmes (ITP).

In each of these situations, discourses can be structured around certain themes, certain grammatical structures, certain metaphors, certain inferential structures – in other words, interpretive institutional repertoires can be generated which in turn may be activated in various other contexts. The sociological interview, through the novelty of its situational challenge, through its questions and through the interviewer's attitude, can create a discursive context in which these acquired repertoires can be activated and alternated to varying degrees. We present below an integrated visual diagram that shows how institutional repertoires might work. We believe that the concept of institutional repertoires allows us to capture the variety and the structure of the discourses generated by the interviews and it can explain them better than a causal scheme.

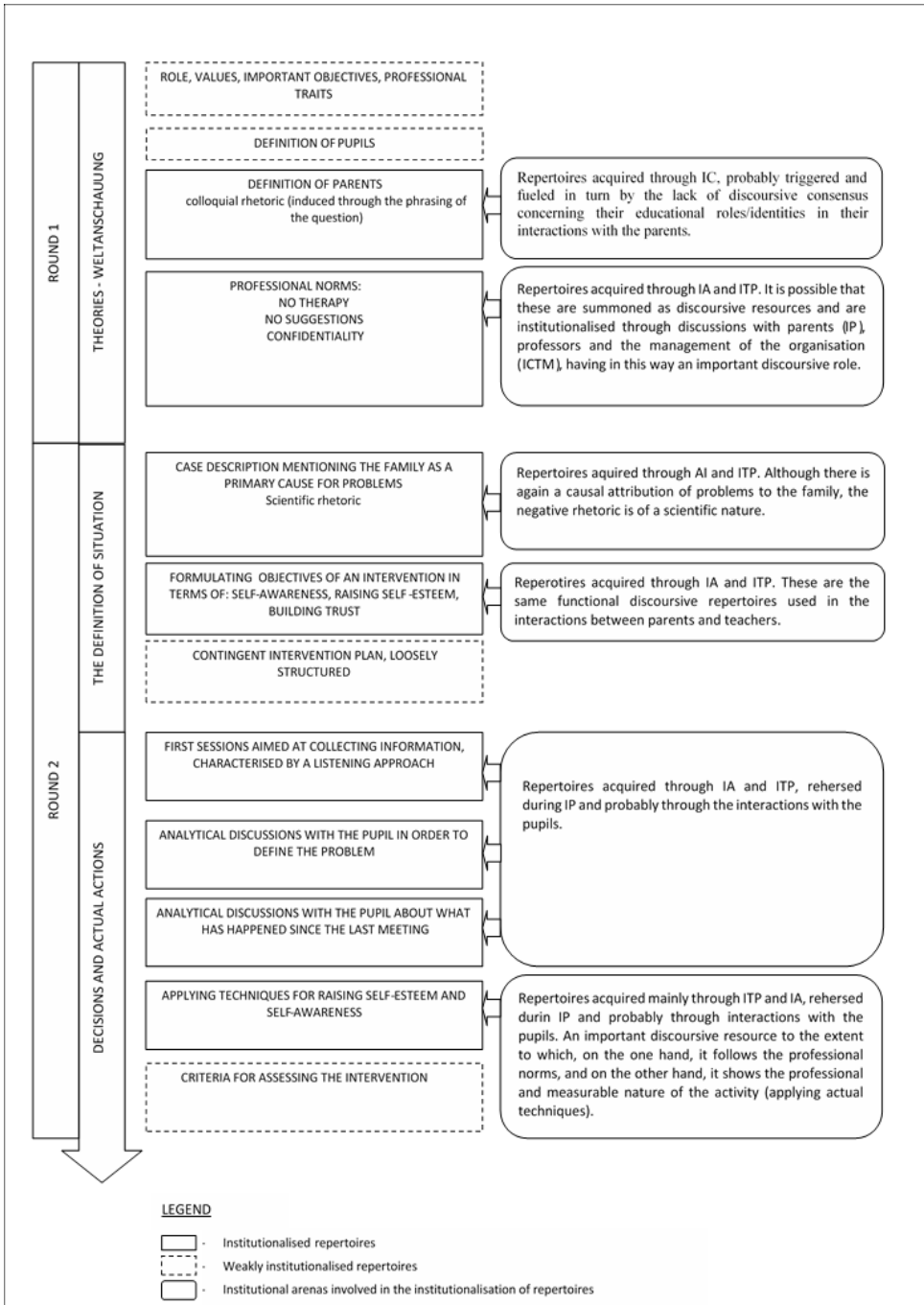


Figure 1. Explanatory diagram of the types of repertoires activated during interviews and of the interactional arenas in which they are generated and rehearsed

The theoretical model presented argues for taking into account more or less institutionalised interactional arenas in order to explain the ways in which different ways of speaking (institutional repertoires) and of acting are structured. In the case of school counsellors, an important interactional arena emerges through the meetings and discussions between counsellors (IC). Most likely, these are the arenas where counsellors discursively negotiate the meaning of the professional issues that they are facing daily and they acquire the discursive resources which can be used later in different arenas that demand various types of professional requirements (for instance, in the interactions with the parents).

The structure of the discourse can indicate the degree to which discourses/repertoires are institutionalised. Subsequently, in a functionalist manner, one can explore and research hypothesis regarding the professional needs to which these discourses have attempted to respond, as well as the way in which they become valuable discursive resources for members in various other contexts. In the case presented here, it appears that discourses regarding the role, values and general objectives of school counsellors are not strongly institutionalised. On the other hand, there is a structured and coherent discourse concerning certain professional norms and regarding the importance of self-awareness and self-esteem, connected with specific techniques.

The school counsellor profession is fairly recent in Romania. However, there are for certain, various expectations from the beneficiaries regarding efficient specific interventions. Some of these expectations seem to be associated with certain better-known professions such as: psychologist, psychotherapist, and psychiatrist. Consequently, the counsellor has to explain and negotiate in various discursive contexts what he/she is actually doing and what he/she is not. In this process some efficient repertoires might arise that make their profession accountable in various settings. The recurrent mention of professional norms can be explained by the effective way in which it succeeds in saying what cannot be done during intervention and what to not expect out of them. Also the pejorative tone in depicting parents might also be interpreted as the outcome of a conflicting meaning negotiation regarding what is to be expected from this profession.

On the other hand, once it is clarified what counsellors are not (professionally), the next challenge concerns what he/she can actually do. An important discursive resource used in this case is built around the notions of self-esteem, self-awareness, and associated techniques. This resource provides immediate solutions, as it is compatible with the pressure for displaying a certain professional technicality. However, school counsellors attended graduate and postgraduate studies in psychology where they acquired scientific competencies typical for psychotherapy and psychology. This resource is activated during the interview when a case is being explained and probably often in discussions between counsellors, but it does not seem to be connected to the intervention techniques employed (developed

in other arenas). Regarding the mission, values, action plans and evaluation the lack in structure/similarity/coherence between discourses suggests that these have not been discursively prompted before.

Conclusion

As shown in the beginning of this paper, certain sociological approaches follow methodologies that rely explicitly on a causal relation between meaning and action. In these cases, the sociological interview technique aims at employing the beliefs/attitudes/motives/preferences expressed for reconstructing a coherent and reasonable universe of meaning, which operates in the mind of the individual and is then used as a determining factor in explaining his/her behaviour.

This type of approach has been criticised from various directions. An important critique came from cognitive research and neo-institutionalism theories, suggesting that the mental universe is rather incoherent, fragmented (bounded rationality) and the link between preferences/beliefs and action is often rather weak and bidirectional (action shapes preferences). A second line of criticisms belongs to discourse analysis where mental constructs from psychology such as attitude or memory are critically assessed, suggesting either that they are artificial constructs, or that they are methodologically irrelevant. From the point of view of the sociologist who employs the interview technique and is mindful of these critiques, the relevance of interview discourses becomes problematic. This paper has suggested an exercise in explaining an interview situation where loose couplings have been identified between different components, through employing the notion of institutional repertoires. This concept admits the possibility of discursive inconsistencies and loose coupling, by accepting the possibility that, in fact, in an interview situation, a variety of repertoires are activated, repertoires which were acquired and institutionalised in different arenas. We consider that research on the institutional repertoires, on their formation, institutionalisation and occurrence in different discursive contexts is an important and fertile area of inquiry, offering a different perspective of the content generated through the sociological interview or at least some fair methodological warnings.

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