2 Agency interdisciplinary

2.1 Agency, Pragmatism, and Action Theory

2.1.1 Sociological Principles

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Agency as the “capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power”\(^2\). Agency thus is conceived as the capacity of an agent to act in our world. Tracing the concept of agency back to its sociological roots is simultaneously straightforward – since it is an omnipresent concept – and difficult to grasp. A significant reason for this arises from the different traditions and branches of research found in Germany and the US,\(^3\) and their differing usage of overlapping terminology. In the German academic discourse agency is, until recently, a little used term, usually equated with ‘action’ (Handlung), such as the very rarely used terms Handlungsbefähigung (the ability to act) or Handlungsermächtigung (the empowerment to act).

Max Weber’s concept of action, distinguished from human reactive behaviour, can be considered seminal to further conceptualizations of human and social action developed in sociology. According to Weber, action is “the human behaviour when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful” (Weber quoted in Schimank 2010: 29). In social action the “subjective meaning takes account of the behaviours of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (ibid: 38), in a meaningful rational means-to-ends deliberation. Social actions are further distinguished into four major types: zweckrational (instrumental/rational), wertrational (value-oriented), affective and traditional social action. While it is one of Weber’s merits to make allowance for other than rational actions, the focus remains on the intentional actions of the motivated actor. This is not unproblematic, since many actions in everyday life might occur without being rational and intentional, while still being more than reactive behaviour. One has to accept Hans Joas’ statement that, although Weber’s four types of action can be considered as a “gradual abandonment of rationalization (…), the ideal remains, then, an action that rationalizes ends, values, and consequences of action” (Joas 1990: 175). The question of inten-

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\(^2\) Merriam Webster Encyclopaedia: http://www.merriam-webster.com (7.03.2013)
\(^3\) In the course of this work I will focus on German, American and some French traditions of sociological theorizing.
tionality is an interesting one and will be discussed in more detail in relation to human agency in the course of this work. Regardless of the question of intentionality, with his model of action and social action, Weber laid the foundation for the German *Handlungstheorie* (action theory) sometimes also labelled *Interaktionstheorie* (interaction theory), which, broadly defined, refers to all sociological theories concerned with human actions. More recently, the term *Handlungstheorie* is sometimes replaced by *Akteurstheorie* (cf. Gabriel 2004), offering a closer correspondence with the American terminology of agency. Other sociological concepts, such as the technoscientific *Actor-Network Theory* with its popular representatives Bruno Latour, Michel Callon or John Law, or the socio-economical *Principal-Agent Theory*, have their origins in classic *Handlungs- oder Akteurstheorien*. While the former tries to integrate objects and artefacts into the action model, the latter theory relies on the *Rational Choice* tradition as it has been appropriated by scholars of economics and politic science. As outlined above, in German action-oriented approaches agency is generally implicit, yet explicitly mentioned only by few scholars.

The American sociological approaches to action are originally linked to Talcott Parsons, who is widely considered to be the founder of modern action theory. Parsons’ theory of social action is based on his concept of society: action is a process in the actor-situation system where the individual ‘actor’ seeks goals. An action becomes social “when the situation of an actor is another actor” (Jung 1984: 217). Parsons’ approach, based upon Weber’s action model, is an attempt to embed individual social action in the structure of society. Parsons’ contextualization of individual action within social structure can be considered paradigmatic of sociology’s engagement with questions about how social structure and human action determine, influence and regulate one another. Most influential in the domain of the social sciences and the action-oriented branch of sociology was the perspective of *Pragmatism*, as elaborated for instance by Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey or Georg Herbert Mead. At the core of pragmatism is the ‘pragmatist maxim’, asserting that theoretical hypotheses and practices rely on each other. Thus, human practices are the sources of theory, while theory depends on these practices; there is no theorizing without practice. Mead, who claimed that the individual mind exists only in relation to other individuals and thoughts with shared meanings, laid the cornerstone for Herbert Blumer’s *symbolic interactionism* (cf. Mead 1973: 244ff.). Chapter 2.1.4 will elucidate on how this approach is crucial to understanding the dynamic relationship between media and recipient.

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4 *Rational Choice* theory assumes that complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of basic individual actions. It constructs the individual as motivated by wants or goals, expressed as preferences, so as to make choices in a way that maximizes their advantage while minimizing cost. *Rational Choice* thus recurs on early sociological concepts of the *homo oeconomicus*. The American sociologist James Samuel Coleman is credited as an essential contributor to the formulation of this approach.
According to Margaret Archer (1988), the “problem of structure and agency has rightly come to be seen as the basic issue in modern social theory” (ibid: xi). Indeed, a division of sociology into two big branches is often invoked, characterizing one tradition of sociology as engaged in the explanation of society’s structure, and the other as interested in human action or agency (e.g. Archer 1988, Reckwitz 2004). In this view, there is a dualistic perspective in the sociological approach between, “Voluntarism versus Determinism”, “Subjectivism versus Objectivism”, and “the micro- versus the macroscopic in sociology” (Archer 1988: xi). From today’s point of view, the structure/agency debate seems to be oversimplifying. While there are indeed scholars that can be integrated into either the structural macro-perspective (e.g. Emil Durkheim, Talcott Parsons), or the action-oriented micro-perspective (e.g. Max Weber), many approaches aim to offer a perspective integrating both aspects. A more useful distinction is provided by Andreas Reckwitz (2004), who identifies three major paradigmatic shifts in sociological action theory, namely a development progressing from the homo oeconomicus to the homo sociologicus; a development from the homo sociologicus towards the homo significans (or homo symbolicum); and a development from the homo significans towards praxeologic approaches (cf. ibid: 306 ff.).

As with all theory, these sociological models did not evolve in an intellectual vacuum. In fact, the normative paradigm arises from the very ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes, David Hume, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, whose philosophical work staged a paradigmatic shift from rationalism and the homo oeconomicus, opening the way toward notions of a homo sociologicus. The enlightened, utilitarian individual, with his/her own interests in mind, is no longer the cornerstone of action resulting in social order. Instead, collective, intersubjective actions are based on a normative system that requires social order. This does not necessarily imply a rejection of the idea of means-end rationality. But the individual is no longer viewed in terms of isolated actions, instead she is always considered as acting within a broader social order. Exemplary of this normative paradigm is Emil Durkheim’s approach implicating a social system as prerequisite for (social) action.

The second paradigmatic shift can be ascribed to the increasing importance of interpretive approaches. While the normative paradigm formulates actions and social order by means of normative rules, interpretive approaches are unified via their recourse to the sociology of knowledge. They thus form an interpretive paradigm with the individual actor in her lifeworld at the centre of the approach: “the cognitive knowledge resources, conceptualized optionally as cultural codes, frames of reference, collective representations, horizons of meaning of differentiating systems (...) attribute meaning to the objects of the world” (Reckwitz 2004: 312). Reckwitz includes ethno-methodological approaches (e.g. Harold Garfinkel), social phenomenological approaches (e.g. Erving Goffman, Alfred Schütz), social hermeneutics (e.g. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor), structuralisms
(e.g. Claude Levi-Strauss), as well as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes within a broad, interpretive, culture-oriented sociological approach. According to interpretive models, social order and social rules are not normative but rather cognitively created – they aim to explain how meaning is symbolically constructed. Notably, Alfred Schütz’ work marks a significant point in sociology, focusing first on the everyday knowledge, the “universe of meaning”, of the acting agents (Schütz 1971: 11). The advantage of this model of the *homo symbolicus*, in contrast with the *homo sociologicus*, can be seen in its ability to explain collective agency and cognitive structures: only on the basis of knowledge structures can agents transform the “uncertainties of the world into meaningful certainty” (ibid: 316), organizing their environment into a comprehensible symbolic universe on a day-to-day, routinized basis.

The third paradigm shift that Reckwitz (2004) indicates refers to a branch of culture-oriented action theories that have been advanced by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Hans Joas and Michel de Certeau (ibid: 317). In reference to Bourdieu’s terminology, they can be labelled as *praxeological approaches*. At the core of these approaches lies the concept of social practices – routinized body performances – in interplay with meaningful comprehension. In contrast to former action theories, praxeologic approaches define action not as selectively separated units, but as a process occurring in time and space. Temporality and repetition are thus important aspects of praxeological social interpretation. Each social practice then consists of a body performance – on a very basic level a practice is a skilful movement of the body: Bourdieu’s “connaissance par corps”, Taylor’s “embodied agency” and Joas’ “constitution of body schemas” all inherit this focus on corporeality. Perhaps most important, the structuredness of the social lies in the routinization of social practices:

Their [social practices’] seemingly self-evident – as a matter of fact heavily presuppositional, since fostered by know-how – repetitive and uniform action was marginalized in Weber’s typology of action as ‘traditional action’ and thus linked to non-meaningful behaviour. Admittedly, this seems to be the real fundament of structuredness of the social world (Reckwitz 2004: 324).

This very brief historical survey of sociology has introduced some basic conceptions of the acting individual in a social world. These paradigmatic shifts outline a development from the enlightened rational and intentional actor, towards conceptions of social action understood as a process of meaning making, incorporating practices that involve mind and body. With these essential principles in mind, the concept and differentiation of action and agency will be approached.

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6 Translation by S.E.
2.1.2 Theorizing Agency

In 2006, Biesta and Tedder state that:

Agency is not only a central concept in modern educational theory and practice, but is also a key notion and issue in contemporary social theory, particularly in sociology, economics and political science. The question in social theory is first and foremost about the empirical conditions of agency, i.e., the question how and when agency is possible, and about ways in which the phenomenon of agency can be conceptualized and theorised. (...) Within sociology ‘the term agency is usually juxtaposed to structure and is often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undermining nature of human action, as opposed to the alleged determinism of structural theories’ (Marshall quoted in Biesta and Tedder 2006: 5; emphasis in the original).

My aim here is to work out a specific and application-oriented definition of agency that avoids the fallacy of equating agency with action.

The paradigm changes in sociology described in the previous chapter have affected the notion of agency. *Homo oeconomicus* is based on the Enlightenment idea of an individual equipped with free will and with the ability to make rational choices. John Locke articulated a conviction that humans are able to form the circumstances of their lives by themselves, an idea to which Jean-Jacques Rousseau adjoined the moral will and Immanuel Kant added the categorical imperative (cf. Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 964 ff.). The Kantian conception of free will versus necessity served as a fundamental basis for normative approaches of agency as employed by Talcott Parsons. However, only the second paradigm shift (as outlined above) towards interpretative approaches enabled a disengagement of the conception of agency from specific (structural) situations and (subjective) intentions. Instead of merely intentional, agency could now also be regarded as *influential*:

Alfred Schutz [sic] insist that action [is] not to be perceived as the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but rather that ends and means develop cotermiously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence (ibid: 967).

The imputation of intentionality, however, has not yet been overcome, as Reckwitz (2004) seems to indicate. Economistic approaches relying on a sociological purview such as those found in rational choice theory, and theories of intention as elucidated by Michael Bratman (e.g. Bratman 1999), who formulated the Belief-Desire-Intention model (a way of explaining future-oriented intentions), are based on a notion of intentionality as the most crucial aspect for understanding human social action and agency. In response to such intention-based approaches, Hornsby emphasizes the false assumption that intentionality is the basis of agency. Assuming subjects to be always “keeping track” of their actions proves to be illusionary. Intentionality requires a “higher-order reflexive” state of mind, that is by no means employed in all every day (social) actions (Hornsby 2004: 3, 9). Hornsby suggests conceiving agency as either positive or negative performance, thus including inten-
tional actions as well as non-intentional, spontaneous or avoiding forms of action. The debate on intentionality brings to light the undertheorizing of the process of agency itself: it is a “black box” (Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 969) that is only very rarely touched upon. It remains a “greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized [concept] these days by social scientists” (Comaroff/Comaroff in Ahearn 2001: 112). As such, it is for instance still unsettled whether agency is specifically human, or if animals can have agency, or if even machines are capable of agency, as Bruno Latour (2007) promotes. Following Ahearn (2001), agency is neither necessarily intentional, oppositional nor absent, but refers to, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (ibid: 130). Thus agency is distinct from action. While action is defined as the actual process of acting, agency refers to the general ability to perform these actions. This ontological difference introduces interesting and continuing consequences. Firstly, it emphasizes the actor and her relation to her actions, and secondly, it refers to the socio-political impact of agency, the capacity of humans to change the social order. The main aim of this sociological conception of agency is accordingly the exploration of those mechanisms that allow agents to perform with agency which impacts the social structure; or, to put it in Ahearn’s words, “how any habitus or structure can produce actions that fundamentally change it” (ibid: 119). Agency entails the potential to trigger processes of transformation. This agentive ability is generally inherent in humanity, but varies culturally and in terms of genre, class, education, generation or ethnicity. It is something that can be improved on, but the extend to which an agent is able to deploy agency is constrained by their resources. Agency “gives people knowledge of different schemas and access to different kinds and amounts and hence different possibilities for transformative action” (Sewell 1992: 21). Sewell’s notion of knowledge resources indicates the processuality of agency, which is also emphasized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). They regard agency as a temporal process that has three components: past, future and presence. Agency is defined as:

(…) the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (ibid: 970).

Alfred Schütz’s earlier treatment of action introduced a similar diachronic scheme to describe how agents formulate and orient themselves via social action. An agent anticipates the future condition that would result from her actions:

What was empty in the project has or has not been fulfilled. Nothing remains unsettled, nothing undecided. To be sure, I remember the open anticipations involved in projecting the act and even the protentions accompanying my living in the ongoing process of my acting. But now, in retrospect, I remember them in terms of my past anticipations, which have or have not come true. Only the performed act, therefore, and never the acting in progress can turn out as a success or failure (Schütz 1945: 539).
Accordingly, iteration (habit), projectivity (imagination) and practical evaluation (judgement) are constitutive elements of human agency. Iteration refers to the learning effect and historical embeddedness of agency. “Past experiences condition present actions” as Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 975) put it. The recurrence of knowledge – either in forms of mental concepts, embodied practices or social organizations – as Sewell (1992) suggested, is fundamentally necessary for any occurrence of agency. However, agency is not merely employing the same schema over and over again. Projectivity refers to the “creative character” of agency (Joas 1996: 15), entailing “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” (Sewell 1992: 19), making agents “inventors of new possibilities” (Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 984) through various creative tactics, such as anticipatory identification or experimental enactment (cf. ibid: 989 ff.). Practical evaluation, finally, refers to the real life circumstances with which an agent contextualizes social experiences, which might be ambiguous and even contradictory. Practical evaluation requires an agent to recognize a given situation adequately in order to decide on appropriate actions, and to execute those actions accordingly. The cognitive dimension of agency clarifies an agent’s general ability to perform with agency, and is therefore not to be understood simply in terms of possessing agentive abilities, but as the ability to acquire them; cognitive agency refers to the process of “achieving agency” (Biesta/Tedder 2006: 18). Rather than an attribute possessed, agency is something which evolves in “transaction with a particular situation” (ibid: 19). With regard to media reception, this signifies that certain specific textual characteristics might allow for more agency than others.

So far, agency has been conceptualized as a core element of social action theory. The paradigm shifts, as outlined by Reckwitz, were the premise to acknowledge the significance of agency. Agency then is defined as the general ability to perform actions, while actions are the actual processes of acting. Furthermore, agency does not ‘just happen’ but is a creative capacity that depends on individual and socio-cultural resources that can be amplified and improved on. Its transformative power is due to the processuality of agency. The question of intentionality is still a contested topic in different fields of academic research. Even in Schütz’s early work in this field, he had suggested abandoning intentionality in favour of influence. In any case, intentional actions are just one possibility out of many positive or negative modes of performance; intentionality thus proves to be a possible, but not a necessary aspect of agency.

To sustain a more in-depth view on the mechanism of agency, the following chapter will employ approaches that provide a detailed insight in the relationship of human agency and societal structure. Furthermore, the concepts employed can be subsumed under what I have labelled praxeologic approaches. It is assumed that a nuanced appreciation of socioculturally mediated agency will also allow for a deeper understanding of agency in the process of media reception, which is at the core of this work.
2.1.3 Practice and Agency

In the following chapter I outline the sociological approaches that seem to be most fruitful for an elaboration of mediated agency. Following Reckwitz (2004), I suggest that the ‘praxeological’ approach has proven to be the most effective. Firstly, praxeological models are fundamental to current, generally accepted conceptions of the ‘active audience’, making them a cornerstone of media reception theory in general. Secondly, due to the focus on power shared by these theories, they will provide an ideal starting point from which to develop a new conception of media agency.

Significant contributions to agency can be found in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, in Giddens’ *stratification model*, in Hans Joas’ notion of the *creativity of actions*, in the concept of *performance*, and in Foucault’s *power/knowledge and discourses* relations.

2.1.3.1 Agents, Power, and Creativity

In his elaboration of habitus, Bourdieu formulates a theory of practice which he labels *praxeology* (Bourdieu, 2009). His aim is to uncover the underlying mechanisms at work in constituting and reproducing the social world and social life. Practical sense and practical reason are considered formative principles for the social structuring of reality, and provide the basis for individual and collective agency (cf. Gabriel 2004: 170). Rejecting both phenomenological approaches (as subjectivist and unscientific), and objectivism (as detached from practical knowledge), Bourdieu strives for an integration of social actors as integral parts of the social world.7 The connection between the social world and individual practice is the habitus. It is a set of dispositions that generates perception, thought and evaluation:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (...) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations (...) The practices produced by the habitus [are] the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations (Bourdieu 2009: 72).

The habitus is a ‘structured structure’, constituted by transposable dispositions (perception, thought, and evaluation) of a certain social position (a social practice), along with schemata (or representations) of these dispositions, generate practices, which in turn (re)produce social structures (structuring practice). Thus, the habitus adjusts practice to structure, ensuring the practical (re)production of structure. This model also holds implications for the agent, since, according to Bourdieu, the habitus, and not the agent herself, is determined by social structures. The dispositions

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7 Bourdieu critiques phenomenological approaches for reducing social relationships to communication, and interaction to symbolic transaction, thus neglecting or belittling the impact of structuration.
and schemata of the habitus thus constitute a “generating principle of all forms of practice” (Bourdieu 1997: 283)\(^8\) such that an agent’s habitus functions as her “modus operandi” (ibid. 281). Furthermore, dispositions can either reproduce or transform “culturally constructed meanings and values”, and thus the social world (Ahearn 2001: 118). Prommer (2012) states accurately that, more than manner and appearance, the habitus is the “individual internalized patterns of values, attitudes, opinions and beliefs, which makes humans social beings. Habitus is a system of dispositions, which is effective in everyday thought, perception and assessment practice” (ibid: 21).\(^9\) The practical sense in its threefold form of habitus, structure, and practice overcomes the dualism of structure and agency.

There is another side to habitus that has not been mentioned yet. The concept of habitus includes body and corporeality. Since social practices are anchored in the human body, social structures can only exist by means of bodily actions and agents. The agents have literally incorporated specific dispositions – in their movement, attitude and sensibilities – thus enabling inferences as to their social position and mode of behaviour (cf. Fröhlich 1994: 38 f.). It is important to recognize that dispositions of practice (i.e. habitus) are prereflexive and do not come into consciousness. Consequently, praxeology incorporates the idea of an agent who is non-intentional:

The actions of social actors in practice theory are not guided by rationality or intentionality, but by the practical requirements. The social actors develop a practical sense towards these requirements, which enables them to participate in forms of practice (Ebrecht and Hillebrandt 2002: 8).\(^10\)

The fundamentally agentive nature of the habitus model, then, lies in its capacity – productively and creatively – to produce practices that are not directly determined by a social structure (though they are pragmatically mediated through habitus). At the same time, the creativity is restricted by the flip side of Bourdieu’s approach, the influence of structure on the habitus.

Of the infinite thoughts, meanings, and practices that the habitus can produce at any given historical moment, there is only a minimal probability that any will ever be thought or practiced because individuals are predisposed to think and act in a manner that reproduces the existing system of inequalities (Ahearn 2001: 118).

Habitus thus has the tendency to produce conservative practices, conforming to a seemingly ‘natural’ social world. However, the habitus is inherently alterable, since it adjusts to every new situation – whether in terms of conjoint affirmation or in

\(^8\) Translation by S.E.

\(^9\) Translation by S.E.

terms of conflicting differences of incorporated structured structures within a particular field. Especially in situations of conflict or in times of crisis, the transformative power of habitus comes to the fore.

The prereflexive nature of habitus raises questions at this point about how the individual is able to perceive herself as an agent. How can the subject evaluate and change her practices when they are ‘conditioned’ by an inherently changeable habitus? This is indeed one of Bourdieu’s weak points, since without self-consciousness, agency seems unlikely to occur. A solution to this problem is provided by Anthony Giddens. In formulating his structuration theory, Giddens (Giddens, 1984) aims to overcome the duality of structure and agency. Social structures are conceived as rules and resources, enabling and restricting agency at the same time: “in and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible” (ibid: 2). According to Giddens, agency is neither free will nor resistance, but is linked in a reciprocal way to structure (cf. Ahearn 2001: 117). No meaningful, intelligible action exists outside the social structures. Social structures, however, are not pre-existent to action. As human action unfolds over time as a “durée” (Giddens 1984: 3), actions and structure recursively condition each other and presuppose each other (cf. Sewell 1992: 4). Giddens conceives this reciprocal influence as consisting of practical consciousness (incorporated, pre-conscious practices), counterposed to discursive consciousness (abstractable, conscious practices). Hence, while social practices (re)produce social structure, they simultaneously retain the potential to introduce structural modification, transformation and social change.

At first glance, the Giddens’ structuration theory may seem to resemble Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. However, there are some significant differences between them. The most important is the different modes of subjectivity operationalized by the two treatments of agency. While Bourdieu maps a subject that cannot but act via her habitus, Giddens’ subject is always (more or less) self-reflectively processing her own actions (through discursive consciousness), thus employing some degree of rationalism. Giddens calls this the stratification model: the “treating [of] the reflexive monitoring, rationalization and motivation of action as embedded sets of processes” (Giddens 1984: 3). Rationalization in this sense does not correspond precisely with intentionality (though it does include aspects of [sociological notions of] intentionality), but refers to the fact that agents maintain “a continuing ‘theoretical understanding’ of the grounds of their activity” (ibid: 5).

While Giddens’ approach to agency does not exclude intentionality, he emphasizes a somewhat distinct capacity, which he identifies as the could have acted differently faculty, which is the “capability of doing those things in the first place” (ibid: 9).11 By further distinguishing between intentional and unintentional actions, Giddens’ notion refers to the concept of contingency that has been employed in various contexts, by Niklas Luhmann (1984) as contradictory, fragmentary or ambivalent information, or according to Makropoulos (1997) the ‘otherwise possible’.

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