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# Entering Discourses: A New Agenda for Qualitative Research and the Sociology of Knowledge

## 1 Introduction

The following text argues for a new agenda in qualitative research and the sociology of knowledge. Taking up the concept of discourse and embedding it in the social constructivist approach – itself largely anchored in the interpretive paradigm and sociological pragmatism – I present theoretical foundations, methodological implications, and some practical tools for a *sociology of knowledge approach to discourse* (SKAD). This qualitative approach to discourse has been established in German sociology since the late 1990s and has been presented in several books (for example, Keller [2005] 2021; [2003] 2013; for additional recent presentations, see Keller 2011; Keller, Hornidge, and Schünemann 2018). Since then, it has influenced research across the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> This chapter first sets up the arguments for entering discourses from sociology of knowledge perspectives; it then presents theoretical grounds for and methodological reflections on SKAD, discusses some knowledge-orientated tools for doing SKAD research, and concludes with reflections on methods of discourse research.

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<sup>1</sup> The full argument is presented in Keller (2005) 2021. Studies using the SKAD framework focus on environmental politics (Keller [1998] 2009; Cantoni et al. 2018; Boettcher 2019), the symbolic production of space and cityscapes (Christmann 2004), healthcare policy (Bechmann 2007), the acknowledgement of competency in employment strategies (Truschkat 2008), public discourse on Satanism (Schmied-Knittel 2008), identity-building in left-wing social movements in Germany and Great Britain (Ulrich 2008) and Chinese migrant communities in Romania (Wundrak 2010), criminology (Singelstein 2009), same-sex marriage TV controversies in the US (Zimmermann 2010), or political sciences' mapping of suicide terrorism (Brunner 2011). For compilations of these different applications of the approach, see Keller and Truschkat 2012; Bosančić and Keller 2016; Keller, Hornidge, and Schünemann 2018.

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## 2 Entering Discourses

For some decades now, sociology has broadly acknowledged the ascendancy of knowledge societies. According to Anthony Giddens' diagnosis of reflexive modernity, these kinds of societies are special in the way they rely on expert knowledge (Giddens 1991, 36–44). Such knowledge, gained through organized procedures, shapes every detail of everyday life as well as organizational processes and institutions, from the way we 'do orgasm' to the daily practices of education, sports, food, and drink; to our ways of working and organizing production and consumption; all the way to the higher spheres of political governance at national or global levels of action in a "world risk society" (to borrow Ulrich Beck's phrase; see Beck 1999). As Stuart Hall and his colleagues in the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies argued in the 1990s, we are living in a period of "circuits of culture" – a phrase Hall used to indicate that meaning-making activities and the social construction of realities have become effects of the organized production, representation, marketing, regulation, and adaption of meaning (Hall 1997a). In making this statement, the Birmingham School was heavily influenced by the interpretive tradition in sociology, primarily by symbolic interactionist and Weberian theorizing and research (see, for example, Blumer 1969; Weber [1904] 1949). However, in their insistence on organized or structured means of processing circuits of culture, the Birmingham School referred to rather different theoretical traditions as well, including some of Michel Foucault's concepts:

[r]ecent commentators have begun to recognize not only the real breaks and paradigm-shifts, but also some of the affinities and continuities, between older and newer traditions of work: for example between Weber's classical interpretive "sociology of meaning" and Foucault's emphasis of the role of the "discursive." (Hall 1997b, 224)

Here it is interesting to see Hall arguing for an integrated perspective on meaning-making, including both Weberian and Foucauldian thinking – bearing in mind that common sociological (and poststructuralist) debates seem to draw a sharp line between these two authors. However, if we look more closely, we can indeed assert that Max Weber's work on *The Protestant Ethic* (Weber [1905] 2002) is no less and no more than an *avant la lettre* discourse study of religious discourse and its power effects in capitalist societies. In making his claim regarding the connection between *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber analyzed several kinds of texts: religious books, advice books, and sermons. It was from such textual data that he developed his ideas on "worldly asceticism" (Weber [1905] 2002, 53–125) and deeply structured ways of living everyday life, whether at home or at work. While Weber insisted on the subject's role in meaning-making, for him this never denoted individual or idiosyncratic activities. *The Protestant Ethic* delivered a deeply social "vocabulary of motives" (to borrow Charles W. Mills' phrase) and an institutionally preconfigured "definition of the situation" (in William I. Thomas' and Dorothy Thomas' sense). Mills (1940) was well aware of this implication of Weber's sociology when he argued,

with strong references to Weber and the sociology of knowledge, for a sociological analysis of vocabularies of motives and situated actions. And Thomas and Thomas (1928) – together with George Herbert Mead (1934) and others in the Chicago tradition – were at least familiar with the German context of *verstehen* and meaning(-making), to which Weber was deeply committed.

As far as I know, Weber never used the term discourse, but the Chicago pragmatists did. They argued that social collectivities produced and lived in ‘universes of discourse’ – systems or horizons of meaning and processes of establishing and transforming such systems. In the 1930s, George Herbert Mead stated: “This universe of discourse is constituted by a group of individuals [. . .] A universe of discourse is simply a system of common or social meanings” (Mead [1934] 1963, 89).

Alfred Schütz, the main proponent of social phenomenology, also referred to this notion – for example in the 1940s, when he considered the conditions of possibility for scientific work:

[a]ll this, however, does not mean that the decision of the scientist in stating the problem is an arbitrary one or that he has the same “freedom of discretion” in choosing and solving his problems which the phantasying self has in filling out its anticipations. This is by no means the case. Of course, the theoretical thinker may choose at his discretion [a particular scientific field.] But, as soon as he has made up his mind in this respect, the scientist enters a preconstituted world of scientific contemplation handed down to him by the historical tradition of his science. Henceforth, he will participate in a universe of discourse embracing the results obtained by others, methods worked out by others. This theoretical universe of the special science is itself a finite province of meaning, having its peculiar cognitive style with peculiar implications and horizons to be explicated. The regulative principle of constitution of such a province of meaning, called a special branch of science, can be formulated as follows: Any problem emerging within the scientific field has to partake of the universal style of this field and has to be compatible with the preconstituted problems and their solution by either accepting or refuting them. Thus, the latitude for the discretion of the scientist in stating the problem is in fact a very small one. (Schütz 1973, 250)

And a few pages later, he writes: “[t]heorizing [. . .] is, first, possible only within a universe of discourse that is pre-given to the scientist as the outcome of other people’s theorizing acts” (Schütz 1973, 256).

While later work in the tradition of Alfred Schütz – as well as of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), who built on Schütz’s work – only marginally took up this concept (if at all), the symbolic interactionist perspective has indeed informed several research agendas which turned to discourse-related subjects and questions, whether implicitly or explicitly. Without offering an exhaustive list, one could mention Joseph Gusfield’s study on the *Culture of Public Problems* (1981), Anselm Strauss’ attention to “ongoing negotiated orderings in social worlds/arenas” (1979; 1991; 1993), or broader work on the social construction and careers of social problems. Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk have presented certain essential assumptions involved in the latter:

In its most schematic form, our model has six main elements:

1. a dynamic process of competition among the members of a very large 'population' of social problem claims;
2. the institutional arenas that serve as 'environments' where social problems compete for attention and grow;
3. the 'carrying capacities' of these arenas, which limit the number of problems that can gain widespread attention at one time;
4. the 'principles of selection' or institutional, political, and cultural factors that influence the probability of survival of competing problem formulations;
5. patterns of interaction among the different arenas, such as feedback and synergy, through which activities in each arena spread throughout the others; and
6. the networks of operatives who promote and attempt to control particular problems and whose channels of communication crisscross the different arenas. (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, 56)

In the context of the symbolic interactionists' social movements research in the 1980s and 1990s, such ideas were closely linked to a concept of public discourse, referring to the issue-framing activities of competing collective actors in public struggles for the collectivities' "definition of the situation" (see Gamson 1988). However, despite these efforts and multiple studies, it seems that this interpretive paradigm's analysis of discourses did not succeed in establishing an approach of its own – one that would integrate the different usages and elaborate on the proposed initial frameworks. Nor did cultural studies in the Birmingham tradition succeed in this arena; concrete research in this tradition made use of social semiotics or argued for critical discourse analysis, as established by Norman Fairclough and others (see Hall 1997a; Barker 2000; Barker and Galasinski 2001).

Discourse research in today's social sciences is mostly attributed to the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (see Keller 2008; 2018b). Such a diagnosis might be sustained by Norman Denzin's ongoing insistence on the importance of poststructuralist or postmodernist thinking for interpretive sociology (see Denzin 1992). Moreover, Adele Clarke's impressive book on *Situational Analysis* (2005) clearly indicates this influence.<sup>2</sup> In her manifesto for a "grounded theory after the postmodern turn," Clarke convincingly shows how grounded theory's focus on situation and interaction can be inspired and "complexified" not only by Anselm Strauss' social worlds/arenas model, but by introducing discourses as important elements of the situation under analysis. Clarke then refers to Michel Foucault as her major "modest witness" to qualitative sociology's discursive turn. She proposes various tools – such as situational maps, positional maps, and social world/arena maps – to account for the "discursive elements" of situations. *Situational Analysis* was developed at almost

<sup>2</sup> A revised edition was published in 2018 by Clarke, Friese, and Washburn.

the same time as my plea for an original sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, between 1999 and 2003, which made use of many of the same references in interpretive sociology and discourse research, although Clarke and I were several thousand miles apart and did not know of each other. However, while Clarke zeroes in on the complexity of situations, my own work (Keller [2005] 2020) takes discourse (s) as the central starting and focal point. Therefore, I refer to Clarke's approach as complementary to SKAD.

Having thus far outlined the interpretive paradigm's basic arguments on social actors' meaning-making in universes of discourse, and before diving more deeply into the theoretical foundations and methodology of the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, let us now turn to discourse and discourse analysis, as these terms are widely used in today's social sciences. No exhaustive account is possible in this case either (see Keller 2013). At present, various notions of discourse are used in the humanities. In Germany, Jürgen Habermas (1985) extensively contributed to the dissemination of the term discourse. But in the Habermasian tradition, discourse is hardly an object of inquiry to be empirically analyzed. Instead, it is regarded as an organized, ordered deliberative process to which a normative ethics of discourse is applied. A case in point concerns conflicts emerging around environmental issues or technological risk, where roundtables are set up to bring together concerned and committed actors in order to discuss what should be done. This usage, which is current today primarily in the political sciences, has created – and continues to create – some confusion in debates on discourse research. The traditional political sciences approach to discourse is mainly concerned with the relationship between arguments (ideas) and interests: in short, discourse matters if the better argument wins over the material interests of (the most) powerful actors. However, this argumentative approach to discourse has (thus far) rarely analyzed the politics of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> More common among sociological perspectives is discourse analysis as a label for the micro-orientated analysis of language in use, which is based either in pragmatic linguistics or – more closely aligned with sociological traditions – in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. Here the focus is on concrete “text and talk in (inter)action” (to borrow Teun van Dijk's phrase), with more or less attention to either linguistic issues or ‘sociological’ questions – including, for example, turn-taking in group discussion or the interactional construction of references to larger social or mental entities. Today's linguistics uses concepts of discourse in order to address linguistic questions of language change and usage in larger social contexts (see Frans Wijsen, chapter 6, this volume). Corpus linguistics, for example, has built up enormous corpuses of textual data around selected word items (e.g., related to political issues such as migration or climate change) in order to search for statistical correlations between words.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that there are approaches to discourse in political science which are closer to interpretive thinking, which space does not allow me to discuss here.

Somewhere between linguistics and social sciences stands *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Norman Fairclough's concept; see, for example, Fairclough 1995), along with the British-Austrian version of this approach, *Wiener Kritische Diskursanalyse* (initiated by Ruth Wodak and others; see, for example, Wodak and Meyer 2015), and its German counterpart, *Kritische Diskursanalyse* (as developed by Siegfried Jäger; see, for example, Jäger 2012). These approaches are all based in linguistics but have slightly different discourse-theoretical elaborations; they direct discourse research mainly toward 'unmasking' the ideological functions of language in use or discovering and 'healing' instances of 'asymmetrically biased communication' and 'disorders of discourse.'<sup>4</sup>

If we consider them more carefully, we can state that none of the approaches to discourse research mentioned thus far is interested in larger societal and historical meaning-making or questions of power/knowledge, which are central to Foucault's arguments on discourse (see below). These approaches cannot (and, to be honest, do not aim to) account for the socio-historical processing of knowledge and symbolic orderings in larger institutional fields and social arenas. It is evident that discourse research anchored in linguistics addresses linguistic questions – and Foucault's main purpose was to pivot discourse away from such issues. The lack of focus on knowledge analysis is also particularly clear in research that employs critical discourse analysis. Instead, such research implies that the researcher identifies and unmasks the illegitimate, ideological, strategic use of language by 'those in power' to 'manipulate the people.' This often results in a 'proof' of the presence of ideological notions and functions in a concrete body of spoken or written language (discourse). There is no room to derive any surprising results or insights from such empirical research, because the discourse theorist always already knows how the ideology in question works. The ethnomethodologically inspired tradition of discourse analysis investigates the situational production of ordered verbal interaction and communication. This is very useful for in-depth analyses of singular discursive events, but it does not (and does not seek to) grasp larger historical processes of knowledge circulation.

As far as I can see, there are two further candidates that could address questions of meaning-making via the concept of discourse. I suggest calling them, for want of a better expression, *discourse theories* – including the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault or the political scientists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Discourse theories are designed to analyze the social formation of circuits of culture, power/knowledge relationships, or political struggles for hegemony and the articulation of collective identities on more global levels of social orderings. The Laclau and Mouffe tradition combines a rather extensive definition of discourse – the discursive and the social are but one<sup>5</sup> – with a reductionist analysis of the

<sup>4</sup> For SKAD's engagement with concepts of critique, see Keller 2016a.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that what has been called (for a hundred years now) 'symbolic ordering' and 'meaning-making' or 'social signification systems' in sociology is here referred to as 'the discursive.'

'hegemonic functions' of texts and articulations, mainly focused on political identity building around a particular issue. Here, attention is drawn to political claim-making in the name of the 'common good' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

The main point I want to make against the Laclau and Mouffe approach to discourse refers back to Foucault's interests in the discursive constitution of knowledge – to which they either do not or cannot draw our attention. So why could and should this part of Foucault's thinking be of interest for interpretive sociology? How did he refer discourse to knowledge and meaning-making? This merits closer examination. As a philosopher turning to empirical and historical studies, Foucault developed his approach to discourse and the complexities of power/knowledge quite apart from sociological positions (which were rather marginal in the French context in the early 1960s). Nevertheless, he invented his own "historical sociology of knowledge" (see Keller 2008; 2018b). While in the German discussion the works of Michel Foucault were long placed in stark contrast to the sociology of knowledge, in the Anglo-American debates, affinities, parallels, and connections were seen early on. This becomes particularly clear in the following quotation, which reflects an early, precise, comprehensive assessment by Philipp Manning:

Foucault explores the domain of the sociology of knowledge: ideas in their social context and the explanation for their continuity and change, as seen against the changing significance of history, politics, and economics. [ . . . ] Foucault attempts to construct a history not of ideas, but of events, and these events are critical insofar as they serve to show the disruption of previous modes of discourse. [ . . . ] He is interested in the ways discourse is represented in documents in his historical guise and how these, in turn, become important or significant, or statements of entire sets of conflicting times, durations and spatial forces. [ . . . ] The document provides an anchor with which Foucault grounds his work on the classification of the world [ . . . ]. Language does not guide Foucault to a consideration of the distinctions between the sign and the signifier, or between language as a system of rules and speech as competence or performance. Rather Foucault distinguishes rules and practices [ . . . ]. The sociology of knowledge in Foucault is represented in the search for the concept that will show how certain practices within a field of regulation or control vary, revealing the effect of power and of invisible forces on the practices. [He] introduces the material and political forces that shape and are sedimented in structures of knowledge. (Manning 1982, 65)

In a certain way, Foucault can definitely be understood as a representative of the Durkheimian ([1912] 2008) tradition, which advances a genuine sociology of knowledge analysis of social 'systems of thought.' However, he did so in somewhat abductive ways, which are closer to qualitative research in sociology. By this I mean that he worked 'from the bottom up,' starting with certain methodical devices and sensitizing concepts in order to analyze in detail certain historical (textual) data representing past institutions, practices, actors, and knowledge – what Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow called an "interpretive analytics" (1982). Foucault's fundamental achievement was first to look at discourses as socio-historically situated 'practices,' manifest as textual data, and not as the development of ideas or lines of argumentation, and second to 'liberate' discourse analysis from linguistic issues.

In so doing, he laid important foundations for a sociological analysis of discourses. When he argued that his main concern was the “analysis of problematisations” (Foucault 1984) – that is, the appearance of central breaking or turning points in the history of social constitutions of subjectivities or particular orders of practice – he came quite close to the interests of the symbolic interactionists.

Although Foucault’s work is often presented in a rather monolithic way, I would like to insist on (and point to) his varied uses of the term discourse. In his seminal book for discourse research, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972a), which reflects his own previous studies (especially the *Order of Things*, a historical analysis of the sciences; see Foucault [1966] 1970), Foucault proposes a theoretical framework which takes discourse as its central concept. Discourses are considered as historically situated, real social practices – not *representing* external objects, but *constituting* them. This implies looking at concrete data – oral and written texts, articles, books, discussions, institutions, disciplines – in order to analyze ‘from the bottom up’ how discourses are structured and how they structure knowledge domains and claims. Foucault speaks of “discursive formations” (1972a, 34–78) – for example, the “formation of concepts” (which concepts are used and how they relate to each other) or the “formation of enunciative modalities” (such as the “places for speakers” and the established criteria – for example, academic careers and titles – by which they are accessed). His notion of the “statement” (Foucault 1972a, 79–117) refers to the typified core elements of discursive events and concrete utterances – that is, what makes them part of a particular discourse and sets up a particular knowledge claim. The analysis of discursive formations leads us, via empirical data, to the rules and regularities which operate – and are operated by socialized actors – in a given or emerging disciplinary field, including rules directing (rather than determining) who is allowed to speak, how a particular discourse is to be performed, and what can be said. This idea can easily be shown in the present text, where I am following social sciences discursive formation, which excludes, for example, gossiping about my adventures yesterday evening or changing the language setting to *der deutschen Sprache*, in which I could also pursue my arguments (if permitted to do so).

In his later works, Foucault never realized the kind of analysis he projected (or stated retrospectively) in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Nevertheless, he returned to discourse several times: *L’ordre du discours* (The Order of Discourse), presented as oral communication in 1970 and strangely translated as *The Discourse on Language* (which was included as an appendix in the American translation of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1972b, 215–238]), in fact pursues the framework of discourse research by more explicitly introducing ideas of power and the mechanisms of the ‘inner structuration’ of discourses (such as the ‘commentary,’ for example, which differentiates between important statements and the rest). Most interesting for interpretive social research, in the context of the Rivière case (see *I, Pierre Rivière* [1973] 1982), Foucault addresses discourses as “battlefields,” as power struggles around the legitimate definition of phenomena. This lesser-known work comes



very close to symbolic interactionist positions. Here, Foucault and his team are dealing with a case of parricide in early nineteenth-century French Normandy: Pierre Rivière killed his mother, sister, and brother in an act of revenge, in order to recover his father's 'lost honor.' The interesting point is that this person presents an extensive written account of his motivation – and he really wants to be punished. But there are some other accounts, too: the police, the doctors, different psychological schools – they all produce their own, often contradictory versions of 'what the Rivière case is.' This is all highly consequential: Is he responsible for this act? Should Rivière be accused and put to death for murder, or labelled 'insane' and sent to a psychiatric hospital? Thus we can observe a classic struggle for the common, institutionally acceptable definition of the situation and the corresponding actions to be taken.

Foucault's implicit affinities with pragmatist and interpretive sociology are very clear here. Indeed, Richard Rorty (1982, xviii) and Nancy Fraser (1997) asserted Foucault's relation to pragmatist philosophy very early on, referring to pragmatist notions of discourse. "Foucault and Pragmatism" is taken up in detail in a recent special issue of *Foucault Studies* (Koopman 2011), with contributions discussing Foucault and Dewey, among other themes. In symbolic interactionism and interpretive sociology, Lindsay Prior (1989), Brian Castellani (1999), Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2007), Adele Clarke (2005), and others have drawn attention to the interest Foucault's work holds for interpretive sociology. We hear echoes of Herbert Blumer's, Anselm Strauss', and many other's writings on symbolic interactionism when Prior states:

Indeed, for Foucault the familiar objects of the social world (whether they be death, disease, madness, sexuality, sin or even mankind itself) are not "things" set apart from and independent of discourse, but are realized only in and through the discursive elements which surround the objects in question. Things, then, are made visible and palpable through the existence of discursive practices, and so disease or death are not referents about which there are discourses, but objects constructed by discourse. As the discourse changes, so too do the objects of attention. A discourse moreover, is not merely a narrow set of linguistic practices which reports on the world, but is composed of a whole assemblage of activities, events, objects, settings and epistemological precepts. The discourse of pathology, for example, is constructed not merely out of statements about diseases, cells and tissues, but out of the whole network of activities and events in which pathologists become involved, together with the laboratory and other settings within which they work and in which they analyze the objects of their attention. (Prior 1989, 3)

Despite these engagements, discourse research, whether situating itself in 'Foucault's footsteps' or more generally in the tradition of poststructuralism, does not usually refer to pragmatist traditions in sociology, and interpretive sociology and qualitative research have not thus far invested very much effort in elaborating a discourse research agenda of their own. However, as Adele Clarke has convincingly argued, discourses are not contexts of situations, but rather constituting aspects of situations.

Qualitative research has to pay attention to this if it aims to better address the complexities of today's social phenomena.

Today the qualitative research enterprise is moving beyond field notes and interview transcripts to include discourses of all kinds. We dwell [. . . in] explosions of images, representations, and narrative discourses that constitute cultures of consumption as well as production, of politics writ a million ways, of diverse individual and collective social and cultural identities, including racial, ethnic, gendered, religious, and subcultural identities, of dense histories, of old and new technologies and media from television to the Internet, and so on. Because *we and the people and things we choose to study* are all routinely both producing and awash in seas of discourses, analyzing only individual and collective human actors no longer suffices for many qualitative projects. Increasingly, historical, visual, narrative, and other discourse materials and non-human material cultural objects of all kinds must be included as elements of our research and subjected to analysis because they are increasingly understood/interpreted as both constitutive of and consequential for the phenomena we study.<sup>6</sup>

(Clarke 2005, 145)

The following section presents the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, which aims to deepen such proposals.

## 3 The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

### 3.1 General Outline

Once again, it was Stuart Hall (among others) who prominently argued in favor of a knowledge-oriented concept of discourse in the 1990s: “Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall 1997a, 4). The hypothesis I want to pursue here is as follows: Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge provides a theoretical framework which makes it possible to integrate (or elaborate within) a sociology of knowledge approach to discourse.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann brought together sociology of knowledge traditions, the interpretive

<sup>6</sup> See also Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018; Clarke and Keller 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Despite some minor differences, I believe this sociology of knowledge approach goes hand-in-hand with symbolic interactionist thought. The whole argument on SKAD is presented in Keller (2005) 2020; see also Keller 2011; the methods are discussed in Keller (2003) 2013. In addition, see the detailed presentation of SKAD and several case studies in Keller, Hornidge, and Schünemann 2018. For the usage of SKAD in social movement research and comparative cultural studies, see Ulrich and Keller 2014.

paradigm (including symbolic interactionist thinking and social phenomenology), and neighboring fields in their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). In this work, the authors differentiated between society as an objective reality which is sedimented within institutions and stocks of knowledge, on the one hand, and the way in which the acting subjects appropriate this reality in diverse socialization processes, on the other. It should be noted here that the term knowledge refers to all kinds of symbolic orderings and institutionalized symbolic orders (including common-sense knowledge, religion, theory, ideology, scientific knowledge, and so on). Above all, Berger and Luckmann emphasize the role of language and the daily 'conversational machinery' in the construction of a shared social reality. They discuss how knowledge is typified and realized through interactions and socially objectified in differing processes of institutionalization. Knowledge is also reified and becomes the foundation of social worlds differentiated by their symbolic horizons. Next, they talk about the legitimization of these knowledge/institutional complexes, and also about forms or steps of legitimization, which extend from the simple usage of particular vocabularies through theoretical postulates and explicit legitimization theories to elaborate symbolic sub-universes. These legitimizations are supported by various forms of social organization. Together with this analysis regarding the structure of knowledge come questions about the individuals, groups, actors, organizations, practices, artifacts, and institutional structures that fix (or transform) such orders. The historically situated order of knowledge within a society is internalized by the actors via socialization processes and is then reproduced (and occasionally transformed) through the permanent use of language or other systems of signs, as well as through nonverbal practices.

Indeed, Berger and Luckmann integrated a more Durkheimian view of society as institutionalized facticity with a more Weberian interest in social actors' meaning-making activities and Meadian perspectives on socialization processes and (wo) man's use of significant symbols. They temporalized and neutralized the older antagonism between structure and action by replacing it with a more dialectical perspective, arguing for structures (institutions) as the historically situated, emerging (side) effects of social actors' practices, 'doings,' and negotiations, and for social actors' agency and creativity as constituted by a socio-historical *a priori* – that is, existing social contexts, particularly "symbolic universes" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 110–120) or "sub-universes of reality" and "finite provinces of meaning" (Schütz 1973, 230).

Although Berger and Luckmann highlighted the role of 'theoretical conceptions' (ideas, theories, and others) in social processes, they placed much more emphasis on the fact that their main interest (and therefore also the main interest of the sociology of knowledge inspired by these two authors) was in 'common sense,' since in the end, this seemed to them the most relevant level of social knowledge (1966, 14–15). The Berger and Luckmann legacy in Germany at present uses the label *Hermeneutische Wissenssoziologie* (the hermeneutical sociology of knowledge;

see Hitzler, Reichertz, and Schröder 1999; 2020)<sup>8</sup> to mark the difference between this and other social science approaches to knowledge. Since Schütz's, Berger's, and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge has always paid great attention to the connection between language and knowledge, it has recently been presented by some of its proponents as the "communicative paradigm" in knowledge research (Knoblauch 1995; see also Knoblauch 2020 on the "communicative construction of reality"). In taking up foundational work on social construction, including the tenet that everyday knowledge should be the central point of reference for research, the *Hermeneutische Wissenssoziologie* has unfortunately concentrated primarily on micro-levels of knowledge analysis. It has directed its interests toward ethnographies of the "small life-worlds of modern man" (to borrow Benita Luckmann's phrase) or laypersons' and professional actors' interpretations of their everyday activities, as well as toward common-sense knowledge and individuals as the knowledge actors of daily life. However, as we have seen with regard to the original argument on institutionalization and legitimization, this is a rather contingent and by no means necessary elaboration on their work.

SKAD, although situated within this paradigm of knowledge research, constitutes both an extension and a correction, elaborating on the 'objective reality' side of Berger's and Luckmann's theory – that is, on the (institutional) processes and structures in social relations of knowledge – and taking the *discursive* construction of highly consequential objective realities into consideration. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Berger and Luckmann's original work offers a rather comprehensive view of society as symbolic order and ordering, including both institutional levels and actors' agency, as well as the interplay between them. Their *insistence* on Mead and Schütz explains the 'priority' these two scholars assume here over Foucault's argument for discourses, which only addresses institutional settings and practices. Foucault's perspective has to be grounded in a general pragmatist theory of the conditions of possibility of the human use of symbols, of the "animal symbolicum" (to borrow Ernst Cassirer's phrase; see Cassirer 1977). Without such an argument, the notion of discourse itself – as used by Foucault in the different ways we have seen – would lose its sense.

I do not have space here to elaborate on the relations between Mead and Schütz; I shall merely note the strong argument presented by Ilja Srubar (1988) regarding the close connection between Schütz and Chicago pragmatist thinking. Following Alfred Schütz, SKAD assumes that meaning is constituted in human consciousness, in the transformation of sensual experience into conceptual experience. The process by which we ascribe meaning to our actions and interactions, social situations, and/or the world is necessarily located in embodied human consciousness. Without a process

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<sup>8</sup> See Hitzler, Reichertz, and Schröder 2020. This approach is indeed very close to symbolic interactionist perspectives (Keller 2012), but it insists on phenomenological foundations (e.g., the work of Alfred Schütz) as well as on strong reflection on the researcher's interpretive activities.

such as the layering or the constitution of meaning, there is no separation between the self and the world, no perception of space, time, the social, and so on. However, this capacity of consciousness is not a genuine, extra-worldly 'production capacity,' as if consciousness creates the existence and the meaning of the world out of nothing in an act of solitary, productive creativity. As social phenomenology and symbolic interactionist thinking have largely shown, consciousnesses do indeed draw on social interpretation schemata in a fundamental typification process in order to instantiate their capacity for orientation. This occurs by means of signs – that is, significant symbols or knowledge schemata, which are taken from the socio-historically generated and established collective stocks of knowledge/universes of discourse, primarily within socialization processes. A particular individual's specific, subjective stocks of knowledge are inconsistent, heterogeneous, complex sedimentations and actualizations of knowledge triggered from the outside, which always exist in a situational, pragmatically motivated relation between focalization and blurry horizons, actualized by 'external' stimulation.

George Herbert Mead and the tradition of symbolic interactionism considered in more depth how individual competence in the use of signs/knowledge or of significant symbols develops within socialization processes. Above all, Mead emphasized the primacy of communication and of the universe(s) of discourse that always historically 'comes before' the individual. The existence of social-symbolic orders – never ultimately achieved, but always being in the 'process of ordering' – and the corresponding communication processes are a necessary prerequisite for the development of individual consciousnesses that are capable of intellectual reflection. Thought is therefore a form of communication turned inward. Research into the social phenomenon of discourses is obsolete without such a theory of sign-processing consciousnesses (which does not mean that everything is already said here).<sup>9</sup> Significant symbols, as well as the 'legitimate ways of using them,' are processed discursively, and the corresponding social rules work as instructions in discursively embedded utterances. Historically, they make up the more or less solidly fixed pre-existing 'supply' to be used by particular individuals and consciousnesses. The language system of meaning is a pre-condition of the inevitable, necessary 'desubjectification' of the individual's interpretive practice – in other words, the historical-social assignation of the possibilities for a 'subjective' orientation of individuals in the life-world. Its usage always presupposes the participating actors' capacity for interpretation. Every long-term use of significant symbols is a social practice regulated by social conventions. These conventions form the basis of discourse practices as a set of more or less powerful, more or less institutionalized instructive rules. They are actualized in practical usage, thus simultaneously reproduced and altered, or transformed, as needed. So individual or collective actors' complex involvement in discourses is socially regulated, but not

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<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, the (widely forgotten) work of Florian Znaniecki on *Cultural Reality* (1919).

determined. There is therefore, in principal, a certain amount of freedom in interpretation and action in concrete situations, as well as a surplus of forms of communication and models for the attribution of meaning. Societies differ in the available spectrum and in their ways of producing such choices.

Following Foucault, I identify discourses as regulated, structured practices of sign usage in social arenas, which constitute smaller or larger symbolic universes. Discourses are simultaneously both an expression of and a constitutional prerequisite for the (modern) social; they become real through the actions of social actors, supply specific knowledge claims, and contribute to the liquefaction and dissolution of the institutionalized interpretations and apparent unavailabilities. Discourses crystallize and constitute themes in a particular form as social interpretation and action issues. Discursive formations are discourse groupings, which follow the same formation rules. For example, a scientific discourse is manifest in texts, conferences, papers, talks, associations, and so on, which can all be studied as data. Such discourses emerged historically out of actions and interactions committed to 'telling the empirical truth' about phenomena 'in the world,' both in form or formal appearance as well as in content: what could – and should – be said about these phenomena. Once institutionalized and generally legitimated, such discourse pre-structures (as Alfred Schütz indicated in the citation above) what can be said and done in this particular discourse arena. Michel Foucault, in the seminal works I have already mentioned, identified the ways in which dimensions of discourse can be analyzed as emergent discourse formations without recourse to the unmasking of the 'real' or 'covert' reasons and intentions of particular social interest groups or actors. He then proposed corresponding dimensions of analysis of discursive formations which, when combined with historically situated institutionalization processes and the interwoven actions of social actors therein, can benefit interpretive sociology. In discourses, social actors' use of language or symbols constitutes the sociocultural facticity of physical and social realities. The meaning of signs, symbols, images, gestures, actions, or things is more or less fixed in socially, spatially, and temporally or historically situated (and therefore transformable) orders of signs. This meaning is affirmed, conserved, or changed in the concrete usage of these signs. In this respect, every fixed meaning is a snapshot within a social process that is capable of generating an endless variety of possible readings and interpretations. Discourses can be understood as attempts to freeze meanings or, more generally speaking, to freeze more or less broad symbolic orders – that is, to fix them in time, and by so doing, to institutionalize a binding context of meaning, values, and actions/agency within social collectives.

SKAD is concerned with this correlation between sign usage as a social practice and the (re)production/transformation of social orders of knowledge. It is called the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (analysis) because the perspective on discourses implied in SKAD can be situated in the sociology of knowledge tradition founded by Berger and Luckmann. This is mainly due to SKAD's research focus on knowledge and symbolic orderings, and also because it benefits from its connection

to this tradition, which is close to qualitative research. More specifically, this approach proposes a perspective on discourse that bridges the gap between agency and structure-oriented traditions within the sociology of knowledge. Indeed, just as Berger and Luckmann addressed the manifestation of institutions out of processes of institutionalization, we can consider the processing of discourses through society as a dialectical interplay between actors producing statements and the established as well as emerging structurations and socio-historical means they have to draw upon.

SKAD is not a method, but rather a research program embedded in the sociology of knowledge tradition that examines the discursive construction of symbolic orders, which occurs in the form of competing politics of knowledge. Social relationships of knowledge are complex socio-historical constellations of the production, stabilization, structuration, and transformation of knowledge within a variety of social arenas. SKAD examines discourses as performative statement practices and symbolic orderings, which constitute orders of reality and also produce power effects within a conflict-ridden network of social actors, institutional dispositifs, and stocks of knowledge. It emphasizes the fact that discourse is concrete and material; it is not an abstract idea or a free-floating line of arguments. This means that discourse appears as speech, text, discussion, visual image, and use of symbols, which have to be performed by actors following social instructions; therefore, discourses are a real social practice.

SKAD research is concerned with reconstructing the processes which occur in the social construction, objectivization, communication, and legitimization of meaning structures in institutional spheres and issue-specific arenas. It is also concerned with the analysis of the social effects of these processes. This includes various dimensions of reconstruction: sense-making as well as subject formation, ways of acting, institutional/structural contexts, and social consequences; how, for example, they become apparent in the form of a dispositif. The latter refers to a kind of material, practical, and symbolic/immaterial infrastructure designed to solve a problem (for instance, consisting of a law, administrative regulations, staff, or things like cars, computers, and so on – which are all kinds of disposals) or in social actors' adoption or rejection of such dispositifs in their everyday lives. For example, actors might refuse to behave 'in an environmentally-friendly way,' to act as "enterprising selves" (to borrow Nicolas Rose's phrases; see Rose 1992), to become a "flexible man" (to borrow Richard Sennett's phrase; see Sennett 1998), or to identify as 'a true African-American.' This perspective presumes the normality of symbolic battles, contested problematizations, and controversies – of competitive discourses, the manifestations and effects of which can be traced back only in the rarest cases to the dominance and intentions of individual actors (although one should perhaps not dismiss them upfront).

The (more or less institutionalized) speaker positions which are available within discursive battles and their corresponding discourse or issue-specific arenas, as well as the social actors who are involved in these arenas, are not 'masters of the discourse

universe,' but are rather (co-)constituted by the existing structuring of discursive orders or formations. Nevertheless, they in no way act as "cultural dopes" (as Harold Garfinkel (1967, 68) put it a long time ago), but rather as lively, interested producers of statements, as articulators with more or less strong potential in terms of resources and creativity. The symbolic orders that are produced and transformed in this process constitute the aggregated effects of their actions; unambiguous, temporary forms of dominance or hegemony are probably rare, but they are nonstandard configurations that should not be excluded from an empirical point of view.

I describe discursive fields as social arenas, constituting themselves around contested issues, controversies, problematizations, and truth claims in which discourses are in reciprocal competition with one another. SKAD's topics of analysis are both *public discourses* and *special discourses* performed in closed arenas for special publics. They are analyzed with regard to their bearer, to their matching or differing formation rules and content positionings, as well as to their effects. In the processing of discourses, specific *discourse coalitions* and statement-bearers can 'win out' over others using a wide range of means. As Thomas Kuhn (1970) long ago demonstrated with regard to scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts do not have to emerge out of arguments; there are many other kinds of reasons. This holds true for discourses, too. However, the discursive formation that occurs as a result of this process cannot be understood as an intended, controlled effect achieved by individual actors. What is at stake in these discourses is the fixing of collective symbolic orders through a more or less accurate repetition and stabilization of the same statements in singular utterances. Argumentative consensus-building processes, as projected in Habermas' normative discourse ethics, in which all participants are equal and the best argument wins, may appear as very particular and rather rare cases of discourse processing. Therefore, SKAD addresses discourses as complexes of power/knowledge which should be the objects not of pre-established normative judgment, but of empirical inquiry and analysis.

SKAD proposes additional terms to use in the analysis of utterances that are assumed to be part of the same discursive formation. The term discourse itself indicates a structuration context, which is the basis for disseminated discursive events. The unity of the structuring context – that is, of the discourse in question – should be considered as a necessary hypothetical construct for sociological observation, an essential research hypothesis. This means that discourses indeed exist as/in performances: if we, the observers, state that there is such a thing as a scientific or religious discourse, or an issue-driven discourse in public or specialized arenas, then we assume that very different usages of signs and things pertain to the same phenomenon – and then we try to give accounts of that phenomenon. Much the same thing occurs in every field of sociology. For example, research on families is rather similar: it presumes that assemblages of individual persons can be regrouped, researched, compared, and analyzed if they are considered 'families' (rather than, for instance, a group of friends or biological organisms).



Just as concrete families are performances of 'doing family,' discursive orders are the results of a continuous communicative production within individual language and action events, which should not be understood as spontaneous or chaotic, but rather as interwoven, structured practices which refer back to one another. A pamphlet, a newspaper article, or a speech in the context of a demonstration, for instance, actualizes an environmental policy discourse in different concrete forms and with different empirical scope. Discourses are subject to the conditions of institutional inertia: individual discursive events never actualize and reproduce a discourse's structure in a completely identical way, but always in a more or less varied form. 'Actualization' can therefore be understood in two ways: as the transfer of discourse-structuring patterns onto a real event, and as the accompanying modification or adaptation to the current conditions of a situational context. Consequential discourse transformations can rarely be related to such an individual event. Rather, they originate in the sum of the variations, in a kind of switch from the quantitative to the qualitative effect. The materiality of discourses (such as discursive or non-discursive practices, 'real' speakers, texts, speeches, discussions, and things) simply means: the way discourses exist in societies.

In producing/articulating interpretations, *social actors* use the rules and resources that are available as discourses in their discursive practice – not as deterministic regulation, but as *instruction* – or they react to them as *addressees*. Only if discourse research accounts for the agency of these actors can we understand how the more or less creative implementation of such practices takes place. SKAD does not hastily mistake the discourse level as a condition of the possibilities or limitations of utterances for the factual interpretations and practices of social actors. Social actors are not merely the empty addressees of knowledge supplies and the value assessments embedded therein, but are also socially configured incarnations of agency – according to the respective socio-historical and situational conditions – who more or less obstinately interpret social knowledge supplies as 'available rules' in their everyday interpretive activities (Hitzler et al. 1999), standing in the crossfire of multiple, heterogeneous, perhaps even contradictory discourses, trying to handle the situations they encounter.

### 3.2 Subject Positions

In what follows, I will give short illustrations – inspired by my own research on waste issue discourses in Germany and France (Keller [1998] 2009) – of some further SKAD concepts before finally turning to questions of method. Firstly, social actors are related to discourse in two ways: on the one hand, as the holders of a *speaker position* and *statement producers* who speak within a discourse; and on the other hand, as *addressees of the statement*. The sociological vocabulary of institutions, organizations, roles, and strategies of the individual or the collective – but

always of social actors – can be used in a corresponding analysis of the structuration of speaker positions within discourses. However, actors generally appear on the discursive level, too: *subject positions/identity offerings* depict the positioning processes and ‘patterns of subjectivization’ that are generated in discourses and that refer to (fields of) addressees. Imagine for a moment, for example, the multiple evil figures and bad guys/bad citizens in visual and textual green action mobilizations who illustrate ‘what not to do’ – on billboards, in guidebooks, in children’s books, etc. It is not necessary to enter into details of interpretation and meaning-making here. I merely want to point out how a subject position might appear in a given discourse. Here, the bad citizen is the one who pollutes, the wild waste-maker, the one who takes the plane and uses plastics, the ‘simple wo/man from the street’ littering, thereby destroying nature while others are trying to save and enjoy it. S/He is the one who needs to be ‘disciplined,’ punished, corrected. But such bad citizens are not alone. They have a strong and powerful counterpart, the eco-citizen who has appeared in public discourses all around the western world since the late 1960s. The good subject of environmental discourse and her or his perfect behavior is likewise addressed in countless advice books, education and teaching programs, etc.

### 3.3 Practices

The term practice(s) depicts very generally conventionalized action patterns, which are made available in collective stocks of knowledge as a repertoire for action – in other words, a more or less explicitly known, often incorporated recipe or knowledge script about the ‘proper’ way to act. This knowledge can originate, establish, and develop itself (further) in fields of social practice by experimenting and testing actions in relation to specific issues. SKAD considers several forms of practice: discursive practices are communication patterns that are bound to a discourse context. They are not only interesting for discourse research – such as genre theory and conversation analysis – so far as their formal process structure is concerned, but also equally in considerations of what Foucault called the (socio-historical emergence of) rules of formation, their adoption by social actors, and their function in discourse production. Discursive practices are observable, describable, typical ways of acting out statement production, the implementation of which requires interpretive competence and active shaping on the part of social actors. SKAD differentiates between the latter and model practices generated within discourses – that is, exemplary patterns (or templates) of action which are constituted in discourses, fixed to subject positions, and addressed to a particular discourse’s public or to some ‘counter-discourse.’ To build on the above-mentioned examples of environmental discourse, this includes recommendations for eco-friendly behavior (such as turning the shower off while shampooing one’s hair, riding a bike, or preparing slow food). Similarly to the subject positions discussed above, one should not suppose that the

model practice will actually be implemented in the way it was imagined in a discourse. Its 'realization' has to be considered in its own right. The idea of 'model practices' can be illustrated by the numerous and locally varying information sheets explaining – often with the help of color schemes and diagrams – how to separate your household waste, which material category has to be put into which container (in order to be transformed from waste to value), how to prepare it, etc. In Germany at least, such diagrams often show us a rather complicated system of waste classification in order to guide our behavior concerning waste separation at home or in the office: there might be the blue bin for paper (which has to be flattened before it is thrown away) – but only for certain kinds of paper (such as newspapers and cartons, but not for tissues, dirty paper, or tampons). There is a yellow bin for all items marked with a green dot (the German recycling label), except paper and glass. There is a green bin for all organic waste (except meat, fish, cheese, and certain other items). There is grey for everything else (such as meat, fish, and condoms). And there might be many more differentiated kinds of waste (glass, bulk garbage, electrical appliances, and special or hazardous waste). What is more, such diagrams provide us with a large number of instructions about how to classify different kinds of waste and they indicate the correct actions that should be performed. Sometimes, a new actor of surveillance, control, and reporting is introduced. This could be a special job position (the waste care taker) or just 'we' towards one another, in the battlefield of environmental governmentality.

### 3.4 Dispositifs

The social actors who mobilize a discourse and are mobilized by discourse establish a corresponding infrastructure of discourse production and problem solving, which can be identified as a dispositif. Michel Foucault (1980, 194–228) introduced different notions of dispositifs. SKAD takes up the one which is most common in everyday French (and which, in a certain way, can be linked to the English terms 'disposal' or 'device'). Thus dispositif refers to what could be called an infrastructure established by social actors or collectivities in order to resolve a particular situation, with its inherent issues of action. Consider the state's need to obtain some 'money of its own': the combination of financial laws, administrative regulation, tax authorities, tax assessment, and tax investigators, together with texts, objects, actions, and persons, constitute the dispositif in question – an ensemble of heterogeneous elements, drawn together and arranged in order to manage a situation, to respond to a kind of 'urgency' (in Michel Foucault's sense). SKAD distinguishes between *dispositifs of discourse production* and *dispositifs* or infrastructures *that emerge out of a discourse* (or several discourses) in order to deal with the real-world phenomena addressed by the discourse in question. A dispositif is both the *institutional foundation* – the sum total of all the material, practical, personal, cognitive,

and normative infrastructures of discourse production – and also the *infrastructures of implementation* that emerge out of discursively configured problematizations of fields of practice.

Consider the issue arena of ‘household waste,’ recycling, and so on – important issues in public debates and policy decisions in recent decades: with reference to the discourse (re)production level, we should mention the discursive interventions of the various administrators, spokespersons, and press committees, and also the research centers that diffuse and legitimize a specific construction of waste issues through their statements, brochures, and so on. With regard to implementation, one could also include the legal regulation of responsibilities, formalized proceedings, specific objects, technologies, sanctions, courses of study, and personal and other phenomena. For instance, waste separation systems are part of the dispositif and effects of discourses on waste. This includes the corresponding legal regulations, the waste removal company’s staff, and also the waste separation and waste cleaning practices to which people submit (or which they refuse). Dispositifs mediate between discourses and fields of practice. SKAD is therefore not simply the textual analysis of signs in use, communication, text, or image research. It is simultaneously case studies, observations, and even dense ethnographic descriptions which consider the links between statements (as situated events), practices, actors, organizational arrangements, and objects as more or less historical and far-reaching socio-spatial processes. From the beginning, SKAD has argued for a focused ethnography of discourses and dispositifs – that is, for particular attention to discourse production and the performative elements and effects of dispositif structures. Such an ethnography is one point of entry in SKAD’s reaction to recent debates on new materialisms (see Keller [2005] 2021; see also the special issue of the *Journal for Discourse Research* on “Discourseethnography,” ed. by Elliker, Wundrak, and Maeder 2017; on discourse research and new materialisms, see Keller 2017, 2018a, 2019).

Here is another appeal to your imagination, in order to illustrate the concept of dispositive: What do we need to address the ‘urgencies’ of waste proliferation, scarcity of natural resources, and environmental degradation? We need texts – laws, rules, regulations, numbers and statistics, books, reviews, information sheets, all of which make accessible the collective level of waste production. We need concrete material devices such as garbage cans, garbage trucks, waste disposal sites, incinerators, and recycling plants. We need people for collecting, transporting, and processing material flows and transformations. And we need some kind of (more or less organized) relations between all such elements.

### 3.5 Symbolic Ordering and Symbolic Orders

Thus far, we have discussed certain core conceptual elements of SKAD. We shall now focus on the ‘knowledge side’ of discourse – that is, the symbolic ordering

proposed and performed in singular discursive events and series of such events. Discourse includes both form and content. Discourse research may concentrate on the socio-historical genealogy, variation, and transformation of such forms, pursuing questions such as: In what way does a speech or a text have to be formally constructed to count as being part of political, religious, or scientific discourse at a given historical moment and in a particular context? Second, at least in sociology, there is an enduring interest in what is being said, by whom, with what effects – that is, in terms of content, actor, and power. We should remember Max Weber and his analysis of *The Protestant Ethic* – a study not about the formal aspects of sermons, prayers, and religious books, but rather about their content – and its effects. Naturally – like all forms – contents, actors, and powers will change over time.

Nevertheless, discourse-oriented research tries to account for the processes by which different, often conflicting ways of symbolic ordering compete – which is what content is all about – and why some of them are more consequential than others. This means, roughly, that there is no longer a need to show that everything is social construction or contingency, but to illuminate, interpret, and thereby understand (or render understandable) how and with what effects such contingency is reduced in social engagements. This holds true for scientific discourses as well as for discourses in the public realm or in special issue arenas. Therefore SKAD does not address singular, isolated, individualized discursive events for their own sake, but always as part of a series of such events. Foucault proposed a very useful idea here, one that is close to qualitative research agendas. In his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he asserted that discourse research is about statements, not about singular utterances. This idea of the ‘statement’ refers to what could be called the typical core element of knowledge configuration processed by a given discourse. To give but one example from interpretive sociology: William Gamson (1988) speaks of “discursive frames” (for example, a certain way of considering nature, be it as a sophisticated “clock-work” or as “our great mother”), argumentative reasoning, and rhetorical framing devices as means to identify and analyze such statements. SKAD proposes a slightly different framework of sensitizing concepts, which are closer to the sociology of knowledge, for analyzing the content of discourses – distinguishing between *interpretive schemes*, *classifications*, *phenomenal structures* (*Phänomenstrukturen*), and *narrative structures*. Together, these elements create the *interpretive repertoire* of a discourse.<sup>10</sup> I shall now consider these concepts more closely.

The term interpretive scheme (*Deutungsmuster*), which is close to Gamson’s idea of frame but situated in the German traditions of *Deutungsmusteranalyse*, conveys meaning and action-generating schemata, which are combined in and circulated through discourses. Such interpretive schemes can be applied to different

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<sup>10</sup> The term “interpretive repertoire” was coined by Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1988); see Keller (1998) 2009, 36.

kinds of phenomena or events, and indeed, they undergo historical and social transformations. Interpretive schemes are part of society's stocks of knowledge. Discourses differentiate in the ways they combine such schemes in specific interpretive frameworks. They are able to generate new interpretive schemes and different ways of positioning these within a social agenda – which is exactly what characterizes discourses. An example of this is the interpretive scheme of the 'irreducible risk' of complex technologies, which has found its way into social stocks of knowledge over the last few decades, within and because of various environmental discourses (and disasters). This frame can be applied to nuclear power plants (as evidenced by the events in Fukushima/Japan in 2011) as well as to waste disposal infrastructures, nanotechnologies, GMOs, hydraulic fracturing, and many other instantiations. It might be opposed by framing certain events in terms of a 'deficient political system' (as was the case with Chernobyl) or 'singular human error.' In contrast to Gamson and certain social movement research, SKAD argues that such framings are of interest far beyond the singular question of their strategic use, because they always aspire to configure reality. Furthermore, against Gamson's and others' empirical research procedures, I would argue that such interpretive schemes may appear in very different ways, and analytical strategies have to address this: they require careful reconstruction,<sup>11</sup> which cannot be reduced to a quantified 'measurement' of key words or expressions (a strategy adopted by William Gamson and his colleagues in their analysis of media discourses), and which has to expand beyond media platforms in order to reach for complexities in arenas of discourse.

A second element which allows for a content-focused analysis of discourses is the exploration of the *classifications* (and therefore qualifications) of phenomena, which are performed both within discourses and by discourses. Classifications are a more or less elaborate, formalized, institutionally fixed form of social typification. Like every form of symbolizing, sign usage within discourses classifies the world and separates it into particular categories, which create the basis for conceptual experiencing, interpreting, and addressing it. Competition for such classifications occurs, for example, between discourses about how (potential) technological catastrophes should be interpreted, which identity offerings can be considered legitimate, the differences between correct and condemnable behavior, and whether or not perpetrators are certifiably sane (one could consider Foucault's Rivière case here; see Foucault 1982; see also *The Order of Things*). Classifications have specific impacts on action. Although this was shown in the groundbreaking work of Geoffrey S. Bowker and Susan L. Star (2000) in the interpretive paradigm, discourse research thus far has rather seldom addressed the work of classification.

<sup>11</sup> Keller and Truschkat (2014) explore sequential analysis as a procedure for analyzing such interpretive schemes. Case studies can be found in Keller, Hornidge, and Schünemann 2018.

Alongside interpretive schemes and classifications, the concept of phenomenal structure (*Phänomenstruktur*), which corresponds in some ways to Karl Mannheim's classical notion of *Aspektstruktur*, offers a complementary third point of access to the levels of content-related structuring of discourse (see Table 1 below). For instance, constructing a theme as a problem on the public agenda requires that the protagonists deal with the issue in several dimensions, referring to argumentative, dramatizing, and evaluative statements; determining the kind of problem or theme of a statement unit; defining characteristics, causal relations (cause-effect), and their links to responsibilities; identifying the human and non-human actors involved; establishing the dimensions of the problem, the values, the moral and aesthetic judgments, the consequences, and the possible courses of action, among other aspects. The phenomena which are constituted by phenomenal structures do not necessarily appear as a 'problem to be solved,' even if they always relate to 'meaning-making' and 'problems of action' in a very general way. The existing state of discourse research provides insight into certain elements of such phenomenal structures, as mentioned above. For example, the subject positions constituted by a discourse can be differentiated in a variety of ways. Discourses carry out social actors' positioning as heroes, rescuers, individuals who act sensibly or responsibly, problematic individuals, villains, and so on. Social actors are not pre-determined or pre-fixed entities with clear interests, strategies, and resources. SKAD discourse research is very much about the discursive processes in which actors emerge, engage themselves or are engaged by others, claim or perform reciprocal positionings, and are involved in discursive structuring in multiple ways. This also includes discourse-generated model practices, which provide templates for how one should act with regard to issues that the discourse has defined. The concept of phenomenal structure takes on these kinds of considerations and links them to the fact that discourses, in the constitution of their referential relation (their "theme"), designate different elements or dimensions of their topic and link these to a specific form or phenomenal constellation. This does not describe any essential qualities of a discourse topic, but rather describes the corresponding discursive attributions. Both the structural dimensions and the concrete implementation of such a phenomenal structure have to be depicted using empirical data; this constitutes a major difference from the concept of the "conditional matrix," as established by Anselm Strauss and Juliette Corbin (1990) in their grounded theory approach.

One final element that is part of the content-related shaping of discourses should be discussed here. The structuring moments of statements and discourses – through which various interpretation schemes, classifications, and dimensions of the phenomenal structure (such as actors and problem definitions) are placed in relation to one another in a specific way – can be described as narrative structures. Narrative structures are not simply techniques used to assemble linguistic elements, but a *mise en intrigue* ('emplotment,' in the sense Paul Ricoeur uses the term), a configurative act, which links disparate signs and statements in the form of

**Table 1: Phenomenal Structure: Administrative Discourse on Waste Issues, France, 1995.**  
Source: Keller 2009, 232.

Dimensions	Concrete Implementation
Causation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Waste as a sanitary issue; discrepancy between the amount produced and disposal or recycling infrastructure</li> <li>- Increased wealth, economic and technical advances, consumption needs of consumers → rise in waste produced</li> <li>- Waste as a problem of deficient waste disposal at landfills</li> <li>- Waste as a problem of a lack of citizen responsibility and discipline</li> <li>- Waste as a problem of national autonomy/foreign trade balance/usage of raw materials</li> <li>- Waste as a problem of international competitive conditions</li> <li>- → <i>waste as a 'quasi-natural' by-product of progress and wealth</i></li> </ul>
Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Politics/government/national administration (must develop and enforce a waste policy framework program in coordination with the economy)</li> <li>- Regional corporations, economy (individual responsibility for the implementation of the political specifications)</li> <li>- Citizens/society (giving up irrational fears and selfish denials; taking on responsibility for waste; accepting technologies)</li> </ul>
Need for action/ problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low problem level; technical mastery of the waste issue is possible through recycling and elimination → <i>nature is governable</i></li> <li>- Large-scale technological expansion and optimization of the waste disposal and recycling infrastructure → <i>interpretive pattern of socio-technical mastery</i></li> <li>- Obtaining acceptance of removal infrastructure through the use of communication and participation</li> <li>- Comprehensive mobilization of citizens' responsibility (local authorities, economy, consumers) for the <i>national interest in resource importation reduction</i></li> </ul>
Self-positioning of speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Representatives of scientific-technical, economic, and pragmatic reason, or of civil (socio-cultural/socio-technical) progress</li> <li>- Government as the administrator of the collective interest</li> <li>- → <i>The French state as representing civilization, modernity, and progress in behavior and technology, as incorporating pragmatic reasoning</i></li> </ul>
Othering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- French civil actors (regional corporations, economy, citizens) show a <i>lack of consciousness of their responsibility as citizens of France</i></li> <li>- Irrationalism and fundamentalism of German waste politics as a disguise for economic protectionism</li> </ul>
Thing culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not a topic in the waste discussion; follows seemingly 'sacrosanct' modernization dynamics and market rationalities</li> <li>- Material model of affluence; the state does not control people's desires and needs (with regard to production and consumption)</li> </ul>



Table 1 (continued)

Dimensions	Concrete Implementation
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Government secures collective interests (affluence, progress, modernity)</li> <li>- (Actual and moral) cleanliness of public space</li> <li>- Nature as a (scarce national) resource, the usage of which can be optimized</li> <li>- <i>Society as it is, right here and now</i>, as a realization of the 'good life'</li> </ul>

narratives. They can be considered a basic modality by which humans order their experience of the world (Ricoeur 1984, 5). In the seriality of discursive events that constitutes a discourse, the above-mentioned elements of knowledge configuration are tied together in a particular 'narration' and are integrated via a common thread, a storyline. Narrative structures link the various interpretive elements of a discourse into a coherent, portrayable, and communicable form. They provide the plot for the narration, with which the discourse can address an audience in the first place, and with which it can construct its own coherence over the course of time.

It should be noted here that the elements for analyzing the 'knowledge side' of discourse presented thus far can each be used separately or all together in empirical research. They indicate what to look for and how to 'order' the results of analysis. SKAD proposes further kinds of ordering devices, such as maps of engaged actors, maps relating actors and competing discourses, or more general maps that attempt to account for the processing of discourses in the public sphere. Consider the following example in Table 2 (modified version, based on Keller 2009, 287).<sup>12</sup>

## 4 On Methods

SKAD aims to direct qualitative research's attention in sociology, the sociology of knowledge, and interpretive traditions toward the field of discourses. As Adele Clarke (2005) argued in *Situational Analysis*, discourses are not external to situations, but

<sup>12</sup> My work in Keller 2009 uses several tables or 'maps' to account for the discursive arena of waste politics in Germany and France, which cannot be included here. These mappings refer to relations between opposing discourses and economic, political, administrative, and civil society actors/entities and the public sphere, as well as to the arena of actors involved in these processes, according to their 'statement producing activity,' which might be central to or on the margins of a given discursive field. Related to this are Clarke's ideas of 'mapping,' as well as Michel Foucault's, Gilles Deleuze's, and Bruno Latour's arguments on 'cartography' (on Foucault and Deleuze, see Deleuze 1988; on Latour, see Venturini 2010).

**Table 2: The Public Discursive Field of Legitimate Statements and Articulators in (West) Germany (Discourse on Waste) in the 1980s—Some Examples. Source: Keller 2009, 287.**

Actors	Structurally conservative discourse on garbage: technical-ecological modernization	Culturally critical discourse on garbage: political-ecological restructuring
Politics/Administration (e.g.)	Discourse Coalitions *Federal Government (Ministry Of Economics) *Federal States (Baden-Wuerttemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia) *Parties *FDP *CDU/CSU *SPD *local authority	*Federal stage government (Lower Saxony, Hesse) *Parties *SPD *Die Grünen *PDS
Economy/environmental organizations (e.g.)	*Trade associations (BDI, DIHT, VCI) *Individual large companies *Disposal and utilization industry (Initiative Sichere Abfallbehandlung, BDE, DSD) *Labour unions	*Environmental organizations (BUND, Greenpeace, Robin Wood, Das bessere Müllkonzept)
Experts(e.g.)	*Experts from public authorities and science *Federal environmental agency *Advisory council on the environment	*Expert from public authorities and science *Office for Technology Assessment of the German Federal Parliament *Environmental Institutes
Media(e.g.)	*FAZ *Die Welt *Handelsblatt *Rheinischer Merkur *SZ *Wirtschaftswoche	*SZ *Der Spiegel *Der Zeit, DAS *FR *taz *nature, global garbage journal
Way of profiling		

should be considered internal components of discourses. This means that whenever qualitative sociological research analyzes concrete phenomena and empirical questions, it should address this discursive dimension in order to provide more complex accounts of 'what is going on.' SKAD research even takes discourses under consideration as the 'situation to address.' Strategies of qualitative research are highly interesting here, as discourses are ways of meaning-making which manifest in concrete textual data. If sociology seeks to be an empirical science – that is, a specifically accountable form of reality-related analysis – rather than a writer's novel or journalist's report, then certain claims regarding general disclosure and transparency of the

steps one takes in research and interpretation must be maintained. This requires a systematic analytical procedure and applies independently of whether or not subjective or collective stocks of knowledge (or the forms of externalization/articulation which document them or are indicative of them, such as books, speeches, newspaper articles, and films) are being analyzed.

Therefore, like certain other qualitative approaches, SKAD favors sequential analysis of textual data directed toward its own research questions to give an account of discursive claims and statements beyond the single utterance or discursive event: a line-by-line, step-by-step development, debate, and choice of interpretations in order to build up an accountable analysis of frames (*Deutungsmuster*), phenomenal structures, classifications, and storylines. The open coding procedure elaborated in grounded theory is helpful in indicating this procedure, as it demands the careful checking of interpretation and categories against the data at hand. In this sense, SKAD is part of the newer hermeneutical tradition in the sociology of knowledge, which pays attention to the fragile relation between 'questions to' and 'answers given by' empirical data. For example, in my own research on waste issues, a 'risk' frame was elaborated from newspaper data. This interpretive scheme entered German discourses on waste in the early 1980s and appeared in many different ways: as textual utterances, as front-page newspaper illustrations, as scientific analyses of waste incineration. In French discourse on waste, the main organizing frame was the importance of French engineers mastering all kinds of technological procedures, including types of waste disposal.

I speak of interpretive analytics in order to emphasize that discourse research places various types of data and interpretive steps in relation to one another – for example, more traditional sociological strategies for individual case analysis or case studies, combined with detailed close analyses of textual data. I also speak of interpretive analytics because, in contrast to other qualitative approaches in sociology, SKAD is not interested in the 'consistency of meaning' inherent to one particular document of a discourse *per se*, but rather assumes that such data is articulating some (but not all) of the heterogeneous elements of discourse, or that perhaps they appear as the points where several discourses cross (as in many books or newspaper articles). So discourse research has to break up the material surface unity of utterances. The mosaic of the analyzed discourse or discourses develops incrementally out of this process – this is certainly one of SKAD's most important modifications of traditional qualitative approaches in the social sciences, which very often take one interview, for example, as a 'coherent' and 'sufficient' case of its own.

In order to work through complex fields of discursive data, SKAD uses ideas of theoretical sampling and concepts of minimal and maximal contrasting (see Strauss 1987, 22–40; Strauss and Corbin 1998, 201–216). Theoretical sampling means the step-by-step building up of data – by beginning the analysis early, then following the criteria that emerge from the first data to inform further data collection – aiming to explore the whole range of the discourse or the discursive field of interest, the

positions taken, and the actors who appear (or, surprisingly, do not appear). Minimal and maximal contrasting is a systematic strategy for crossing the field of inquiry in order to establish the range of important findings and to achieve detailed accounts of particular elements of analysis. To be clear: SKAD, unlike classic grounded theory, does not aim to explore particular ‘situations and (inter)actions’ along with their basic social processes, but rather explores ongoing discourses in social arenas. In addition to these strategies borrowed from grounded theory, the rich tradition of qualitative data analysis, of case studies and fieldwork methods, as developed in symbolic interactionism and interpretive sociology, can be usefully referred to in order to grasp the materialities and dispositifs of discourse, since social sciences discourse research deals – to a great extent – with current issues. In addition to documents (of all kinds), interview and ethnographic research strategies can therefore be part of empirical SKAD work on discourses. Such interview data and observations are not available for historical discourse analysis (as in Foucault’s work). Nevertheless, SKAD can surely be used to analyze historical discourses as well; its heuristic framework allows for a wide range of questions in this field, too. As Kocku von Stuckrad (see chapter 5, this volume) and other work on historical discourse analysis (Eder 2006; Landwehr 2009) show, there is no proper historical approach to discourse – there are simply particular documents and contexts which must be respected, but very different perspectives can also be applied to historical questions.

Like all discourse-focused approaches, SKAD is itself a discourse about discourses, which follows its own discourse production rules, its own means of enabling and disciplining. Statements about individual data – as well as generalizing hypotheses, formulations, and conclusions – must be argued and explained. However, the criteria for the evaluation of evidence and inconsistencies are themselves part of discourses, and in this way, there is no escape from the network of meanings. We cannot ignore the fact that SKAD’s reconstructive work is also irreducibly constructive work. The interpretation can be called reconstructive because it refers to data, and its goal is to reveal something about that data’s interrelations and peculiarities. In this general sense, all discourse research necessarily proceeds in a reconstructive way. Such analyses also proceed constructively because they generate interpretations, conceptual schemata, and observations out of the data, and in so doing, they generate types of statements that were not – and indeed could not have been – in the actual data as such. Since the process of construction is determined first of all by the relevancies – the questions, analytical concepts, and strategies – of sociological discourse research, these are geared toward giving the ‘field’s own relevancies’ a chance.

I would like to add one final point: When analyzing discourses, competing discursive meaning-making, and the discursive construction of reality, one major interest is in reconstruction – understanding and thereby explaining situated discursive processes and concrete cases (in Max Weber’s sense). But we should not forget the more general questions: What are our cases ‘cases of? This is not to forget our interest in power/knowledge, in relations of knowledge/knowing, and in the politics of

knowledge/knowing. Thus SKAD research can also be informed by and contribute to core debates and theoretization in every arena where questions of knowledge and power are relevant. This not only concerns sociology, but also the broad field of disciplines and studies where SKAD is used, which now ranges from (to name a few examples) Chinese studies to criminology, education to gender studies, history to Japanese studies, media and communication to political science, postcolonial studies to studies of religion, and beyond.

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