Pragmatist sociology and analytical sociology have routinely been pitted and measured against each other (Abbott 2007; Gross 2009, 2013; Little 2012, 2014; Manzo 2010, 2014). This comparison and conflictual framing are tempting. Both pragmatist and analytical sociology share an interest in mechanisms-based approaches to sociological explanation and have a similar enough conception of mechanisms to allow for easy comparison and contrast. Furthermore, this exercise has been valuable because for each school of thought, having an approach with a similar starting point but a different emphasis and set of assumptions has been useful for clarifying what each is up to and why. On the other hand, the points of common interest between analytical sociology and a pragmatist mechanisms approach have usually been taken to highlight the stark differences just beneath the surface of these schools of thought on matters of causal logic, levels of analysis, individualism, and the centrality and theory of meaning, among others. The premise of this chapter, however, is that a series of clarifications and developments by analytical sociologists on matters related to methodological individualism, the Analytical Sociology (AS) theory of action, the claim that AS can best be understood not in reference to a specified causal logic but rather as “a ‘syntax’ for explanation” (Manzo 2010: 162) and through clarifications and developments of the mechanism concept have resulted in a rather more accessible conception of analytical sociology for those adopting pragmatist approaches to sociological analysis. These developments make possible, and valuable, a different way of thinking about the relationship between pragmatism and a pragmatist approach to mechanismal explanation and analytical sociology. This chapter will explore the possibility and value of doing analytical sociology in a pragmatist mode.

After first noting several of the commonalities that have brought AS and pragmatist approaches into frequent contact, the chapter will consider four points that help to define AS in the pragmatist mode. It first examines methodological individualism as a central focus of the pragmatist/AS divide and how more recent definitions of AS’s so-called structural individualism can be developed in a manner that is consistent with a pragmatist focus on multiple contextualized situations. Second and third, it will adopt a similar approach to examining how theories of action and causal logics that have once been taken to mark the divisions between these approaches can, given important clarifications of the AS school of thought, be adapted to a pragmatist view. Finally it considers the analytical foci of AS in the pragmatist mode, describing how the conciliatory theorizing of the preceding sections opens the way for an analytical sociology focused on mechanisms that highlight typical pragmatist concerns about the social world and strengths in analyzing it that ultimately enrich the analytical sociological approach and broaden its range in important ways.

1. POINTS OF ALIGNMENT

The value of the comparison between analytical sociology and a theory of mechanisms based on pragmatist social theory depends in part on the similarities between these approaches. Most obviously, both approaches adopt the concept of mechanism as central to their
approaches to sociological explanation (Gross 2009). There have of course been many definitions of mechanism advanced in analytical sociology, each with a slightly different emphasis or inflection. The risk of this approach is that any critique aimed at a specific definition can be unproductively stymied by shifting to another of the available definitions. For that reason I focus here on definitions that are mainstream, but also that are most amenable to understanding the commonalities between AS and pragmatist social theory. In one of the ur texts of contemporary analytical sociology Hedström (2005) writes that “a social mechanism, as defined here, is a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome” (p. 11). More generally, Hedström and Bearman (2009) argue that a good account will describe how the mechanisms in play generate the outcome to be explained (p. 6). Hedström and Ylikoski (2010) have also influentially described mechanism-centered explanation as focusing on the “cogs and wheels of the causal process through which the outcome to be explained was brought about” that “generate aggregate outcomes” (p. 50).

The analysis of the genesis of outcomes of interest has meant that analytical sociology focuses on building up chains of causation and specifying the elements of those chains and their relations (Gross 2018; Abbott 2007). In doing so AS aims to specify and clarify the component objects, actions, relationships, and other factors that combine to constitute mechanisms that can be used to describe the generation of outcomes of interest. In doing so it aims to avoid placing “black boxes” athwart the explanation and thus breaking the enchain sequences of mechanisms and effects that generate outcomes and are the hallmark of the AS approach to sociological explanation. In practice this has meant a focus on identifying causal factors at lower levels of analysis than the outcome of interest and exploring how those mechanisms interact, combine, colligate, and aggregate to generate higher level outcomes, and vice versa: how structural factors are translated into the concrete contexts of social action.

This approach coincides neatly with one of the founding imperatives of pragmatist social theory: the pragmatic maxim. As formulated by Peirce (1978), the pragmatic maxim held that in order to explain something the analyst should “consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object p. 402). This pragmatist emphasis on explanation through a focus on effects is the foundation for linking pragmatist approaches in sociology to contemporary analytical sociology. Both look to the production of effects in order to explain something as opposed to approaches that instead seek to explain, for instance, via constant conjunction or deduction. And both analytical sociologists and pragmatist social theorists seem to be in general agreement with an approach to explanation that seeks to account for the generation of effects of interest.

This general amenability of pragmatist social theory and analytical sociology can account for the further concordance of these approaches on a similar style of explanation that focuses on causal accounts anchored in specific, concrete, and clear social occurrences and patterns and the consequences that they generate. The pragmatic maxim cited comes from Peirce’s essay “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” and this focus on clarity as a central stylistic and even epistemic goal of explanation is likewise clearly echoed in foundational works of analytical sociology (Hedström 2009; Hedström and Bearman 2009: 3–4; Manzo 2014: 10–11) (see also Little’s chapter on analytical philosophy and sociology on this volume). Both abjure underspecified and overly abstract explanations that fail to account
for causation through specified generative sequences and fail to anchor these causal models in the nitty-gritty actuality of social life where the causal force of all mechanisms is ultimately paid off.

Both analytical sociologists and pragmatists also seem to be in agreement on the importance of developing explanations of social phenomena up to the macro level that not only remain consistent with sociological knowledge and theory about the character of human social life at more constitutive levels but that actively seek to elucidate their explanation in terms of the sociological factors at these more constitutive levels that generate trans-situational, multi-faceted phenomena occurring over longer temporal scales and wider spatial scales than any discrete action or situation alone and which are constituted by the aggregation of action sequences.

It is this concordance that has helped to put pragmatist social theory and analytical sociology in conversation with one another, for each has been represented as attempting to provide a roadmap for good explanatory practice (Hedström and Bearman 2009; Little 2012, 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012), and each tradition has generated significant discussion of what the mechanism concept means for sociology as a matter of both method and theory. It is in the context of the dominance of the middle-range in much of contemporary sociology that these two approaches have become somewhat prominent, for each offers a playbook for how to engage in middle-range-focused sociological explanation in a manner that is consistent with a defensible causal epistemology itself rooted in a defensible, if not fully developed, social ontology.

As the several salvos of critique and restatement between pragmatist proponents of mechanism-based sociology and analytical sociologists suggests, however, these approaches are not in easy agreement. Those differences can be reconciled, however, in the context of broader and more principled articulations of the AS project.

2. THE SHORT HOP FROM METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM TO METHODOLOGICAL LOCALISM

For a sociological method focused on providing clearly specified mechanismal explanations, the attractions of individualism are clear. Individualist approaches offer an easily graspable, intuitively bounded nexus for constructing mechanismal explanations by focusing on a unit of analysis, the individual, that plays an obvious central role in action and coordination. As rational choice approaches demonstrate (Kiser 1994; Kiser and Hechter 1998), it is possible to generate explanations for even quite complex social facts and events by building from an abstract, simplified conception of the individual. Analytical sociologists have resisted the rational choice flavor of individualism as a foundation for mechanisms-based sociological explanation in general, however. The (intentional) reductivism and toleration of implausible micro-level models for the sake of building explanations from clear and simply stated theoretical premises that is the hallmark of rational choice approaches imposes too high an analytical cost for an approach like AS that undertakes to build generative models that are empirically valid every step of the way and that aim to account for the actual processes that generate outcomes of social life.

Analytical sociologists have, however, emphasized the individual as the preeminent unit for creating sociological explanations that are epistemologically defensible because they are
rooted in a level of action that is indisputably concrete. Hedström’s (2005) observation, that “the causal efficacy of actions would be readily seen if we were able to press a pause button that suddenly froze all individuals and prevented them from performing any further actions. All social processes would then come to an immediate halt” (p. 28), speaks to the attraction of the individual for AS. AS implements its version of individualism through the concept of “structural individualism.” Structural individualist doctrine holds that “social facts should be explained as the intended or unintended outcomes of individuals’ actions. Structural individualism differs from traditional methodological individualism in attributing substantial explanatory importance to the social structures in which individuals are embedded” (Hedström and Bearman 2009: 5). It is worth noting that there is significant ambiguity in how to understand this and similar pronouncements. On the one hand it can be read as individualism with an epiphenomenal gloss of institution and culture talk, easily hand waved away when the time comes to get to the actual models. On the other hand it presents a view that can barely be called a real individualism at all as it brings non-individual levels of analysis that exhibit significant emergent properties into the explanatory model (Erikson 2017).

The AS emphasis on individualism has typically been at the front of critiques from a pragmatist direction (Gross 2009). The gist of these critiques is that because of its insistence on the importance of being able to reduce mechanisms-based explanations to the actions and even the motivations of individuals, structural individualism diminishes the analytical fidelity with which it can represent the importance of the emergent properties of situations and the powerful contextualization that meso- and macro-level social facts and forms impose on individuals through the ways that they structure situations. This argument holds that structural individualism is a relatively transparent attempt to have one’s cake and eat it by insisting on the importance of context, interaction, and structure, but adopting a theory of the individual that does not match these protestations of concern.

In response to these criticisms (and I should note at this point that it is not my intent in this chapter to wade into whether these debates have clarified what was always the AS position or if they have pushed AS into developing more nuanced theoretical frameworks) analytical sociologists have clarified their commitment to both parts of the so-called structural individualism that is the core tenet of its micro-level theory of the social actor. Manzo (2014), for instance, insists that both “macro-and meso-level entities and properties are regarded as causally important by analytical sociologists. From an explanatory point of view, the only requirement is that it should be possible to indicate at least one micro-level element through which the macro/meso-to-micro causal effect is generated—no matter if consciously or unconsciously from the point of view of the micro-level entity at hand” (pp. 19–20). He goes on to emphasize that these macro- and micro-level factors should be understood as exhibiting emergent properties with respect to individual-level aspects of explanations. Manzo’s clarification is important because its implication is that for AS macro and meso elements of explanations cannot be reduced to individuals and must instead be built into sophisticated, multi-level models that account for emergent properties as well as dynamics of aggregation and structuration. Of course it also holds the opposite—that AS explanations cannot be divorced from individuals either, but as Lizardo (2012) writes this is a stipulation it is hard to imagine many sociologists disagreeing with (p. 5).

For AS in the pragmatist mode, Manzo’s clarification of structural individualism opens the door to a way of doing AS that is aligned with the typically pragmatist micro-foundation focus on situations and interaction. Indeed, Manzo’s restatement of the structural individual-
ism concept with an emphasis on the reality of the commitment to the structure part raises the question of whether AS needs to identify itself with methodological individualism any more strongly than any other way of doing sociology that notices that “people doing stuff” is at some level germane to the analysis.

Pragmatist approaches to mechanisms share with AS a desire for concrete foundations on which to build explanations and turn to situations rather than individuals to provide that clarity and specificity. As a general matter it is not clear that individuals should be taken to represent a more micro level of analysis than situations. To turn the tables on Hedström’s claims regarding the intuitive plausibility of individualism, it is equally true that were we to magically pause all situations or interactions “all social processes,” would likewise, “come to an immediate halt” (Abbott 2001; Hedström 2005: 28). While perhaps counterintuitive—don’t individuals constitute situations?—doubts about the clear preferabley of individuals vs. situations as microfoundational levels of analysis can be supported by observing that crucial aspects of social life do not occur, or do not occur in the ways that matter for most sociological purposes, at the level of individuals. To put it more bluntly, one of the purposes of analytical concepts is to carve social life at its joints in ways that are conducive to constructing valid generative models and sociological explanations. But from a pragmatist perspective, the individual isn’t a joint. Rather, the individual only exists for analytical purposes as embedded in and constituted by a dynamic relationship with the situations that they find themselves in. As Rawls (1987) writes, “The social self needs to be continually achieved in and through interaction” (p. 136). Carving the individual from the situation, as intuitively attractive as that might seem, from a pragmatist perspective cuts across the very circuits of translation and influence, the very dynamics of embeddedness, that provide the microfoundational basis on which AS in the pragmatist mode will need to be built. It is an analytical maneuver that runs the risk of the very theoretical abstraction that AS in other contexts abjures because it posits as foundational a highly abstract and entirely implausible concept of the non-situated individual.

Little has proposed a microfoundational concept that is similar to structural individualism in some respects but that more unambiguously corresponds to a pragmatist view of this microfoundational question and that may be more suitable than structural individualism as an orienting analytical theory for AS in the pragmatist mode. Methodological localism, Little (2007) writes, takes as its centerpiece the “socially constructed and socially situated individual, who lives, acts, and develops within a set of local social relationships, institutions, norms, and rules” (see also Little 2008). The advantage of this view is that it makes the relationship between individuals, situations, and other situation elements, including structural factors that are real and present circumstances of the local context of action, the key microfoundational unit for sociological analysis (Schneiderhan 2011: 595).

Taking situations, and more specifically the relations and patterns of dynamic circulation that constitute them as the central microfoundational focus in place of individual entities with their properties offers a microfoundational account that is consistent with the goals of AS expressed by Manzo but that is far more amenable to constructing explanations along pragmatist lines and more clearly foreground characteristically pragmatist analytical foci. Interaction with other people and with the physical environment, for instance, are prominent examples of social action that cannot be reduced to the individual and nonetheless are microfoundational elements of analysis. Pragmatist microfoundations insist on accounting for the primordial sociality and corporeality of individuals (Joas and Beckert 2002), which is to say that individuals and individual action cannot be usefully conceptualized outside of the situational context.
within which these constitutive interactions happen. The translation of signs from individuals to social environments and back likewise cannot be mapped from an approach that cuts the micro-level off by defining it as pertaining to the individual. Furthermore, sociology has an excellent set of methodological approaches, ranging from cultural sociological analysis to symbolic interactionism and comparative historical process tracing, for assembling situations into patterned chains of effects. A theory of the structure of situations (Norton 2014) is likewise critical for pragmatist accounts of social action as well as accounts of the dynamics of aggregation and influence that define relationships between the macro and micro levels of analysis and that are easier to account for in methodological localist terms that decline to separate the individual from the situation. In this view, situations are the key mechanism (or meta-mechanism) used to account for the translation of macro structures into experientially real constraints and affordances that shape the possibilities and probabilities for different lines of action. The point is not that these cannot be considered on structural individualist grounds, but that doing so is less elegant than doing so on the basis of methodological localist grounds and in any case is not necessary from the perspective of AS.

For the purposes of the argument of this chapter, though, the main point is that the social ontology of AS is broadly enough conceived to incorporate both structural individualism and methodological localism and furthermore both approaches are well-conceptualized enough that they can serve as platforms for structuring and organizing different lines of AS work. There is space in AS for a social ontology that enables AS in the pragmatist mode.

3. ACTION

Given their commitment to constructing explanations anchored in concrete and specific circumstances of social life, AS and pragmatist theories of social mechanisms are aligned in the central importance of a theory of action. It is the specific content of action theory that has provided grist to accounts focusing on the conflicts between these approaches (Gross 2009; Manzo 2010). For AS the most prominent action theory has been Hedström’s DBO approach. DBO, like structural individualism, parts ways with rational choice theory despite some shared premises and concerns. DBO, though, argues that to understand individual action we should look to the sociologically embedded genesis of actors’ desires and beliefs rather than imputing them on the basis of a general theory of rationality. This largely anodyne theory (Lizardo 2012) has nonetheless been a flashpoint for critics, refuting the idea that DBO, at least in its initial statement, would provide an uncontroversial theory of action. Reasons that DBO has turned out not to be widely acceptable as a generic sociological theory of action are useful to relate here only insofar as they help to establish the parameters for a theory of action for AS in the pragmatist mode.

While DBO theory suggests desires as a more inclusive alternative to the doctrinaire rational choice emphasis on instrumental utility maximization, critics have warned that for sociological purposes we cannot take desires to be established prior to and apart from the circumstances of the analysis (Gross 2009: 365). They must be treated as an endogenous dimension of the problem of analysis itself, not as established prior to the action situation to be explained. Beliefs are DBO theory’s implementation of culture on the level of action (Rydgren 2009). As with desires, however, critics have warned against an overly individualistic and static concept of beliefs as something that an individual brings to the action situation, rather than a part of the
analysis of the situation and importantly something that emerges from the interaction between people and situations. Further, the notion of beliefs needs to be clearly defined and specified so as not to become the sort of vague implication that analytical sociology claims to guard against. This is especially important to note for approaches like AS in the pragmatist mode in which culture and meaning, “the semiotic dimension of human social practice” (Sewell 2005: 164), are at the heart of the analytical project. In place of focusing exclusively on culture concepts best attuned to individual minds and selves, pragmatist approaches need to make use of the much more robust and diverse conceptual repertoire developed under the auspices of pragmatist, symbolic interactionist, and cultural sociology for the analysis of culture and meaning at the cognitive, individual, situational, meso, and macro levels of analysis (e.g. Alexander 2004; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 1991; Norton 2019; Reed 2013; Tavory and Timmermans 2013; Wagner-Pacifici 2010).

Recent defenses against these critiques, however, have insisted on the modularity of DBO as AS’s preferred theory of action. In his response to pragmatist and other critics of DBO Manzo declines to argue for the merits of the more restricted view of DBO theory ascribed to it by its critics, instead arguing that on the multiple points where the differences between DBO and pragmatist theories of action have been identified there is no conflict at all. He writes of DBO theory:

1) it makes no assumptions on the specific form of actors’ rationality; 2) actors’ ends and means may arise from their action rather than precede it; 3) actors’ beliefs and desires are conceived as explananda, not as exogenous elements of the problem; 4) actors’ beliefs and desires are not conceived as being invariably clear, transparent and consistent; 5) the cognitive and relational mechanisms responsible for actors’ beliefs and desires are conceptualized as being able to operate unconsciously; 6) actors’ beliefs and desires are inseparable from actors’ perceptions of the symbolic context in which they act.(Manzo 2010: 157)

Accepting this argument at face value, which I do, establishes that DBO theory is just one possible theory of action that has some affinity for the AS approach to explanation but is hardly the only theory of action that might be useful. This leaves the particulars of the AS theory of action wide open to pragmatist approaches.

Indeed, pragmatist approaches are already closely aligned with the metamethodological principles that provided encouragement for the uptake of DBO theory as the main AS theory of action in that they are concrete, clear, and specific. Nonetheless, pragmatist action theory differs significantly from DBO theory and provides AS in the pragmatist mode a very different valence from approaches focused on DBO or similar action theories. For AS purposes, a pragmatist theory of action should be understood as consistent with the foundation of “methodological localism” described in the preceding section. One of the core concepts of pragmatist action theories is that beginning with the individual is a mistake because action is fundamentally structured by the relationship between people and situations. Attempting to clarify action-theoretic mechanisms by the abstract extraction of the individual from the situations where action actually happens and then theorizing on this basis, which the DBO approach invites if not insists on, is to cut the crucial mechanistical connections for effectively theorizing action according to a pragmatist view. As Joas writes, “goals are not externally set but emerge in the action process itself in a reciprocal interaction between means and goals … as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context” (Joas and Beckert 2002: 273).
What this means theoretically is that motives emerge through the course of experiencing structured situations and interactions. Similarly, opportunities should also be understood as endogenous to and embedded in situations, observations of unfolding situational circumstances that provide actors with possible lines of action leading to “ends in view” (Dewey 1958; Joas and Beckert 2002: 273). Action is thus conceptualized in a way that remains concrete, specific, and clear, but is much less amenable to the individual frames of reference that DBO theory emphasizes. Likewise this approach shifts the focus from entities with properties to both entities and their properties as relationally constructed, constituted, and reciprocally ratified through interaction in the course of a situation (or multiple situations that share features). Entities and properties are not conceptualized prior to the action context but are rather made present realities of the structure of situations through action and then in turn structure further and future action in that context. From the vantage point of pragmatist action theory, then, motivations are better understood as emerging out of the habitual or creative responses of actors to situations, and the analysis of situations can be understood as an effort to understand how and why situations call forth certain actions and lines of action from the people experiencing them (Camic 1986; Gross 2009; Joas 1996; Silver 2011).

Thinking about the courses of action that particular situations, whether routine or problem, constrain or afford also provides an important way to think about meaning as a part of situation structure and individual experience in a manner that goes beyond the underspecified and static notion of culture implied by the notion of beliefs. According to the semiotic conception of culture preferred by pragmatist theory, culture refers to the circulation and translation of signs into and between situations in a manner that shapes those situations as environments of action (Norton 2019). Peirce (1978) emphasizes this tight linkage between meaning and action when he writes that “the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action” (p. 400). The meaningful component of action in this view is not simply what someone thinks (or believes, or how they cognitively process situational information), though this is certainly part of the picture, and more about what representations are present (or absent), how they bring situational structures into existence, how they are translated into individual experience, and how they are connected to past and future situations in ways that create meso- and macro-cultural structures that can be understood as key mechanisms in shaping the structure of other situations. They are public culture in the sense that they are manifest as situational realities more so and more importantly than they are manifest in the interstices of individual minds (Lizardo 2017).

This is a different basis for action theory than DBO obviously, but given Manzo’s clarification it is nonetheless consistent with the purpose of DBO for AS: to provide a concrete, clear, and explicit theory of action that can serve as a fundamental, indeed perhaps the fundamental, element in a mechanismal approach to sociological explanation. Desires, in the pragmatist mode, are reconceptualized as motivations in a pragmatist theory of action and conceptualized as emergent from structured, situational interaction. Beliefs recede from the theoretical framework in this view and are replaced by a more involved, but still well-theorized, specific, and clear set of concepts to describe and model the orientation of action to social meaning manifest in ways dependent on situational specifics and in ways that are shaped by large-scale structures and patterns of meaning. Opportunities refer to the structure of situations, and especially the ways that they are structured by both contingent situation-specific meanings and by situational manifestations of meaning structures that occur over longer temporal
and wider spatial scales than a single situation. Finally, there is an overall greater degree of attention paid by this pragmatist theory of action to the play of habitual and creative action as triggered by the specific constellations of motive, meaning, and structure that comprise a given situation as well as to the ways in which meaning operates to link situations to broader structures of meaning and power as well as to the ways that situations present possible and likely future consequences that are likewise part of actors’ experiences of the meaning of the situation.

4. CAUSALITY AND EXPLANATION

A similar framework to that deployed in the previous sections pertains to questions of AS’s causal theory and its compatibility with those commonly used in pragmatist sociology. AS has at times looked to a theory of causality based on “counterfactual dependency” (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010: 54) and thus, to at least some degree, a theory of causality focused on the independence of the mechanisms that contribute to an explanation (Knight and Reed 2019). Counterfactual dependency, however, is not a programmatic requirement of AS so much as one way to think about the relationships between the mechanisms that contribute to a particular outcome that will be useful in some analytical contexts more than others. Indeed, Hedström and Ylikoski (2010) specifically tout as an advantage that “the mechanism-based account of explanation is not wedded to a specific theory of causation” (p. 53). Rather, the core AS commitment is to generative models as explanations, and such models can be constructed in valid ways on the basis of different conceptions of causality. So while an account focused on counterfactual dependency and independent, “modular” mechanisms (Knight and Reed 2019) may be valid for some explanations, for others mechanisms underwritten by different concepts of causality will yield better generative models.

The concept of causality that runs through the work of contemporary sociological pragmatism is, generally speaking, probabilistic, concerned with the interdependency of mechanisms and the sensitivity of causation to the particulars of situations, and skeptical of the intersituational stability of the entities and properties, such as belief bearing individuals, that other approaches to mechanismal explanation often take for granted (Norton 2019). For pragmatist explanations it is often necessary to think about mechanisms as generating outcomes in conjunctural ways, and often in complex conjunctural ways (Steinmetz 1998: 178). This means that to explain a given outcome it will often be necessary to model multiple interacting mechanisms that operate differently in the specific conjunctures that occur in the empirical context examined than they would in other conjunctures. This leads to a potentially uncomfortable but necessary concept of non-deterministic mechanisms that can only be properly modeled in consort and in specific configurations. Pragmatist explanations, as focused as they are on a semiotic theory of meaning, are also rarely best pursued on the basis of independent mechanism. This is because semiosis involves the pervasive presence of relationally defined, intrinsically interdependent signs and semiotic structures. As Peirce (1978) writes, “This universe is perfused with signs” (p. 448), a perspective that powerfully shapes the entirety of the pragmatist approach and its focus on meaning. The representations that are generated in the situations that actors experience, therefore, are necessarily contingent in their effects on interdependent networks of signs that are incorporated into the situational circulation and manifestation of meaning through the interpretive experiences of situational
actors. As Tavory and Timmermans argue, a particular configuration of meaning introduced into dissimilar situations can lead to quite different outcomes. That configuration of meaning is correctly understood as contributing in an identifiable way to the genesis of both outcomes. Its effects, however, depend on the conjunctures of other mechanisms that they are part of and that specify the meanings that actors actually experience and respond to (Tavory and Timmermans 2013).

It is important to note that this probabilistic, conjunctural, semiotic, interdependent approach to explanation is nonetheless consistent with the goal of creating explanations that identify specific chains of mechanisms that generate outcomes of interest. It is just that the generation of outcomes, from a pragmatist view, is often a conjunctural, probabilistic, and interdependent matter that cannot be adequately or accurately accounted for in terms of independent, fully modular mechanisms (Knight and Reed 2019). That ontological complexity does not call for throwing up one’s hands at the prospect of generating specific, clear mechanismal explanations, but does suggest that certain ways of doing so that are conjunctural, probabilistic, and interdependent are preferable, at least for the types of outcomes that pragmatist analytical sociology tends to focus on. Fortunately, this way of thinking about causality and explanation appears to be fully consistent with an approach to AS that understands mechanisms as operating through the highly context-dependent dynamics of situational conjunctures of meaning.

5. METHODS

One of the ongoing lines of argument in this chapter has been that analytical sociology is a far more inclusive platform for sociological analysis than is often recognized (though see Lizardo 2012), particularly when more recent clarifications and restatements of the core elements of AS are taken into account. If this argument is correct, then different ways of doing AS should be expected to emerge with different methods, different questions, and different analytical foci.

Approaches that may make sense in the context of other modalities of AS will be superseded in pragmatist approaches because of their different foci and causal theories. For instance, Manzo (2014) has argued for the centrality (though not the exclusivity) of agent-based models as a strong approach for developing generative explanatory models. In the pragmatist mode of AS, however, agent-based models have little to offer. Pragmatist analytical sociology is more commonly going to be concerned with the close observation of specific interaction situations along with the theoretical and empirical reconstruction of the various mechanisms that structure those situations, including their patterns of motivation and action, as well as the mechanisms of aggregation and influence that enchain situations and macro structures together for purposes of explanation (Fine 1991; Gross 2018). Pragmatist analytical sociology, following pragmatist sociology more generally, must therefore focus on methods that foreground the observation and analysis of situations of important types as well as sui generis situations that play consequential roles in the transformation of structures (Sewell 1996).

Historical (Vaughan 2004) and in-person ethnography (Tavory and Timmermans 2013) are good examples of pragmatist AS methods. These approaches focus on analyzing specific interactions in detail and provide the empirical foundation necessary to begin building an understanding of the semiotic structure of the types of situations that help to generate the outcome of interest. Those structural investigations themselves are a further foundational
element of AS in the pragmatist mode as the researcher looks to reconstruct the circuits of meaning that recur and concatenate in ways that generate the outcomes of interest. For the same reason, case studies (Gibson 2011; Norton 2014) will often serve as a valuable tool for this way of doing analytical sociology because they allow for the close observation and careful reconstruction of the circulation of meaning and its causal consequences in a delimited circumstance that may then be able to be extended into a middle-range mechanismal theory. By examining these dynamics in the context of the specificities of a delimited case the researcher is better able to understand the interaction between meaning and action as well as the ways that these situation-level dynamics combine to produce larger patterns of meaning as well as more macro mechanisms such as institutions. Both of these approaches, it should be noted, are closely connected to and can draw on a range of techniques from more general methodological traditions, including phenomenology and symbolic interactionism more generally.

Process tracing is another important tool in the effort to examine specific mechanismal links between situations and situation-level dynamics of meaning and more macro social structures and outcomes (Mahoney 2012). In a general sense, process tracing involves identifying occurrences that are connected temporally through encheded mechanisms by which earlier events lead to or powerfully shape later events. While often used in macro-historical analysis, this same method can be useful for identifying and modeling any processes that occur over time. Process tracing methods serve as one of the most powerful ways for identifying, analyzing, and assembling generative models from the sorts of mechanisms that pragmatist analytical sociology specializes in. They are also a valuable way to address concerns that approaches to explanations from a probabilistic, conjectural, and highly contextualized perspective are liable to the production of “just so stories” (Bearman 2012: 2). The systematic analysis of causal sequences in close empirical detail offers a valuable corrective to underspecified processual accounts. Between-case comparisons offer another methodology of great complementary importance to process tracing in assembling and validating typologies of mechanisms that operate in definable ways even in complex situational contexts (Tavory and Timmermans 2013).

Pragmatist AS will also, of course, focus on methods that allow for the scientific and systematic investigation of the semiotic dynamics that structure social life and through which much of social life transpires. Meaning is at the core of the pragmatist modality of AS. Thus, a wide range of tools drawn from cultural sociology, including hermeneutic approaches, structural analysis, and the analysis of performativity, just to name a few, may all find a place in specific pragmatist AS lines of inquiry. Semiotic analysis in the Peircean tradition with its emphasis on the situated consequences of meaning-making likewise has much to offer. Importantly, semiotic analysis in this view does not inhere in the analysis of abstractions. Indeed, to the contrary. Approaches like those focused on the material manifestations of culture as a corporeal reality that confronts people in the situations that they experience provide powerful frameworks of analysis (McDonnell 2010). Semiotic approaches are especially important as they attempt to put meat on the bones of the claim that culture is a matter of causal significance and not just a matter of context with unspecified contributions to explanation understood in a generative way. Indeed, these semiotically oriented methods from cultural and pragmatist sociology that aim for a systematic account for the causality of culture and meaning in a way that is robust to its many varied manifestations is one of the most important lessons from pragmatist AS that needs a wider airing amongst adherents of AS more generally.
6. PRAGMATIST FOCI

AS in the pragmatist mode differs from other modalities of AS, focusing on typically pragmatist concerns of a semiotically inclined analysis of meaning as an aspect of situation structure, interaction dynamics, and in general one of the most important mechanisms, or more precisely genres of mechanisms, for sociological explanation. This is not to suggest that the rest of AS ignores meaning, but pragmatist approaches, aligned in this regard with the concerns, theories, and methods of cultural sociology, engage in a more robust theorization and subsequent analysis of the semiotic dimensions of social life than an approach that takes the relatively simple cultural theory behind DBO or a similar individual-centered theory as their foundation for thinking about meaning. This focus on semiotic dynamics is rooted in pragmatist theory. Specifically, Peirce’s theory of the sign provides a useful sketch of the main elements of this analytical tradition, focusing on the signature series of translations that comprise semiosis, from mental or physical objects to signifiers to the effects of signification all incorporated into a “continuous temporal process of interpretation” (Rochberg-Halton 1986: 46).

Semiotic analysis of this sort, and more generally the pragmatist and cultural sociological focus on meaning as one of the fundamental sociological mechanisms, has a role to play in analyzing specific situations and their dynamics. It is also central to understanding how situations and situational outcomes can become aggregated and colligated in a manner that amounts to the emergence of meaning structures and other elements of social structure. Those aggregation dynamics taking us from patterned interactions to institutions and structures that transcend individual situations and take on causal significance of their own as well as through their potential structuring of subsequent situations. Likewise this modality of AS focuses on the ways that actors translate the realities of social structures such as institutions or distributional facts into situations in a way that makes them a real structural circumstance for that situation. This focus, again, is especially concerned with meaning as a key category of mechanisms for understanding this translation from the macro to the micro level of the situation. This, to be sure, is itself a methodologically complex operation and likely requires an all-hands-on-deck approach when it comes to identifying appropriate methods. Agent-based models are one technique for doing so and that AS practitioners already draw on and that could be used to study these aggregation processes (Manzo 2020). Other methods that offer ways to understand these aggregating processes and mechanisms include structuralist and structural hermeneutic approaches (Alexander and Smith 1993; Norton 2011, 2014) and process tracing methods drawn from historical sociology that attempt to understand the specific chains of causation that connect concrete interactions with outcomes of broader significance (Gross 2018; Mahoney 2012; Sewell 1996).

A further concern that AS in the pragmatist mode should exhibit, corresponding closely with these micro-to-macro and macro-to-micro aggregation and translation dynamics, is with the role of forming causes in sociological explanation. Hirschman and Reed (2014) have suggested a distinction between “forcing causes” and “forming causes.” The former loosely corresponds with the sorts of mechanisms that are AS’s traditional focus. For example, discrimination by hiring managers is an important forcing cause of high levels of unemployment and the subsequent integration problems experienced by ex-felons in the United States following release from jail or prison. While this could be part of a pragmatist AS analysis of questions related to recidivism, for example, the felon construct would also play a central role in that analysis. Furthermore, it would not play a role as context, part of opportunity structure,
or a background concern, but as an important cause unto itself. The difference between these causes, to the extent that one is necessary, is that an analysis of forming causes recognizes the semiotic webs produced and reproduced through interactions and translated into the concrete contexts of many of the situations that contribute to the phenomenon of interest should themselves be recognized as playing a fundamentally important causal role by bringing into being within and across situations the realities of meaning that determine the flow of action. Discrimination against felons obviously could not exist without felons, but more importantly the semiotic dynamics that continually form and reform the realities that determine the meanings—in Mead’s (1934) sense, “What you are going to do about it?” (p. 49)—of “felon” as a social category.

CONCLUSION

The mechanism metaphor as it is used in analytical sociology trades on the promise of clarity. It famously enjoins us to find the cogs and wheels of the causal process and to report back on them with fidelity and specificity to achieve a more precise causal science. The second part of the analytical sociology premise is that such clarity can be achieved without resorting to implausibly simplistic, reductionist, or mechanistic models of social action. The extent to which it succeeds in achieving both of these goals at once is one principle measure of the analytical sociology program. It is not a straightforward measure, however, couched as it is in the ambiguous terms “clarity” and “implausibly.” To get a sense of its progress in delivering on these ambiguous goals, and to therefore gain a sense of where the program is doing well, where it has run into trouble, and where it can and should go from here it is helpful for the practitioners of analytical sociology to look to close comparators. The pragmatist theory of mechanisms offers just such a valuable comparator. While the traditions differ on significant points and it may be temptingly pluralistic to let each get on with it, this would be a lost opportunity. The analytical sociology and the pragmatist theory of mechanisms share some important premises (generating explanations of social phenomena up to the macro level that remain consistent with sociological knowledge and theory about the character of human social life at more constitutive levels) and core metaphors (mechanisms). They are hardly in easy accord though. The pragmatist theory of mechanisms insists that the relational, processual, contextual, semiotic, and intrinsically interdependent and interactive character of social life sets an epistemic bound on how finely we can carve social life into its component parts before we find that what we have left is inadequate to the task of adequate sociological explanation, and that this bound is rather less micro, and that an adequate theory of social action is more relational and interdependent, than what is generally preferred by AS. The premise of this chapter, however, has been that there is daylight between the premises and usual practices of AS and that an AS in the pragmatist mode is not only feasible but has much to recommend it. Contrasting the approaches continues to have value, but so may integrating them.

REFERENCES

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