

Séminaire scientifique de l'OSC

2020-2021

Vendredi 18 septembre 2020
11h30 - 13h, en ligne (via Zoom)

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Mapping Symbolic Boundaries: Theoretical-Methodological Reflections



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This communication addresses a key methodological question in cultural sociology: what good are qualitative interviews for mapping people's perceptions, thoughts, attitudes and actions? Zooming in on cultural stratification research – a field of research that has focused on whether and how cultural differences create and perpetuate divisions between social classes – I discuss limitations and possibilities of two fundamentally opposed theoretical-methodological stances: on the one hand, the stance informed by Bourdieu's practice theory, primarily geared towards assessing 'practical consciousness', and, on the other, the stance informed by Lamont's repertoire theory, primarily geared towards assessing 'discursive consciousness'.

Aiming to establish a 'third way', I sketch out a synthetic theoretical-methodological approach to study cultural class divisions. Although acknowledging legitimate critiques of particular uses of qualitative interviews – in particular the problematic assumption that what people say directly mirrors what people do – I argue in favour of the continued relevance of such interviews, as it has the potential to illuminate aspects of cultural class divisions that are difficult to assess through other methods. Nevertheless, I will argue that much current uses of interviews – especially uses linked to the mapping of 'symbolic boundaries' – must be qualified in terms of which aspects of cultural class divisions this method can possibly shed light on. Discussing recent empirical studies, I specify legitimate and illegitimate uses of interviews to map symbolic boundaries, and I highlight particular interviewing techniques that may help paving the way for new directions in cultural stratification research.

