

mores and institutions can move only at a glacier-like pace and as a result of natural forces beyond purposive human control.

Can we master the agencies and instruments of guided social change that are available in the enlightened democracies of the free world and focus them upon the goals of social, economic, and political reconstruction demanded by the space age? Can we drive home to this generation the realization that neither the concept of war as we have known it in the past, nor the other principal means through which international peace and stability were formerly sought have any validity in the new era? Can we shift from the divisive, self-defeating attitudes of the ancient tribe to those of responsible concern for the rights and welfare of all humankind under the rule of international law? We must try, and only if we succeed can we rise from the status of hapless earthlings to become masters of the new world in space.

CONSIDERATIONS ON A THEORY OF DESCRIPTIVE ACTIVITY

Jaber F. Gubrium
Marquette University

David R. Buckholdt
Marquette University

Robert J. Lynott
Loyola University

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From a working definition of description, the meaning of idealized representation is presented. It is suggested that, as a universal means of depiction, idealized representation stands in a contradictory relationship with the concrete conditions of its production, generating descriptive irresponsibility. Features of descriptive activity are presented, which serve as a basis for redefining the moral character of idealized representation.

As a working definition, description might be said to be the process by which things, ideas, or events are represented. Our intention is first to briefly develop the definition along a conventional line in order then to make suggestions for a theory of descriptive activity, one that is social and informed by some current sociological approaches to it and that generally frames an ongoing program of related research. In the main, the suggestions are intended to be practical; they do not aim toward a final transcendent version of representation. Rather, they provide a means for analytically perusing the working affairs of those who concertedly engage in description. We shall argue that, as a universal means of depiction, conventional or idealized representation stands in a contradictory relationship with the concrete working conditions of its production, generating descriptive irresponsibility.

IDEALIZED REPRESENTATION

Perhaps the most popular way formally to interpret the working definition is traced frequently, at least in sociological context, to Durkheim's (1958) famous dictum to treat social facts as things. As conventionally held in both textbook and classroom, to report sociological findings is to represent things (the variety of social objects and events) as they are in their own rights. It is taken for granted that the latter virtually have "rights" of their own, rights not held by assignment but as essential features of their existence. Sociological description which does not reveal social objects as they are, is not objectively, but subjectively, remiss. Something about the process of representation has gone awry. The aim of this interpretation of description is to specify the conditions that optimize representation, ideally to be able to describe social objects and events as they are in their own rights. Overall, two conditions do so—reliability and validity—both of which are treated as technical achievements. Means are devised to assure the consistent (reliable) representation of the way social objects really are (validity). Ideally, then, representation can be technically managed so that description virtually becomes whatever is being described, a state of description frequently spoken of as "concrete fact," meaning that fact as such is concrete.

While this interpretation is frequently attributed to Durkheim, it is important to note that it is not altogether clear in his various studies that he adheres to it (Hughes, 1958:284). Bellah (1973), for one, suggests that Durkheim's contrasting "symbolic realism" is revealed, perhaps most vividly, in his study of primitive religion in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961), where social objects have positive existence both in their own rights (rites?) and as an artifice of their adherents' both witting and unwitting treatment of them as such. This immediately ties idealized representation to the process of idealization. There is considerable theoretical distance between the interpretation of ideal representation as the reflection of social reality and as the product of its reconstruction. Durkheim's work can be read as standing tensely between them.¹

The popularity of idealized representation—positivistic description—is a formal one to the extent that it is an interpretation of description made in a "scientific mood." Whether scientists or laypersons are asked to specify the meaning of good description, a positivistic standard commonly is assumed. The standard serves to suggest that the road to objectivity (the depiction of objects, not subjects) is marked by reliability and validity. Being in a scientific mood, the idealization of representation is rendered by a set of attitudes and a course of action, implying that such representation is not concrete fact in its own right but the popular response to things and questions about them as such. Again, we encounter theoretical divergence, this time between a frame of reference that informs us, independent of the circumstances at stake, how to describe ideal description, on the one hand, and the ideal representation that circumstance and frame serve to portray, on the other.²

The scientific mood is a formally organized set of attitudes; it is not simply a cognitive interest in description, one that out of one or two other cognitive interests is a possible choice for describing things. The scientific mood pervades organized social science as well as the variety of formal organizations whose members are obliged to describe people in some way. Among the latter organizations is the full range of human service institutions where people-descriptions are evaluated both internally and externally (accountability) for their approximation to clinically idealized representation (Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982). Any associated "cognitive interest" (Habermas, 1971) in the background of their descriptive activity is not just cognitively assumed but is part of the social organization of its production: description is constrained by membership obligations, not the least of which is that description is also a job—a material condition. To interpret good description as objective representation is to assume that one can, in principle, ignore the conditions of its production, both cognitive and material.

Recognition of the practical sources of idealized representation does not necessarily free one from its descriptive obligations. While a vision of alternate cognitive possibilities or insight

into the human artifices of practice may display the possibilities for change, it does not by this alone bring it about (Giddens, 1976:126). Those who produce idealized representations and thereby serve a positivistic interpretation of description may, in the right circumstance, come face to face with, and speak of, their production—both in exasperation and in a good-humored sense of absurdity—yet go on to subsequently serve the same interpretation (Gubrium, 1980; Gubrium, Buckholdt and Lynott, 1982). Consciousness in regard to production is not merely psychological; it is always at the same time social, which, because of its practical duality, makes it possible for producers of idealized representation to gain insight into their own practice and yet continue to engage it (cf. Giddens, 1979). Moreover, while insight by itself does not necessarily pose a threat to formally organized description, it also can be personally managed. In the matter of idealized representation, as long as one manages to separate descriptive insight from formal descriptive obligations, the personal contradictions are contained. And furthermore, when it is sensed that insight is, at best, only amusing (not to be taken seriously), related personal moral obligations are assuaged. After all, it might be implied or even flatly stated, it is only a joke that we literally work at idealizing representation, at burying the process of description in the service of what description will be claimed to “really” represent (see concrete examples in Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979; and in Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982).

Positivistic description has been touted as universal, a standard against which all description is to be judged. Yet it is increasingly clear on micro-empirical grounds that its ostensible universal criteria are produced by those who have an interest in, or obligations for, idealized representation (Cicourel, 1964, 1968, 1973; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Garfinkel, 1967; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1979; Pfohl, 1978; Raffel, 1979). On historical and theoretical grounds, it is now difficult to conceive of how it is possible to overlook the pervasive role of more general conditions of description in representation, like the historical embeddedness of interpretation as informed by a variety of traditions from hermeneutics to structuralism (Gadamer, 1975;

Foucault, 1972, 1973), the politics of representation (Mills, 1963; Horowitz, ed., 1975; Gouldner, 1970; Edelman, 1977), and the sheer linguistic situatedness of meaning (Wittgenstein, 1969).³ It is evident that the theory and method of idealized representation are not reconstructions of transcendent principles of description but, rather, the displacement of descriptive alternatives by a single strategy of representation, a kind of descriptive imperialism. To have such a state of representation is to idealize it—an achievement, not a natural condition.

As Habermas (1971) suggests, it is important to note that the theoretical and historical demotion of positivistic description does not imply its elimination. It stands, rather, as a descriptive alternative, one serving a different purpose from other forms of description. Idealized representation becomes less a universal standard for the evaluation of description than a useful means for describing things.

However, as Weber (1958) feared over a half century ago and as the early Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Held, 1980) so vehemently criticized, “instrumental reason” seems to have come to virtually dominate our formal organizational routines if not our private lives. With regard to this state of affairs, Habermas’ evenhandedness is perhaps premature, a theoretical but certainly not a firmly evident future of descriptive alternatives. Indeed, positivistic description is not yet even an alternative in the university, especially in the American context, where the prevailing mode of descriptive production in the social sciences is diffusely tied to, and underwritten by, requirements of so-called “social need,” utility, and policy-making, among a host of other interests that aim to control, decontrol, and reconcontrol people’s lives, usually, it is said, for the common welfare.

DESCRIPTIVE IRRESPONSIBILITY

On present micro-empirical, historical, and theoretical grounds, it is imperative that the term “representation” be interpreted literally—as re-presentation—a process of offering again whatever is believed was presented to us by our senses

in regard to objects and events of interest. This puts some distance between description and that which is described, a distance containing what we call "descriptive activity." Descriptive activity is organized around diverse rules, from historical to organization, circumstantial, interpersonal, and interpretive rules (cf. Douglas, 1973). The activity is by no means passive, for those who engage in description taken into account the variety of rules and, what is more, are not infrequently aware that they do so.

In view of this, there is considerable irresponsibility associated with an analytic insistence on a universalistic theory of idealized representation. By irresponsibility we intend to mean both an empirical and moral condition. It is an empirical condition to the extent that those responsible for representation present themselves as mere servants of the truths they report (cf. McHugh, Raffel, Foss, Blum, 1974, esp. chaps. 3 and 4). At the same time, it is moral in the sense that it is socially engaged people who expedite the tasks of description, wherein they choose how to produce and present what they know.

In principle, to idealize representation is to generate description that precisely and truly mirrors whatever it represents, nothing else. It should not reflect any aspect of descriptive activity. Yet it does and, in practice, it is difficult to conceive of it not doing so. For example, the author should not be part of positivistic description; when he is, the description is said to be biased. All sorts of technical procedures have been developed to minimize authorship in positivistic description, from randomization to blind experimentation. Ideally, the author should disappear altogether, even in name.

This ideal, however, is organizationally constrained. In human service organizations, for instance, considerable effort enters into the production of descriptively accurate accounts of client care, treatment, and progress (e.g., Gubrium, 1980). Human service documentation is evaluated by those who engage in it as well as by those who receive it, in terms of standards of positivistic description. Those who engage in the production of the documents (in many cases, with as much methodological acumen as formal social scientific studies) frequently remain

unnamed. The content of documents is acceptable with no reference to authorship except the indication that it is offered under the aegis of a particular organization. The organization, in effect, is the author and is held responsible for its contents. Descriptive adequacy is directly linked with payment for services rendered (that is, services described), usually retroactively. Again it is difficult to conceive of how some form of authorship would not accompany such human service descriptions, ideally representational or otherwise. It is clear, in such cases, that positivistic description cannot be completely transcendent to its production. Dollars and cents urge (but do not assure) organizational authors to be responsible, both descriptively and materially.

And consider the university as a setting that organizes the production of descriptions, as far as scientific ones are concerned. The descriptions allegedly should approach idealized representation. Is authorship absent here? Certainly not, since, among other conditions, description is tied organizationally to careers. In contrast to human service institutions, individual describers have a personal stake in extending their authorship (author-ity?) over as wide a range of descriptions as possible. Authorship signals not only remuneration but honor. Yet this too does not sit well with idealized representation, wherein a strict adherence to positivistic description suggests anonymity.

There is a good deal of tension in all of this, which perforce generates irresponsibility. On the one hand, adherence to idealized positivistic description requires the trivialization, if not virtual elimination, of descriptive activity. On the other hand, if description is to be done, if it is to exist at all, it must be produced, which generates descriptive activity. Those who adhere to the aim of idealized representation inevitably describe under the aegis of the activity and circumstances of their production. One resolution of the contradiction spawns descriptive irresponsibility, a form of which is the implicit or explicit claim that names (authors) are not, in principle, features of idealized representation. There are, of course, related claims such that idealized representation is ahistorical (law-like), noncircumstantial (unobtrusive), and objective (impersonal). Taken together,

they provide a set of disclaimers for descriptive irresponsibility, warranting devices for glossing the alienation of description from its production and fetishizing its end products.⁴ In the final analysis, it seems description is tenaciously practical, a form of labor, something that is done in the service of representation. To deny this is to be irresponsible—as laypersons and as social scientists—to the active participation that is an integral feature of description.

DESCRIPTIVE ACTIVITY

Turning directly to descriptive activity, let us outline some of its components and how they enter into description. Our working tenet is: the representation of things, ideas, and events is precisely re-presentational, the activity of presenting to an audience whatever is considered to be reportable. As for idealized description, it is a state of representation that is presented as such and may or may not be similarly received, a condition of descriptive activity toward which effort may or may not be concerted, yet which is underpinned by a principle of ideal communication.⁵

Descriptive Circumstances

Like other components of descriptive activity, circumstance is both concrete and tenuous. It is concrete in that the activities of representation occur in time and place; the only senses in which they transcend the latter is in their working depiction as such and in the principle of ideal communication that makes description itself a reasonable activity to pursue. This contrasts with the positivistic view that description as such more or less approximates an objective, yet transcendent ideal.

The concrete conditions of descriptive activity are the diverse objects, resources, events, and social relations that both penetrate and serve as the working background of representation. For example, when a special education teacher describes the progress of a student to colleagues, the teacher speaks of a range of objects, from the student's IQ score to his achievement test results, his daily classroom performance, reports from other

teachers, and his personal maturity. These are treated as the working realities of the teacher's description. On the one hand, they are linguistically cast by the teacher and her audience as the referential realities at hand; their language in speech and gesture is tacitly articulated in reference to them as objects separate from their description. On the other hand, the objects referenced are further "realized" by their material representation. The teacher not only speaks about the child's achievement test scores, she offers her colleagues the papers that document them, which, in turn, may be further concretized by references to them as "hard" evidence "in black and white" (cf. Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1977; Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979).

Varied concrete conditions serve as the working resources of description. The teacher makes use of an understanding of her own competence and that of her colleagues in describing a student's progress. She may, for example, refer to herself as one whom they all know to be a special education teacher with extensive experience and training in working with hyperactive children. On those concrete grounds (with that resource), she then may further confirm the reality of the "objective" documentation she presented earlier. Indeed, her attempt to confirm the realities at hand may reverse object and resource wherein she uses *her* documentation of achievement to attest to the objectivity of her claim to competence.

The separation of the concrete conditions of description into categories of objects, resources, events, and social relations is not purely substantive. It is a practical categorization which is, at once, both material and referential. In the course of ongoing description, things come to serve as objects—to concretely be objects—when they are assembled as such in their presentation. Needless to say, the same "things" become other working conditions in their practical transformation in the course of description. This is not a whimsical matter of definition or redefinition but, rather, is meant to be understood as alterations of the working conditions of description, conditions that not only confirm definition but resist it as well. Things defined as real are, by that alone, not realities.⁶ Yet at the same time it is important from a practical point of view not to overdetermine

the purely material meaning of concrete conditions; they are, after all, concrete conditions for us. It is in this sense that concrete conditions are also tenuous.

Other conditions of descriptive circumstances are its ongoing events and social relations. The activity of describing itself produces grist for its virtual re-presentation. Each descriptive action becomes, in the course of ongoing representation, part of the concrete objects of, or resources for, descriptive reproduction, reflexive and indexical features of their own describability (Garfinkel, 1967; Mehan and Wood, 1975). For example, as the teacher now describes her pupil's progress, she refers back to the concrete "facts" that she, at some time earlier, worked up as such and presented to her accepting colleagues. In their dialectical relation to ongoing activity, the events played out in descriptive circumstances are part of its concrete conditions.

All of this is referenced within a context of existing social relations: teacher to colleagues, colleagues to supervisors, staff members to families, organization to organizations. The social relations are not fixed but they are encountered as a set of present conditions (working constraints or resources) of description. Among other conditions, they specify who is obligated to describe to whom and the aegis under which description is made. For example, a school for emotionally disturbed children obligates its staff members to produce descriptions of children's progress to funding agencies (Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979). A recent court order obligates case reviewers in a state hospital for the criminally insane to present the rationale for predicting the dangerousness of candidates for release (Pfohl, 1978). In these examples, the auspices are, respectively, membership on a school's faculty and participation on a review board. In its own right, aegis is both a feature of the relations of descriptive production and a force in its legitimation. When a teacher states that she must "put things" in a certain way in describing what she knows for a funding agency, she makes reference to one of the social relations of description. Yet when she exemplifies a progressed product of her educational efforts, she legitimizes

the social relations that serve to articulate her pedagogical activities with others. Even failure serves legitimation in that it need not necessarily call into question the structure of existing social relations but, rather, its presently ineffective operation.

Descriptive circumstance is further specified by the extent to which the concrete conditions of representation are co-present or fragmented features, something which may be formally organized. For example, in one circumstance, staff members of a nursing home may engage in working up written descriptions of patient care in meetings where the objects of their care (patients) are present while, in another nursing home, the latter are absent (Gubrium, 1980b). The location of official audiences for description may also vary in the same way wherein some descriptive circumstances are organized with an audience being a direct witness to the working up of descriptions whereas others are organized so that audiences receive completed descriptions. In fact, both co-present and fragmented descriptive conditions may occur in the same formal organization in respect to different audiences (cf. Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982).

The bounds of descriptive circumstances are practical ones. It is not as if the circumstances of description, in regard to the scope of any of its conditions, can be specified a priori. Rather, bounds are to be seen as they are by their circumstantial practitioner, namely, as working bounds. For example, the professional participants of a hospital's utilization review conference may find themselves in a descriptive circumstance whose working scope does not include the presence of the object of their deliberations—until sometime into the proceedings it is learned that one of the participants is related to the patient being discussed. Suddenly, the conditions of description are center stage, demanding some resolution before the proceedings continue. The bounds of descriptive circumstance, explicitly or implicitly, are thereby integral features of the products of descriptive activity. What is to appear in written form as a "black and white" representation of something is articulated in part by (indexical to) a boundary problematic.

We have centered our empirical considerations thus far on the concrete conditions in the face-to-face circumstances in

which people work up descriptions. In the circumstances, we find members virtually working at the process of producing a sense of the objects of concern to them. In the process, articulated by the dialectics of references and realities, things to be described take on their more or less valid representation. In this sense, then, as ethnomethodology has so richly shown, representation is—both in method and content—a matter of doing description.

Audiences and Images

Yet there is something too chaotic about this, not because it is not in some way profoundly creative and unpredictable. The “artful” (Garfinkel, 1967) aspects of descriptive work are evident in the circumspection that is part and parcel of members’ attention to their descriptive activities: attention to things as well as attention to their own attention toward them. Out of this are produced senses of objects (e.g., of patient care, delinquency, dangerousness, school performance, and emotional disturbance). Describers to artfully assign meaning to varied categories of objects, the meaning articulated against and within variations in the circumstantial conditions of description. But not everything emerges in new form in the process. There seems to be less art, not less artifice, at this end of things.

We have, of course, addressed this issue to some extent in our comments about the working material conditions of descriptive production. In this section, we pinpoint the external relations of production, especially the effect of their perceived obligations on the content of description. People do not simply engage in description together under the aegis of immediate circumstantial conditions; they describe for someone. We refer to those who are expected to be in receipt of the product of descriptive activity as its “audiences,” descriptive markets as it were. We limit our considerations here to the condition of description in which audiences are not immediate witnesses to the process wherein descriptions are produced. (For a study of the latter, see Gubrium, 1980b).

Like other working conditions of descriptive activity, audience considerations delimit artful practices. More or less

reliable and valid representations are taken for granted as being worked up for someone or other. In practice, these idealized standards are managed against a background of expectations about what state of representation shall constitute its reliable and valid form. For example, in the matter of validity, where the methodological issue is the question of whether description really represents what it is claimed to be about, the background question of “really for whom” demands attention. Implicit here is the understanding that varied audiences may presume different versions of the realities being described, have different *images* of them. What might constitute literal validity for one audience might not be literal valid for another. Images provide working rules for articulating the content of description.

It is important to note that the understanding is a feature of the working conditions of description, conditions that are pervasive to descriptive activity. Underpinning it and descriptive practice in general is a tacit adherence to a principle of describability. The understanding urges those who work up descriptions to pursue adequate ones. The principle grounds the understanding and informs those who engage in description that, in the final analysis, description is not altogether illusory.

At times in the process of description, image considerations are rather evident. Studies of medical decision-making, for example, show that the clinical staffs who participate in conferences to review and work up descriptions (progress reports) of patient care, organize what is to be said or written to audiences around two considerations: the real problems and care of patients as the staff concretely experience them, and how the experiences are to be presented to whomever staff is accountable (Gubrium, 1980a; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982). While proceedings vary in the particular clinical experiences referenced and debated, and with regard to the explanations and interpretations of the experiences, at some time therein attention is turned to the descriptive issue of audiences. When the participants seem to have exhausted a case or it is noted that “time is running out,” someone may quickly ask, “Okay, now, how do you want to put that?” or “Does this sound alright to you?” Or after a

written description has been read to the participant, the reader may ask, "Do you think they'll [audience] buy that?" to which might be added, "You all know that that's the way they think about things?" It is evident in such questions and comments that descriptive activity is not plainly representational but representational with regard to whom things known are represented.

In the midst of questions and comments like the preceding ones, it may be added that "it's too bad" that audiences or people have such varied understandings of things or that "it would be nice" if things could just be told the way they are. Indeed, on unusually thought-provoking occasions, the same spokesperson may broach the possibility that the participants themselves, not their audiences, may be deceiving themselves—that the concrete realities of their work may be different from what they routinely think they are after all. It is not a foundational principle as such that is questioned but what concrete objects are to be taken as the ultimate grounds of description.

While in a given descriptive circumstances it might not be known who the particular audience is or will be, the mere understanding that some audience or other will have access to descriptions generates circumspection over content and style. This delimits the artfulness of description. When the particular audience is known, the artfulness is further contained, this time by describers' sense of what a particular audience presumes to be the concrete realities being described, being that audience's image of the realities.

The relation between audiences and images is practical. Working rules-of-thumb, produced and reproduced out of ongoing historical and organizational experiences, inform describers that, for all practical purposes, specific audiences have particular images of the things being described. When an audience is defined, a particular image is expected to serve as the frame for portraying things. In the time and energy devoted to its resolution, the issue of audiences may loom larger than the formulation of a description itself. Moreover, the formulation does not proceed until an audience resolution is accepted (cf. Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979).

Analytically, images are akin to what Goffman (1974) has called "frames" in that both serve to organize experiences—the one, experiences as described, the other, experiences as expressed. They are working recipes for their related activities: more or less known, images frame description. Once an image is assumed, description virtually takes its particular natural course, presents its own specific ideals to describers, and confronts them with its own errors. But what description "owns" is something given to it by those who participate in it. It is only to that extent that image orders descriptive activity. Images are not transcendent "structures" but practical ones (Giddens, 1979).

RESPONSIBLE DESCRIPTION

In conjunction with concrete conditions of description, adherence to idealized representation leads to descriptive irresponsibility, the attempt to act as if description were not practical. As we noted, the irresponsibility is not only a matter of personal ignorance but an organized feature of the intra- and interinstitutional context of descriptive obligations, some of which are called "accountability." The morality of descriptive responsibility is profoundly social in that the intentions motivating the production of descriptions both arise out of, and attend to, the complex of rational, yet contradictory conditions around which descriptive activity occurs.

What, then, can be the responsibility of idealized representation? It is not a responsibility or emulating a transcendent representative ideal, but rather a responsibility to accuracy and objectivity, which, in respect to the epistemological insight of practice, are standards for only one form of descriptive truth. In the hindsight of practice, objectivity is not a synonym for descriptive truth; it only can be adjectival—objective (object-like) truth as opposed to other descriptive forms (Habermas, 1971). Moreover, being practical, it is an integral feature of descriptive obligations, obligations to be objective and accurate. In this context, the latter are working, not transcendent ideals.

To be descriptively responsible is to recognize that descriptive truth must harbor as much subjectivity and inexplication as objectivity and accuracy. Indeed, the practice of description is a complex dialectic of each, grounded in descriptibility.

FOOTNOTES

1. Berger and Luckman (1966) attempt to resolve the theoretical tension by means of a dialectical treatment of knowledge production in everyday life. Their work is, however, more "dialectical" in theory than in practice. It is rather functionally Durkheimian in that respect.
2. Habermas (1971) offers a practical/theoretical resolution to the divergence in his theory of cognitive interests. Evenhandedly, Habermas suggests that description does not transcend its process but is articulated through the cognitive interests of describers. For whatever reason, some persons may take on what we have called a "scientific mood" and idealize representation for what, Habermas states, aims at control. Others or the same persons in a non-scientific mood, may take on what might be called a "critical mood" in the presumed interest of liberation and expose accuracy as one-dimension (cf. Marcuse, 1964), an ideology of truth.
3. Here we are speaking analytically, in terms of how representation is to be conceived in view of what is now known about it. Certainly in the concrete activity of describing, it is possible to overlook the pervasive role of the conditions of description when the practical recognition and the positive application of descriptive activity are cognitively and/or organizationally separated, as we mentioned earlier. Our analysis itself is practical insofar as it is organized by an urge to reveal and make theoretical sense of all the conditions of description including its own understanding. This does not necessarily lead to descriptive relativism, for its urgency is distinct from an imperative to precisely mirror some positive state of things. Rather, it is grounded in the principle that all descriptive activity is informed by a vision that there are increasingly general understandings of the conditions and contents of description—an imperative, not a recipe. The urgency is a non-substantially-defined, universal descriptive principle, to which we shall return later in respect of Habermas' concept of the "ideal speech situation" (see footnote 5).
4. Consider Marx' (1909) and, later, Lukacs' (1971) discussion of the fetishization of commodities as a form of practical irresponsibility exquisitely organized by capitalistic modes of production.

5. There is a difference between the concrete presentation of ideal representation and the principle of ideal communication, the latter making communication itself reasonable. While descriptions offered and received may be presented or evaluated as more or less ideally representative, the activities therein are tacitly informed by the understanding that what is known could, in principle, be communicated, an anticipation articulated through the working conditions of description. As Habermas (1970:144) puts it: "... for every speech, even of intentional deception, is oriented towards the idea of truth. This idea can only be analyzed with regard to a consensus achieved in unrestraint and universal discourse. Insofar as we master the means for the construction of an ideal speech situation, we can conceive the ideas of truth, freedom, and justice—which interpret each other—only as ideas of course. For on the strength of communicative competence we can by no means really produce the ideal speech situation independent of the empirical structures of the social system to which we belong; we can only anticipate this situation."
6. There is a tendency in the symbolic interactionist tradition to read Mead in the opposite way, perhaps epitomized by perennial references (especially in labeling theory) to W.I. Thomas' (1923) statement that things defined as real are real in their consequence. Blumer (1969, 1977, 1980), for one, has taken great pains to make it clear that this is a statement about practice.

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