LECTURE ABSTRACT: ‘Systems of Meaning and Systems of Practice’

What are cultural meanings? In what ways can we use quantitative measures to capture meanings? How have social scientists changed their approach to measuring meanings over the years? From the original invention of attitude measures by W.I. Thomas nearly a century ago, to the mapping of meaning fields by Kurt Lewin, the analysis of semantic differentials by Charles Osgood, the emergence of cognitive anthropology and network mappings of cultural discourse systems by sociologists over the last 20 years to the modern use of “topic model” technologies by computer scientists, the formal study of cultural meanings has changed dramatically over the last century, but the core questions about the nature of meaning and the central dilemmas of cultural interpretation continue to confound us. In this talk, Prof. Mohr will address the conceptual problems and the historical progress of the social scientific approach to quantifying the study of cultural meanings and address the questions of where does the field stand today and where is it headed tomorrow?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER:

John W. Mohr, (PhD, Yale, 1992) is a Professor in the Department of Sociology and the Director of the Social Science Survey Research Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His primary interest is in the empirical study of meaning systems. His focus has been on developing applications of formal methods of relational (network) analysis to the study of discourse in institutional systems. He was originally trained as an organizational sociologist and his early work was concerned with the rise of bureaucratic forms of rationalization in the American social welfare sector (focusing in particular on Progressive Era New York City). He has also been active in developing programs for broadening participation in graduate education and he has conducted research on faculty activism on campus and on the discourse systems that have developed surrounding changes in affirmative action programs in U.S. higher education. He is currently working on analyzing U.S. National Security Strategy discourse systems and on finding ways to use textual analysis tools from the computer sciences to analyze cultural systems. With Roger Friedland, he co-edited Matters of Culture: Cultural
Sociology in Practice (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and with Barbara Harthorn he co-edited The Social Life of Nanotechnology (Routledge, 2012). Mohr has been a visiting professor at the University of Rome as well at the Maison des Sciences de L'Homme in Paris. He has served as chair of the ASA section on the sociology of culture and currently serves on the editorial boards of Theory and Society, Poetics and The American Journal of Cultural Sociology

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