I now suspect that there are no general sociological propositions...and that the only general propositions of sociology are in fact psychological.

Homans (1964, p. 817)

I assume that the proper study of interaction is not in the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another.

Goffman (1967, p. 2)

THE DISCURSIVE ALTERNATIVE

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to demonstrate that the orthodox theory of action is a formulation of the theory implicit in commonsense explanations of behavior. I have raised what I take to be serious questions about the empirical foundations and the internal logic of the orthodox/commonsense theory. As a foundation for an alternative approach to social action, I proposed that we view internal states, such as intention, motivation, and emotion, as members’ concepts. This proposal, in turn, led to a consideration of sociologically viable approaches to meaning and to rules. I refer to this alternative to the orthodox approach as discursive sociology. Discursive sociology focuses on the interpretive systems and practices through which members deal with behavior. By investigating members’ explanations of behavior, I have tried to achieve some preliminary insight.
into the nature of these interpretive systems and practices. Discursive sociology is an approach, not a theory or an analytic system. It is the general alternative to a motivational sociology of action. The crucial feature of the discursive approach is that behavior is viewed as meaningful by virtue of its articulation with a system of discourse rather than by virtue of its being "meant" or motivated.

I have argued, along with the ethnomethodologists, that the dominant sociology of action is based on common sense. Wallis and Bruce (1983) specifically acknowledged this dependence and sought to justify it:

Our conception of sociology ... is [in large part] only of a more systematic commonsense. We are all in the business of explaining behavior, and of evaluating actors' accounts in our everyday lives. While we may hope to go about this task with more discipline, consistency, concern for generality, continuity, etc., than the layman, the methods available to the sociologist and layman alike are essentially the same. (p. 103)

A bit later, they added this rather odd defense of sociology as common sense:

For us ... no shame attaches to the fact that sociology is—in its method, of course, rather than in its content or focus—only a more systematic form of commonsense. Rather we are impressed by how well commonsense has got along without sociology for all these years; how little the advent of sociology has added to the sum of human knowledge; and thus, how much there is to learn from what others affect to despise. (p. 105)

Looking at history and the present state of the world, one might have cause to be less impressed than Wallis and Bruce with the virtues of common sense. One might also wonder if perhaps a noncommonsensical sociology would have contributed more to the "sum of human knowledge."

The alternative to a commonsense, rational-motivational approach is structural and systemic. Miller (1984, 150) suggested that public performances be viewed in terms of "their functional consequences ... their socially predictable

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1Wallis and Bruce presented their view as if it were a minority position, although at points they seem to have acknowledged that it is the standard sociological position. The alternatives, as they presented them, are macrosociology and ethnomethodology. Because macrosociology, in their presentation, does not deal with social action, it is not really an alternative position but an alternative undertaking. (They rejected it as a self-contained enterprise on the grounds that it doesn't explain. Because society consists of actors doing things, we must explain why actors do things.) That leaves ethnomethodology as the only other position on social action, and their discussion of ethnomethodology is very inadequate. At any rate, because macrosociology is not in itself a theory of social action, and because ethnomethodology is clearly not the majority position on social action, Wallis and Bruce seem a little coy in disclaiming majority status for the commonsense approach to social action.