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Measure Mohr culture



Fig. 1. an image of the buttons Chris Bail made for John Mohr's career retrospective at the 2018 ASA in Philadelphia, and the source for the title of this special issue.

1. Introduction

How do you look back and memorialize a forward-thinking person? It is a testament to how many lives John Mohr touched that since his death in 2019, he has been the recipient of a lot of memorializing. From inventive and creative reflections in this journal from [Camille Roth and Nikita Basov \(2020\)](#), [Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Ronald Breiger \(2020\)](#), and [Paul DiMaggio \(2020\)](#), to a celebration of John organized by Chris Bail at the 2018 ASA (see [Fig. 1](#)), a co-authored book with almost an entire generation of earlier career sociologists ([Mohr et al., 2020](#)), a conversation between ourselves and Jennifer C. Lena in the ASA Culture Section newsletter ([2019](#)), a moving memorial written by Geoff [Raymond \(2019\)](#) that diffused across listservs, and two graduate student awards (one from the ASA Culture section, and one at UCSB), there is no doubt that upon John Mohr's death none of us were ready to just be forward thinking and forge ahead.

Instead, we think we should do what John did, which is to look back and forge ahead all at the same time. Just as John applied methods (that the world still wasn't quite ready for) to archival data (that had accumulated a lifetime's worth of dust while the world forgot), we believe we can—and should—be backward and forward looking at the exact same time. Doing so isn't easy, but John Mohr was an optimist. And he believed in better integration, be it socially, intellectually, or between theory and method. It can be hard to see or have that optimism these days, but having watched John go through the hardest of times with his optimism intact, we have taken that as our charge in this special issue.

2. The philosophy behind the special issue

John was a great listener. And he often organized groups of scholars to sit in rooms together to learn from one another in conversation. This listening and dialogic work extended to the many special issues he organized for *Poetics*. We have therefore organized this special issue in that same spirit. To us, the best way to continue to “measure Mohr culture” is to continue the conversation and collectively push the field forward. Our philosophy for the special issue is therefore not to concretize or objectify John's oeuvre as *the*

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model for future work. The Mohr model, in our assessment, is to get together and to listen and share in order to come to new combinations of ideas, and maybe even entirely new ideas. One may read John's work in its entirety and not see the "invisible college" of ongoing conversations to which he belonged and to which he dedicated much energy in growing. As two beneficiaries of these efforts, we sought to foster the types of conversations John would have loved, and in a way that John would have done too: by lending support to early-stage scholars who not only embody the Mohrian form of measuring culture, but also its spirit.

We believe that spirit is encapsulated in some of the final thoughts John shared with us. When ALS had taken away his voice, John continued to speak through a blinking system with letters spelling out words. Even then, John was looking to the future and sought to inspire us in our work, saying "go beyond," and "change the field." Implicit but integral to his thoughts we believe was a call for cultural sociologists to engage in more conversations – that is, one does not change the field alone, but fosters groups of scholars and helps to mentor the next generation who will carry forward and build on the ideas and tools of the previous generation. As much as it pained us to realize that we were no longer the *next* generation after John, upon entering our mid-careers we knew it was time to advance what we see as John's key intellectual legacy.

For us, that legacy can be summarized in two words: "meaning matters." While John's work is frequently cited for its innovative methods, he always understood those methods as vehicles for trying to get at meanings. Meanings are real. Meanings are ubiquitous, frequently shared, organize action, and are therefore part of the definitions of situations that are very "real in their consequences," as W.I. Thomas said (and John was fond of quoting). Of course, a general belief in the importance of meaning is at the heart of both cultural sociology and anthropology. But actually uncovering meaning—including figuring out where to look and how to gauge its importance—is no small task, and involves theories of interpretation and methods for doing so. Learning when to stop and take a step back from measurement is just as important as the measurement itself. In short, John saw the measurement as always in service of the meaning and trying to get it right.

Getting things right involves interpretation. Interpretation requires another type of listening, and John was also a master of this type. We believe the main motivation behind his methodological innovations was to formalize ways of listening to qualitative data. Measuring culture is not an end itself. It is the beginning of an interpretive process, which entails theory and a substantive knowledge of a domain. John spent years developing expert knowledge of the welfare state, the Progressive Era, and even the profession of social work. Consequently, John taught us that formal tools must always be combined with other hermeneutical approaches and one's hard-earned understanding of an empirical domain. This can take time. Add to this effort to gain expertise in a domain the time it takes to gather data and formally measure culture, and one can start to understand why a full Mohrian approach may be more of a long-term goal, rather than something to expect from any one project. One may need to choose a greater commitment to a specific domain, or to pushing methodological frontiers in a variety of ways.

Innovative methods may also entail using old methods in new ways or devising entirely new approaches. John was a hacker – not in the sense of someone who breaches computer security systems, but in the sense of someone who delights in hacking together ways to get results using whatever tools will do the job. John came from the generation when computers were seen as tools still requiring considerable work to produce useful results. Today, the back-end of computing is mostly invisible and people largely expect computers to do the work for them before giving them the results. Of course, John had no problem with such elegant packages, and constantly delighted in the newest Apple devices and their elegance. But seeing John work in a modern computing environment was like seeing an old time race car driver put a new engine in a classic car: John relished having a feel for the road while going very fast and in new directions. John would regularly chain together complex workflows from various programs in order to produce a novel outcome. And he would at times stay up all night before a deadline figuring out how to use a set of existing tools to produce a novel way to analyze textual data. To our surprise and his clear delight, John always found a way by sunrise. This might involve cutting and pasting from the output of one program into a text file to be inputted into another, so that the results could then be visualized in a conventional statistical package. Not all of these efforts were successful. As far back as 2003, John would teach undergraduate methods courses that involved manually scraping internet pages (archives, blogs, etc.), and getting students to use formal methods using complex workflows (Word to NVivo to Excel to SAS) in order to uncover their meanings. Essentially, John was showing the way toward data science and blowing minds in the process. For these reasons, we see much to emulate in the hacker spirit, which seeks to find any way to get results, rather than the most elegant way.

Our philosophy for this special issue is therefore to foster hackers and early stage researchers who are hell bent on finding ways to actually see meanings and map out their contours and why they matter; to listen and to inspire new ways of listening to one another and to the discursive data that now permeates our lives. Before turning to the contents of the special issue and how these relate to John's own work, we also hope to dispel an easy characterization of John's legacy.

3. The guy who turned meaning into math?

There's a real risk that John Mohr gets remembered as the guy who turned meaning into math. It has already started to happen, and quite frankly, even this special issue probably doesn't do enough to dispel the belief that this encapsulates who he was. But John Mohr wasn't Chair of the Theory Section because he made a Galios Lattice that one time, nor did he wrangle eight leading, earlier-career scholars into all collaborating on a book on culture and measurement because turning meaning into math was the thing that he was really about. Instead, methodologically, John's innovation was in figuring out how numbers can be used to facilitate inductive reasoning. Epistemologically, John was always much more aligned with qualitative researchers; he was an interpretivist for whom the cool kids were cultural anthropologists and historians. If he had an axe to grind it was that he wasn't considered one of them because of his interest in numbers and his use of formal methods. But John also had to push back on the more linear modeling core of quantitative researchers, who undoubtedly thought John's work was overly descriptive and not causal enough to be real science.

For these reasons it is a mistake to think that Mohrian measurement means applying NLP or network techniques to questions of culture and meaning. To do so is to mistake the forest for the trees. While it's true that John spent his career applying NLP and network techniques to questions of culture and meaning, for him those were the tools rather than the trade. Mohrian measurement is about finding creative methodological solutions to seemingly intractable theoretical problems; it is using backdoors and side doors to get new vantage points on longstanding questions about the relational, dually-constitutive, nature of institutional life. The phrase "long-standing questions" means that cool methods for the sake of cool methods is also beside the point; if what you are doing is not theoretically rich and theoretically driven, why bother doing it at all? The only restraint is that the method must be formalized; hermeneutics must be formally studied, not just imputed or imposed. And again, to be clear here, we are not using the word "formally" as a faux-inclusive euphemism for "quantitatively," which would also miss the point entirely. The goal for John was to bring together the interpretivists and institutionalists; to do quantitative work from the standpoint of an inductive ethnography or cultural history. To John's credit—and honestly probably even more to his reputational benefit than to his credit—the world of inductive and "forensic" computational social science seems to be bending in this direction.

At a more general level, the lesson to take away from John Mohr is to try weird shit, and that to try weird shit is not—and perhaps *should not be*—easy. John spent his graduate career collecting and digitizing archival data *by hand* and then making software do things it wasn't supposed to do. What that means is that scraping conveniently assembled text corpora in order to apply topic models, word embeddings, BERT models, or any other canned NLP method looks a lot like the lesson to be learned with John, while actually being the opposite of the lesson he was teaching us. It doesn't make it bad, or invalid, or not useful – all of these things are *useful* – but what was weird shit in 1991 simply isn't weird shit today. Taking a Mohrian approach is to do what's considered weird shit in today's terms; not what was weird shit when John was coming up.

A final concern with reducing John into a guy who turned meaning into math is that it overlooks the communal orientation that not only defined his career, but also led to the creation of this issue. As with anybody out ahead or at the cutting edge, there's a habit of treating them as isolated iconoclasts, which John never was. John always subtly discouraged others from this, too. In the same way that *Measuring Culture* was an effort to assemble the leaders of the field in the next cohort down and get them thinking collectively and together, this special issue goes a cohort down from that, collecting the works of those who have only recently come up, and are still rising. The best way to celebrate John Mohr, we think, is to assemble and celebrate the work of those who knew him less well, who were inspired by him, and maybe sometimes did not know him at all and had not heard of him but were still working in the more-than-just-the-guy-who-turned-meaning-into-math nascent Mohrian tradition.

4. The special issue and its Mohrian directions

If John was not simply the guy who turned meaning into math, is it possible to encapsulate succinctly his broad research agenda? Although we are reluctant to do so (because any such attempt may appear to eulogize and put his work in a tidy box), we think laying out the elements of a full Mohrian approach will hopefully demonstrate the rich and deeply sociological roots of John's work and perhaps even inspire a broader engagement with his ideas. For us, John Mohr's work can be summarized as having three key aspects: (1) *innovating formal methods aimed at revealing meanings through relations and dualities, done* (2) *largely in organizational settings responsible for institutionalizing important social identities, because* (3) *so doing engages larger theories*. Method, substance, and theory were always holistic for John, and each required an *equally* deep level of engagement.

Each of the articles selected for this issue fall into this general research agenda. But, as with John's work, some of the articles shine with respect to one or two of these key aspects. As with much of sociology as a discipline, cultural sociologists tend to specialize in method, interpretation, or theory. Consequently, we should not be surprised to see such divisions emerge in fractal-like fashion within various subfields, or even as we do here, within a special issue (see [Abbott, 2001](#)). Our great hope for encouraging the measuring of Mohr culture in the future is to emphasize this holistic approach that was to us and many others the hallmark of John as a scholar and a person, even if we may enter this broader agenda in more specialized ways that sync with our research agendas on any given project.

4.1. Innovative formal methods

Nearly all of the articles in this issue either use existing methods in novel ways or innovate methods through a chaining together of pre-existing methods or through new ways of measurement.

As we noted in the previous section, John's work often involved multiple steps in data processing. Several of the articles in this issue follow suit. As examples of more complex workflows, consider Figure 3 in [Stuhler's \(2021\)](#) article on Discourse Role Analysis, and [Nie's \(2021\) Fig. 1](#). Rather than using a single method, these authors are clearly hacking together approaches aimed at the goal of revealing meanings in specific domains. The authors know what they are looking for, but there just isn't an easy way to get there. Of course, there is a danger in putting data through a meat grinder of formal processing – namely, methods always introduce errors, and these errors may compile over various iterations, and thereby produce splotchy results from which we then project meanings. However, this is not really different from any method in which we can fall in love with results. As researchers we must constantly seek to disprove our own theories of the case, and let our own and others' knowledge disabuse us of mistakes-in-process. Like John always did, we should always present our work and our nascent (and perhaps wrong) interpretations to relevant and critical audiences. If they introduce substantive problems, it's time to rethink the analysis.

Many of the articles in this issue explicitly engage with methods that are relational and examine dualities. [Yung's \(2021\)](#) article on the career of "networks" as a metaphor is doubly interesting in this regard. By contextualizing the meaning of "networks" (a relational concept) within the historical contexts of its usages, Yung gauges a 150-year discursive migration of how a relational metaphor is

relationally positioned. Stolz and Taylor's extension of word embedding approaches proposes two navigation-like strategies, which also extends relational approaches. The authors show how different aspects of meanings arise when researchers either hold constant terms or hold constant the embedding space. Nanni and Fallin's (2021) article on the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of climate science performs a similarly innovative shift using word embeddings. Analyzing over 30,000 article abstracts, the authors use a word embedding approach to derive clusters of topics and research methods in the emerging field, and then layering on several other techniques they show how existing disciplinary meanings constrain how interdisciplinary fields evolve. The most explicit engagement with the duality concept, which Mohr imported into cultural analysis from the seminal work by Breiger (1974), is in the article by Lee, Herdagdelen, Park, and Martin (2021). Here, the authors devise a number of measures that extend the duality of persons and groups in ways that build toward the inclusion of various ways of understanding that the diversity of groups matters – something that was also at the heart of Mohr's work as a dean in the graduate school.

Importantly, several of the articles in this issue demonstrate that innovation need not be from hacking together complex workflows, and instead through careful consideration and use of existing methods in novel ways. Nelson's (2021) article demonstrates the epistemological alignment between machine learning and theory and research on intersectionality. Using a large corpus of Nineteenth Century narratives from the American South, Nelson uses word embeddings to reveal the complex ways that race and gender were discursively co-constitutive in relation to discourse in the semantic domains of the polity, culture, economy, and domestic spheres. In a similar vein, Puetz, Davis, and Kinney (2021) use semantic network analysis to reveal shifting meanings of human rights in peace agreements. The authors bring this relational approach to a research domain (world polity theories of institutionalism) that has clear theoretical alignments with relational ideas, but has historically been tethered to diffusion models that keep meaning-making processes in the background.

Thus, the articles in this issue cover a wide range of what it means to be innovative with respect to formal methods. Most importantly, all innovations are performed in the service of engaging important theoretical issues, which we will return to shortly. And many of the empirical contexts concern the more substantive areas that John found most compelling. We turn to these next.

4.2. Organizational settings and identities

Much of John's work was deeply concerned with organizational processes as engines of social construction. As a neoinstitutionalist, John began with the notion that organizations are "people-processing" machines. Organizational fields then emerge over struggles to legitimately institute categories and hierarchies of identities, and in so doing help to reify those cultural constructs. These struggles point to yet another duality that exists between the positions of organizations within a space of meanings, and the meanings themselves: prisons and types of prisoners co-create each other, as do universities and graduates, or hospitals and patients. Within each of these fields, one will find niches of all sorts and fractal-like divisions of identities, categories, and statuses that partition individuals and organizations. John's formal methods were often aimed precisely at revealing these complex and fateful processes over various timespans.

These intellectual priorities are reflected in several of the articles in this issue. Several of the articles concern the organizational processing of vulnerable or marginalized peoples. Stuhler (2021) devises an approach to better capture the discourse roles that structure fields based on combinations of treatments, actions, and characteristics, illustrating this approach in the context of German news coverage of refugees. Valentino (2021) shows that differences in support for poverty policy are conditioned on the underlying logics of both who liberals and conservatives perceive to be poor, and what they perceive to be the causes of poverty. In a similar vein, Stoltz and Taylor (2021) demonstrate their cultural cartography by examining immigration discourse in a large corpus of U.S. news articles between 2013 and 2018. Puetz et al. (2021) unpack an evolving human rights discourse in international peace agreements. All of these articles are aimed at understanding how formal organizational structures mediate social categories in meaningful ways. While, like Mohr, most articles use organizationally-produced discourse as their main data, Park, Abecassis, and Revel (2021) flip this Mohrian logic on its head and analyze how individuals process organizational discourse. By examining how individuals remember various newsworthy events in France, and how they processed them, in comparison to what the media outputs, the authors begin to lend more cognitive understandings to the intersection of categories of meaning and meaning-making.

Although John was dedicated to understanding the people-processing work of organizations, and later as a dean actually trying to move such processes in more egalitarian directions, John was also a scientist and deeply interested in the organizational bases of knowledge production (John was, after all, also a student of Walter Powell). John kept up such interests with an affiliation at the Center for Nanotechnology in Society, through engaging with scholars in the burgeoning technology management program at Santa Barbara, and in many close discussions with Charles Bazerman – an expert of the discourse of science. The articles in this issue by both Yung (2021) and Nanni and Fallin (2021) reflect this facet of John's work. Yung shows us how the metaphor of "networks" functions within changing scientific contexts. Nanni and Fallin uncover the ordering of topics and methods that delimit "a space of probables" in how knowledge may evolve into an interdisciplinary field. These articles take the Mohrian approach to better understand scientific knowledge as a discursive process, and using formal methods to do so.

We were heartened to see so much of John's substantive interests taking new form in many of the submissions for this issue. We were even more heartened to see many of the type of larger ideas that truly motivated John's work were in some way present as well.

4.3. Engaging larger theories

John loved books. And John loved theory, probably just as much as devising formal methods (and maybe more). The large basement in his home was literally full of books in aisles of shelves. When John and his wife Lael temporarily moved from this home so

it could be remodeled to better accommodate his wheelchair, numerous colleagues and friends (including Rawlings) helped to box up these books and categorize them. Generating categories with John to classify his library holdings was definitely a meta-Mohrian experience. And so many of these books were theory. Like many sociologists, John was drawn to empirical work through theory. At UC-Irvine, John studied with Stanley Aronowitz – a Marxist cultural studies scholar and activist. As students of John, we can recognize his Marxist roots, and how these grew into his love of Foucault. John always embraced the big ideas and even obdurate texts. John once ran an entire seminar on reading Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice*, and never gave up on understanding Harrison White's *Identity and Control*.

In selecting and helping revise the articles for this issue, we have kept in mind that John's work was always in the service of the big ideas. In these articles, you will find careful engagements with concepts and theories motivating much of John's work: institutional logics, duality, semiotics, hermeneutics, and more. As John encouraged us to "go beyond" in our own work, we have done so with these contributions. Today, we find that earlier career scholars are frequently well-versed in computational techniques and have facility with generating the kinds of formal analyses that were prohibitively difficult in the past. We encourage these scholars to also build their basement libraries, and to dwell there as John did, soaking up the theory and trying to imagine how methods could elaborate and test these important ideas.

5. Closing thoughts

John was fearless in life and in scholarship. He made us feel brave and encouraged us to take risks. These risks did not always pay off immediately, or at all. But they always led us to more interesting places, where we met interesting and wonderful people, and got us to go beyond what we thought we could do. To this, we not only owe our careers, but also much of our joy in life. In this special issue, and in many future efforts, we hope to keep this spirit alive. We recognize that these days sociologists, and academics more generally, are under greater pressure than ever to specialize. Graduate students are quickly professionalized to compete for scarcer jobs, and are reasonably hesitant to wander off the track in order to dig both widely and deeply across methods, interpretation, and theory. It is clear to us that the path John took in the 1980s and 1990s is not the path that earlier career scholars could or should take today, and a decade ago he even warned us of as much about our own careers. But in working together and keeping the conversations going, we can continue to collectively realize bold research agendas. We can find the time to fit together pieces from different puzzles, to look back and to forge ahead at the same time, to try weird shit, and to measure Mohr culture. Doing so is, we believe, the only way to memorialize a forward-thinking person.

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