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**Evaluating Interests in Social Science:  
Beyond Objectivist Evaluation and the Non-judgemental Stance  
By Stephen Kemp**

**Abstract:** This article attempts to move debates about interests beyond the impasse between proponents of objective evaluation and defenders of a non-judgemental approach to lay actors' interests. It develops an evaluative approach to actors' understandings of their interests but rejects ideas of 'real' or 'objective' interests in favour of an engagement with the limitations of actors' understandings from within their own frameworks. These ideas are developed through a sympathetic but critical engagement with Lukes' account of interests in *Power: A Radical View*. Issues explored include the viability of the divide between 'objective' and 'subjective' interests, the notion of 'contradictory interests' and the relation between social scientific and agential accounts. Following Holmwood, I argue that social scientific evaluations are only justified when they identify limitations and problems in actors' understandings of their interests and show how these are avoided in social scientific interest accounts.

**Keywords:** criticism, Holmwood, interests, justification, Lukes, problems, real interests

## **1. Introduction**

Although debates about the concept of 'interests' in social science are long-standing, various issues remain unresolved. One central issue is the relationship between social scientific accounts of the interests of lay actors, and actors' own understandings of their interests (Lukes, 2005; Ron, 2008). The question is whether social scientists can ever justifiably claim to understand actors' interests better than those actors do themselves, and in this article I offer an answer to that question which, I hope, will take the debate forward. To do so, I engage with wider theoretical debates about the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, the significance of actors' concepts in constituting the social world, and the status and purpose of social scientific knowledge. This is necessary because those who believe that social scientists can justifiably correct actors' understandings of their interests frequently claim that social science can generate 'objective' understandings of social condition, identifying the 'real interests' of actors which may not be consistent with their 'subjective' conceptions (e.g. Lukes, 2005; Balbus, 1971). Likewise those who argue that actors' understandings of their interests cannot justifiably be criticised by social scientists

have often defended this position on the basis of the incorrigibility of actors' subjective preferences (for discussion see Coleman, 1990), the non-objective character of normative values (see Hay, 1997) or the centrality of actors' understandings in constituting the social world (for discussion see Woolgar, 1981). These questions of objectivity, subjectivity and meaning also connect to debates about the status and purpose of social scientific knowledge. Thinkers who believe that objective evaluations of actors' interests are possible have been accused of imposing their own values on others (Hay, 1997), and would be seen by some as having an outdated conception of objectivity (Harding, 1991; Kuhn, 1970). By contrast, thinkers who argue that actors' understandings of their interests are not corrigible are open to accusations of conservatism, and their stance raises the question of what contribution social science can make if it is simply interpreting actors' existing understandings (cf Bauman, 1987).

In this article I develop an account of the relation between social scientists' and lay actors' conceptions of interests which attempts to move beyond both an objectivist conception of evaluation and a non-judgemental approach. I want to retain the possibility that social scientists can offer justified evaluations of lay actors' accounts, linking my argument to critical and normative currents in social science. However, unlike some other writers, I avoid invoking 'objective' or 'real' social conditions due to the implicit over-confidence this displays in social scientific argumentation. I develop this position by offering a sympathetic critique of Steven Lukes' (2005, 2006) analysis of interests. Although Lukes is most closely associated with his work on power, his ideas are substantially underpinned by an analysis of the concept of interests. Of particular relevance here is his continuing defence of the possibility of legitimately criticising actors' conceptions of their interests, and his use of the idea of 'real interests'. The critical appraisal I present is sympathetic insofar as it supports Lukes' attempt to develop an evaluative approach to interests. However, I question Lukes' use of concepts like 'real' and 'objective' in relation to interests, instead arguing that all accounts of interests are 'theoretical' and 'fallible' in character. Drawing on the work of John Holmwood I argue that it is possible for social scientific accounts to be preferable to lay accounts, but that this has to be justified on a case by case basis, through a dialogue with lay actors. I also contend that taking seriously the

‘theoretical’ status of social scientific accounts sheds new light on the issue of ‘contradictory’ interests.

Much of the discussion in this article will focus on Lukes’ *Power: A Radical View*, which was reissued in 2005 in dramatically expanded form, the second edition being over twice the length of the first. Although I will introduce Lukes’ first edition arguments as relevant context, I will focus largely on his second-edition arguments which were updated and revised in relation to more recent issues and debates. Through a critical assessment of both Lukes’ arguments and evaluations of his work by others, I aim to take forward debates about interests in social science.

## **2. Lukes and Interests: General Conception and First Edition Arguments**

Beginning with Lukes’ general conception of interests, we can see that in the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes makes the suggestion that ‘The concept of “interests” points us towards what is important in people’s lives’ (Lukes, 2005: 80). In the first edition, Lukes further states that ‘In general, talk of interests provides a license for the making of normative judgements of a moral and political character’ (Lukes, 2005: 37).<sup>1</sup> Lukes contends that this is because the notion of ‘interests’ is irreducibly evaluative (Lukes, 2005: 37) – if we say something is in the interests of a group we imply a positive evaluation of the realization of those interests. These remarks, I would argue, offer a helpful basis for thinking about interests. We can legitimately expect social scientific debates about interests to deal with issues of importance to social actors. Furthermore, analysing interests as an evaluative notion suggests that social science can contribute to social life by helping to identify what is beneficial for actors. Lukes’ broad approach to interests also fits with one everyday usage of the term ‘interest’: if I say that it is in your interest to stay in your current job given the economic climate, I’m implying a positive evaluation of this course of action.

The idea of interests is essential to what Lukes terms simply ‘power’ in the first edition of *Power: A Radical View*, but what he comes to refer to as ‘power as domination’ in the second edition (Lukes, 2005: 109).<sup>2</sup> With the hindsight of the

second edition, we can see Lukes defining the concept of ‘power as domination’ as follows: ‘*A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*’s interests’ (Lukes, 2005: 37). One of the distinctive features of Lukes’ own ‘three-dimensional’ approach to power as domination is its argument that there may be a divergence between what agents believe their interests to be, and what their real interests are. Putting this another way, Lukes argues that interests should not necessarily be understood as statements about the desirability of realizing the subjective preferences or wishes of agents (Lukes, 2005: 28). Rather, he suggests that the real interests of agents may be served by outcomes which they do not currently have a preference for. This allows Lukes to extend the boundaries of the types of social situations that can be understood as involving the exercise of power as domination. Claims about power no longer need to be based in cases where it is possible to observe disgruntled groups expressing concern, whether in formal or informal settings, about their inability to realize their interests – their subjectively based wishes. Rather, for Lukes, even groups who believe the present state of affairs to be beneficial may be said to be acting against their real interests (Lukes, 2005: 28).

This, of course, raises the question of what Lukes understands a ‘real interest’ to be. Lukes actually gives two different accounts of this, one developed briefly in the first edition, and one developed in more detail in the second. In the first edition, Lukes understands real interests to be interests in realizing preferences that actors *would have* if they were able to engage in relatively autonomous reflection on these. This relative autonomy would involve actors being able to reflect on their preferences without other agents exercising domination over them (Lukes, 2005: 36-8). Thus, Lukes states of his ‘radical’ conception:

‘The radical... maintains that people’s wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such cases, relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice’  
(Lukes, 2005: 38)

Lukes doesn’t develop his conception of real interests much further in the first edition of *Power: A Radical View*, stating later, in an admirably robust self-appraisal, that the first edition ‘offers no more than the most perfunctory and questionable account of

what such interests are...’ (Lukes, 2005: 109). Nevertheless, some brief critical comment on it is in order.

The issue I want to consider here is what substance we can give to Lukes’ idea that real interests are associated with the wants and preferences that agents would choose under conditions of relative autonomy. One issue is that sociologists would generally see the wants and preferences of agents as importantly shaped by interactions with others, fundamentally through socialization processes but in an ongoing way through interaction, debate and so on. Thus, it might be argued that even if we set aside processes of domination, agents do not freely choose their wants and preferences. Does this mean that, on Lukes’ criteria, there are no real interests, because no preferences and wants are freely chosen? To avoid this conclusion, it might seem obvious for Lukes to utilize a distinction developed in the first edition and argue that preferences that have merely been shaped by the *influence* of others can be considered real; it is those that have been shaped by *power as domination* that are not real (for the distinction see Lukes, 2005: 35-7). For Lukes, the difference between influence and power as domination is as follows: when one group is significantly affected by another it is a case of influence where the interests of the groups are consonant with one another, and a case of domination where the influenced groups’ real interests clash with those doing the influencing. The difficulty in using this distinction arises when we recall that, on Lukes’ terms, we can only work out what the real interests of a group are, and whether they clash, *once we know* whether their preferences have been formed by influence or domination. Thus to utilize this approach Lukes would need to know actors’ real interests in order to establish whether they were being influenced or dominated; and he would need to know whether actors were being influenced or dominated in order to know what their real interests were. This suggests that Lukes’ first edition arguments do not provide a solid basis for the identification of ‘real interests’.

### **3. Lukes on Interests in the Second Edition**

In the new chapters in the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes offers further discussion of the notion of power as domination. Despite moving to place it as one aspect of power, rather than identifying it with power as such, Lukes’ account

of power as domination has a great deal of consistency with his earlier view. Lukes states:

‘...power as domination will be present wherever it furthers, or does not harm, the interests of the powerful and bears negatively upon the interests of those subject to it...’ (Lukes, 2005: 86)

However, Lukes does insist on one revision to his earlier views. This is to argue that whereas the first edition considered the interests of agents to be unitary, we should acknowledge that there may be ‘differences, interactions and conflicts among one’s interests’ (Lukes, 2005: 109). I shall discuss this idea in more detail later.

In the second edition, Lukes shows a continuing willingness to invoke a distinction between presently held preferences and real interests. However, he defends this in more detail, arguing that such a move is possible because social scientists can take an ‘external standpoint’ in their study of the beliefs and activities of actors (Lukes, 2005: 146). As Lukes acknowledges, his account of 3-dimensional power relies on the idea of a standpoint from which one can attribute real interests to agents that do not match their current preferences. Lukes also acknowledges that there have been a range of criticisms of his earlier conception of real interests, most of which focus on how social scientific ascriptions of real interests can be held to be more valid than actors’ preferences (Lukes, 2005: 146-8; see for example Hay, 1997; Bradshaw, 1976).

Lukes responds to such criticisms in two ways. Firstly he argues that there are potentially plausible accounts of interests which don’t interpret them ‘subjectively’ but ‘objectively’ (Lukes, 2005: 80-2). The latter, says Lukes, focus on ‘what benefits or harms me, where what counts as benefit and harm is not decided by my preferences or judgements’ (Lukes, 2005: 80). Lukes mentions two approaches which he sees as breaking with a subjective interpretation. The first of these are theories based on the idea of ‘well-being’, Charles Taylor’s (1985) theorising being a key reference point. In this approach interests are not associated with immediate and potentially changeable preferences but with actions that work to realize an actors’ ‘meta-preferences’ or values. To achieve your interests is to achieve a worthwhile

life lived upholding these meta-preferences, and achieve long-term goals associated with them. Lukes states that:

‘...interests understood this way are also not straightforwardly preference-dependent, since this view of interests as wellbeing allows, indeed assumes, that people can in fact prefer to lead lives that are against what they may recognize to be their well-being.’ (Lukes, 2005: 82)

So Lukes sees such approaches as breaking from a subjectivity-centred conception of interests.<sup>3</sup>

Another example of a non-subjective approach, on Lukes’ terms, is welfare-based analysis. In this category, Lukes includes approaches which seek to identify the basic needs of actors that have to be met for those actors to be able to pursue the projects they desire (see Sen, 1985). Lukes sees this approach as objectively-oriented because there may be a divergence between interests as identified by welfare theories and lay actors’ views of their situation:

‘...welfare interests, thus conceived, are not preference-dependent, and so they can be thought of as objective. Their status as interests of persons does not derive from their being desired by them; conditions that damage your health are against your interests, in this sense, whatever your preferences...’ (Lukes, 2005: 82)

Thus, welfare-based approaches exemplify Lukes’ conception of non-subjectively based interest theories.

Lukes’ second response to criticisms about the prioritization of social scientific accounts of interests over those of agents is as follows:

‘These difficulties become less serious if one simply takes what count as “real interests” to be a function of one’s explanatory purpose, framework and methods, which in turn have to be justified. There is no reason to believe that



there exists a canonical set of such interests that will constitute “the last word on the matter”...’ (Lukes, 2005: 148)

Crucially, Lukes is here both defending the notion of ‘real interests’ and pluralizing it such that different frameworks may conceive of real interests in different ways.

Lukes mentions in passing his earlier contention that real interests could be conceived of as the subjective preferences of agents chosen under conditions of relative autonomy. But he also discusses other possibilities including the welfare theories of Sen and Nussbaum, Przeworski’s Marx-influenced analysis which presents real interests as material interests, and well-being theories, which associate interests with higher level values or meta-preferences that may clash with other preferences (Lukes, 2005: 148, 146, 82). Thus Lukes argues that we should see ‘real interests’ as subject to ongoing debate between different social scientific and philosophical perspectives.

#### **4. Critical Reflections on Lukes’ Later Views**

Having outlined Lukes’ later view, I now want to turn to evaluating it. I want to begin by supporting Lukes’ claim that social scientists can reasonably diverge from social actors in their judgements about what is in the interests of those actors. In Lukes’ later formulation this idea is not pinned so tightly to the idea that an actor’s real interests are the preferences and wants that they would have if they could choose these relatively autonomously. This loosening seems to me to be helpful given the issue with the earlier approach that I noted. However, I also want to indicate three main issues that need to be addressed in the way that Lukes theorizes the (potential) divergence of social scientific and agential accounts of interests.

##### *From ‘real’ interests to competing interest accounts*

The first of these is to do with the justification and connotations of the terms ‘real’ and ‘objective’ interests. For Lukes, real interests are invoked when there is a divergence between the understandings of social scientists and lay actors about what is best for those actors. The ‘real’ is associated with the account of interests that social scientists put forward. As we have seen, Lukes acknowledges that there are different and competing theories of ‘real interests’. However, he doesn’t draw what seems to me to be an important inference from this, which is that if there are multiple and contradictory theories of interests on offer, it does not make sense to refer to all

of them as getting in touch with the 'real'. The continued invocation of 'reality' for these accounts is also questionable in light of the revolution in the philosophy of science that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. This threw into question the idea that theories get directly in touch with reality and emphasised, instead, that reality comes to us through specific conceptual frameworks (Kuhn, 1970). To point out that all accounts, including interest accounts, are mediated interpretations is not to argue that all are equally convincing or valid (Lakatos, 1978; Holmwood, 1996). However, it is to suggest that attributing 'reality' to social scientific interest accounts gives them an unjustified seal of approval, implying that they are in touch with reality whereas other accounts, such as those put forward by actors themselves, are not.

This problem is reinforced by Lukes' use of a questionable notion of 'objective' interests, taken to refer to social scientific judgements about agents' interests which draw on factors not dependent on agents' preferences and judgements. The problem is not the idea that the social scientist may differ from agents in their evaluation of what is in their best interests. It is that the term 'objective' contains within it an implicitly positive epistemic evaluation of the social scientific account whatever its content. In the history of the use of this term, the 'objective' is neutral, distanced, and scientifically justified (see Harding, 1991). And accounts that are not objective are understood to be 'subjective' and limited by the agents' narrow perspectives. There is, thus, an implicit hierarchy which assumes, rather than demonstrates, the limitations of agents' accounts of their best interests and the superiority of the social scientific account. The claim here is not that Lukes intended to invoke this hierarchy, but rather that we must avoid unintentionally swallowing the assumptions implicit in the terminology. Indeed, I would recommend abandoning the idea that social scientific accounts identify 'real interests' and the idea that they can be 'objective' in orientation. I would suggest that it is preferable instead to refer to understandings/accounts of agents' interests, which may be social scientific or agentially-derived. This would avoid presuming a hierarchy by allowing that both the agent and the social scientist are trying to come up with the best account presently possible of what it is in the interests of the agent to do. Of course, as social scientists we are hoping to improve on agents' accounts; but this does not mean we can assume that we have done so, and the terminology of 'real' and 'objective' interests implies this, whether Lukes intended it to or not.

*From contradictory interests to contradictory theories*

The second issue relates to Lukes' argument that an agent's interests may not be unitary but that there may be conflicts between his/her interests (Lukes, 2005: 109). The only analytical elaboration of this notion that I am aware of is Lukes' discussion, cited above, of the different accounts of interests that exist – subjectively-oriented accounts, welfare-based accounts, and so on. The sense that Lukes is deriving his view of the potentially multiple and conflicting interests of actors from this idea of different accounts of interests is reinforced by the following passage:

‘But how can we speak of “real” interests, given that, as I have argued, people's interests are many, conflicting and of different kinds? For example, where is one's “real” interest if one's “well-being interest” (or “strong evaluation” or “meta-preference”) conflicts with one's “welfare interest” in meeting a basic need – as when fundamentalist Christian believers refuse life-saving medical interventions on the grounds that they violate God's will and will damn them eternally?’ (Lukes, 2005: 147)

Although this is posed as a question about the reality of interests, there is a clear implication that Lukes believes: (i) that agents can have conflicting interests; and (ii) that an example of such conflicting interests is the clash between the welfare interest and the well-being interest of a fundamentalist Christian.

Without arguing here against the *possibility* that agents may have multiple and conflicting interests, I do want to say that we need to be very careful when making such an attribution. In particular, we need to be sure that we are not taking the existence of multiple and conflicting theories as a sign that there must be multiple and conflicting interests. It should be acknowledged that defenders of some positions, such as relativist philosophies of science and post-structuralism, do defend the idea of multiple and incompatible truths (cf. Kuhn, 1970; Hekman, 1997), implying that there could be incompatible truths about the interests of a group or individual. Proponents of this view might argue, for example, that if two theories are incompatible it need not be the case that at least one is wrong if each theory can explain some aspects of the subject-matter that the other cannot. I cannot seriously question the idea of

multiple truths here, but the key issue is the role that the identification of incompatibility has in pushing knowledge forward. Whereas proponents of multiple truths see contradiction between theories as unproblematic as long as each theory has some successes, I would argue instead that incompatibility is always an issue that needs to be addressed (Popper, 1972; Holmwood, 1996). This is not to deny that two incompatible theories can both contain insights, but it is to deny that this renders each of them 'true'. Rather, their incompatibility points to the need for theoretical reconstruction that will be able to incorporate the insights of both in a non-contradictory manner.

The example cited above from Lukes is a case in point. Here Lukes is clearly making reference to two (potentially) clashing theories of interests – a welfare theory and a well-being theory – but identifying the clash as representing a real clash in the interests of the individual in question. If, instead, we treat this as a clash of theories this gives us a chance to reflect on these theories and consider whether one or both need to be reconstructed in light of the clash. In the medical-intervention example that Lukes gives, one way forward would be to propose that the clash helps us to see certain limitations of the welfare theory as Lukes presents it. If a fundamentalist Christian believes that medical interventions promoted by the welfare theory are going to damn them eternally it could be argued to be ethnocentric to insist that those medical interventions were actually in their interests. Proponents of such a view could therefore challenge defenders of the Lukesian welfare theory to consider that the framework within which many actors think of their lives is not bounded by the birth and death of the biological human body, and contend that the conception of interests in the welfare theory may need to be modified. Of course this argument is contestable, and the welfare theorist might argue back that religious beliefs are incorrect, and thus actors who base their actions upon them, rather than on a secular conception, are not actually promoting their interests. This argument could go on. But the key point about such an argument is that it is a *dispute between theories* about the interests of the actor. Such a dispute does not demonstrate that there are multiple and conflicting interests but that there are multiple and conflicting theories of what it is in the interests of actors to do. Because contradictory theories cannot both be correct, we shouldn't, in such a situation, attribute multiple and conflicting interests to the actor, but instead consider how to resolve the clash between theories.

Ian Shapiro (2006) recently declared himself in favour of Lukes' conception of multiple and competing real interests, and we can briefly consider whether Shapiro's article bolsters Lukes' argument. Shapiro states:

'Class, gender, status, religion, race and countless other bases of human identification can generate interests that can plausibly be ascribed to people...' (Shapiro, 2006: 147)

As well as this postulated range of interests, Shapiro implies that promoting one interest may damage another:

'Indeed, once we acknowledge that domination can occur along multiple metrics of real interest, we have to take seriously the possibility that reducing domination on one such dimension will increase it on another. Getting rid of debilitating inequities that are rooted in race or gender might reinforce equally or more debilitating class-based inequities.' (Shapiro, 2006: 152)

Thus, Shapiro connects the idea of multiple competing real interests to the familiar social scientific idea that society has cross-cutting divisions and inequalities. Does this provide a plausible way of defending Lukes' contention about the existence of non-unitary and potentially conflicting real interests? As Lukes pluralizes the notion of real interests to particular theories of these, we would have to consider Shapiro's conception of interests before we can answer this question. Shapiro is somewhat unclear about this in his article; the clearest steer being that we might associate at least one type of real interest with an interest in the removal of 'debilitating inequities' (Shapiro, 2006: 152). Does such a conception give rise to multiple and competing real interests for individuals? The case in favour rests on Shapiro's observation that policies may simultaneously decrease inequities along one axis of domination whilst increasing them along another. For example, it is possible that a governmental policy would remove gender inequities in financial resources, but also increase the overall level of 'class' inequity in society by increasing the disparity between the richest and poorest. This might encourage us to think that a working-class woman could have conflicting real interests in Shapiro's sense – her real interest

as a woman in having inequities removed might be thought to clash with her real interest as a working-class individual.

As with Lukes' work, I would suggest that Shapiro's emphasis on the 'real' status of interests distracts him from the point that the interests he discusses are theoretical attributions. 'Gendered' interests and 'working-class' interests might seem potentially incompatible with one another and equally real, but they need to be recognized as described and analysed within theories which must have some relation to one another. One possibility is that the theories contradict each other, in which case the argument directed at Lukes' analysis above applies. But, in this case, it seems more plausible that Shapiro's analyses of gendered interests and working class interests are actually commensurable within his wider social scientific (not 'real') claim that both working class people and women have an interest in removing inequities from their lives. As such, social scientists can claim that an agent doesn't have a separate interest in the removal of these as a member of each particular social category. They just have an interest in getting rid of inequities as a disadvantaged person. The sum-total of these inequities may be visited on a person by virtue of their membership of various social categories. But membership of these categories doesn't give them a variety of interests. Their interest in removing inequities that they face is singular. In relation to the example of the working-class woman, when assessing whether the policy supports her interests, as specified in this social scientific theory, we can do so by working out whether the outcome results in a position that is more or less disadvantaged, in relation to the population as a whole, than her position previously. The policy doesn't relate to two separate and potentially contradictory interests; it produces mixed effects, the final result of which can be assessed in relation to one social scientific interest account.

Thus I would argue that Shapiro's analysis does not strengthen the case that agents should be best understood to have multiple conflicting interests.<sup>4</sup> And when contradictory interests are attributed by social scientists we need to look very carefully at the theoretical bases of these attributions.

*Evaluating competing accounts of interests*

Now I want to move on to consider the last issue to be addressed in this section: how social scientists can tell whether or not their interest attributions are justified in cases where these clash with the accounts of agents. Unfortunately, Lukes doesn't offer any guidance on this in his second edition. And yet it is clearly a crucial question because critics of Lukes, such as Colin Hay, have argued that it is intrinsically an elitist move for social scientists to claim to have understood the interests of actors better than actors themselves (Hay, 1997: 47-8). The implication of Hay's argument is that where there is a clash between social scientists' and actors' views of their interests, we should always accept the latter. Contrary to Hay, I want to suggest that it is possible, in certain circumstances, for social scientists to justify the preferable character of their accounts of interests.

Here I want to support John Holmwood's important argument that social scientists should attempt to demonstrate the value of social scientific understandings by identifying difficulties and problems that lay actors have been experiencing as a result of acting on their own problematic understandings, and showing how social scientific understandings can resolve these (Holmwood, 1996). Let me tease out three aspects of this claim in order to consider them further, and defend the overall plausibility of the idea. Firstly, we can see that the validity of this mode of demonstration relies on the acceptance of a particular theoretical idea: that actors' understandings are not fully adequate on their own terms, and that their construction of the world can have limitations and problems. Holmwood thus challenges the constructivist and interpretivist view that constructions of the world are 'valid on their own terms' (see Barnes, 1983; Winch 1958), a view that provides one key rationale for taking a non-judgemental stance on actors' understandings of their interests. Following Holmwood, I would argue that when beliefs are put to use, whether in theoretical or practical applications, their limitations and contradictions can become apparent. Such problems can emerge in scientifically-developed belief systems, such as the anomalies which helped to bring down the Newtonian theory of gravity (Lakatos, 1978). Or they can emerge in wider social life, such as the anomalies which present a challenge to the contentions that 'all gay men are effeminate' and 'all women are poor map readers'.

The second element of Holmwood's claim that needs to be defended is the idea that actors' lives and experiences are shaped by problems within their understandings. This is based on the claim, supported by interpretive arguments, that actors make decisions and take actions based on their understandings of the world (see for example Winch, 1958). But it goes further than interpretive arguments by contending that if actors draw on problematic understandings in their decisions about what to do, there will be problematic consequences for them (Holmwood, 1996; Kemp, 2003). Let's take, for example, a case where lay actors believe that expanding their consumption is the way to achieve happiness (for critical work in this area see O'Neill, 2008). Actors who believe that consumption brings them happiness will pursue the latter by attempting to purchase goods. But, if this belief is a problematic understanding of the benefits excessive consumption can bring, they will live the consequences. For instance, the actors may find that each peak of consumption is followed by an emotional trough in which the purchased items seem to become insignificant. And they may experience, instead of satisfaction, a renewed and uncomfortable sense of restless desire. Putting this in a more general way, the way the actor understands their interests may give rise to the experience of problems in their lives.

This brings us to the third element of Holmwood's claim, which is that social scientists can attempt to justify their accounts of interests, where they diverge from those of lay actors, by picking up on problems that actors experience and trying to show how these could be resolved by adopting an alternative understanding. Thus, in the example mentioned before, if social scientists can identify the dissatisfaction and restoration of restless desire just mentioned, they can argue that this is an intrinsic consequence of the superficial relation between the consumer and the consumed object. And social scientists can also suggest that this would be greatly decreased by pursuing activities which engage the skill and creativity of the agent more fully, whether these be the production of artworks or the mending of motorbikes. Thus, where problems of understanding and troubled experiences can be identified by social scientists, the latter can also propose their alternatives to show how to avoid these problems. One way to put this would be to say that the normative content of sociologists' arguments is inter-related with that of actors and works on the problems and limitations of actors' understandings rather than imposing a framework from the



outside. Thus, Holmwood's argument provides us with a basis for understanding how social scientists may justify attributing interests to actors which are distinct from those the actors currently express.

Importantly, Holmwood's approach to comparing accounts doesn't provide a foundational guarantee of the superiority of social scientific accounts. It thus avoids Hay's accusation to Lukes that the latter's approach sets up the analyst as the 'supreme arbiter' of the genuine interests of social actors (Hay, 1997: 47). It doesn't encourage us to think of social scientific accounts as automatically fastening on to 'real' or 'objective' interests. Rather, it suggests a way in which social scientists can *attempt* to justify to actors the validity of social scientific interest-accounts. Of course, there may be many complexities to the attribution of interests, arising from the inter-relations between interested parties and from the forms of uncertainty faced by social actors. However, actors themselves face these conditions but still make judgements about what is in their interest, so it is not clear that these conditions should deter social scientists. Undeniably, it is a standing possibility that actors will be unconvinced, and might, reciprocally, identify problems and limitations with social scientific accounts. But this is a part of the dialogic character of social life discussed below.

When we consider debates around interest attributions, we can see that aspects of Benton's account of interests, developed in a critical evaluation of Lukes, is close to the approach recommended here. On the subject of interest-claims Benton states:

'To be *persuasive*, oppositional uses of the concept of interests must be rooted in at least some aspect of the life-experience of those for whose identifications they are in competition. Otherwise they have no purchase, no relevance to their "target" actors...' (Benton, 1981: 182. Benton's emphasis)

What is appealing about Benton's analysis is that it emphasizes the need for social scientific accounts of actors' interests to have some purchase on their life-experience. If we understand this life-experience as conceptually-mediated in character, we can combine Benton's point with Holmwood's emphasis on the significance of problems within lay-actors' understandings to argue that social science needs to be able to

identify and resolve problems within lay actors' experience and understanding in order to provide a convincing alternative to lay actors' understandings of their interests.

Given that the approach described here has some affinity with pragmatist and problem-solving approaches, it is reasonable to reflect briefly on the similarities and differences to Amit Ron's pragmatist account of interests, which was also developed in dialogue with Lukes' approach (Ron, 2008). In his most general characterisation, Ron argues that 'real interests' should be conceptualized as an 'intersubjective web of meaning' which is drawn on by a community in understanding problems that they face (Ron, 2008: 276, 278). For Ron, real interest accounts are understood to be developed and defended in a dialogue between social scientists and members of civil society, rather than their validity being established by social scientific experts alone. Central to such dialogues will be questions about the character of civil society decision-making itself, and debates about real interest will often discuss the operation of power in the process of dialogue, for example, the influence of multimedia corporations on the way social and economic debates are framed (Ron, 2008: 282-3).

Insofar as Ron emphasises the meaningful constitution of interest accounts, his ideas are consistent with (and prior to!) the approach adopted here. Furthermore, his argument that social scientific interest claims should be developed and defended in the context of a dialogue with the various differentiated groups that make up the public is a useful one that successfully avoids giving a foundational privilege to social scientific claims, whilst acknowledging that there may still be problems in social life which social scientists can address. However, Ron's approach has two limitations. Firstly, it is not clear why Ron retains the term 'real interests', as it seems at odds with his explicitly pragmatic perspective to retain this usage. Once we acknowledge that social scientific accounts are theoretically-mediated, we should not use the term 'real interests' to refer to social scientific accounts.

Secondly, and more importantly, Ron is, at some points, overly restrictive in the subjects that he sees social scientific 'real interest' accounts as permissibly addressing. Thus, Ron states the following about real interest arguments:

‘Those who make such arguments do not exhort the public to rethink their conception of the good, but instead to rethink the social conditions in which they deliberate.’ (Ron, 2008: 276)

Ron also contends that:

‘...the positing of real interests does not require political scientists to make the unacceptable contention that they know what is good for the subjects they study better than the subjects themselves. Rather, the claim is that a community understands its own problem through frameworks that are in fact inadequate to address its own goals’ (Ron, 2008: 274-5)

A key feature of both of these quotations is that Ron is excluding the public’s conception of ‘the good’ from the scope of real interest debates. Rather, conceptions of the good and ‘goals’ are treated as matters which the social scientist does not contribute to in debates about ‘real interests’. To my mind, such an approach is unnecessarily restrictive, and delimits too narrowly the scope of legitimate interest attributions by social scientists. There is no principled reason why conceptions of the good shouldn’t be up for grabs in debates about agents’ interests. One possible way to construe an example I discussed above is to consider agents and social scientists as disagreeing about what a good life involves – a dispute between consumption and praxis-oriented conceptions. To exclude conceptions of the good life from interest debates would restrict social science to a technical reflection on the ability of agents to realize their goals, rather than allowing that it might have a part to play in richer reflections on what are beneficial goals for agents to pursue.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the conclusion to this article I want to draw together from the analysis above aspects of what I see as a defensible conception of interests for social scientists.

In the first place, I am defending the value of an *evaluative* conception of interests. That is to say, statements about interests are understood to involve an evaluation of states of affairs or outcomes for actors, and to say that something is in the interests of

a group is to contend that it is beneficial for them. Secondly, I am supporting the idea that agents' own evaluations of their interests need not be the last word on the matter; that social scientists are able to evaluate the interests of agents and can, in certain circumstances, justifiably disagree about what is most beneficial for agents. In both these respects I am defending the orientation to interests adopted by Lukes. However, I develop this idea in a somewhat different direction, generating a critique of the non-judgemental stance not by invoking the 'real interests' of actors but by emphasising the fallibility of actors' understandings of their interests on their own terms.

This leads on to the third aspect of my approach, which is the contention that the interest accounts of both social scientists and actors are fallible, theoretically mediated claims about what it would be beneficial for actors to do. When the implications of this fallibility are worked through, they encourage us to abandon the application of the terms 'real' or 'objective' interests to social scientific accounts. They also encourage us to abandon the presumed hierarchy of 'objective' social scientific accounts and 'subjective' actors' accounts. Another, perhaps less obvious, consequence is to prompt social inquirers to consider whether actors who are identified as having contradictory interests could be better understood as having their interests analysed using contradictory interest theories. In both of these respects, my arguments diverge from those of Lukes. Lukes uses the terminology of 'real' and 'objective' interests with the connotations that I have questioned. He is also committed to the idea that interests can be multiple and contradictory in character, and I questioned whether his example of this stood up to scrutiny.

The fourth aspect of my approach to interests draws on Holmwood's (1996) work to identify a meta-level criterion that we can use to help assess whether any particular social scientific interest account is preferable to any particular actor's account. This doesn't delimit the scope of social scientific interest arguments, which can be as bold and challenging to contemporary conceptions as one likes. However, it does suggest that processes of justification must involve social scientists attempting to show how they can identify problems and limitations in actors' understandings of their interests, and trying to show how social scientific accounts can resolve these. In such a situation social scientists would also attempt to show that (some of) the problems that

actors live as a result of the limitations of their understandings would be removed by adopting social scientists' accounts. This approach doesn't set up social scientific accounts of interests as intrinsically more compelling than those of actors. Rather it demands that claims to be compelling be demonstrated in each particular case by social scientists managing to convince actors that the social scientific account will resolve problems that they are experiencing. This approach therefore incorporates a dialogic element in the way that Ron (2008) recommends. The theory of interest account comparison developed here doesn't so much clash with that developed by Lukes, as address an area which he has little to say about. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is crucial to have an account of this kind to deflect the criticism that it is inherently elitist to claim that social scientists may have a better understanding of actors' interests than those actors themselves. Importantly, on the approach recommended here, any claim of social scientists to have a better understanding of interests than that of lay actors would be a temporary state of affairs. Social scientific interest accounts are only legitimated if lay actors became convinced through processes of debate that such social scientific accounts are right. And at that point the divergence between social scientists' and lay actors' understandings disappears.

Even if the arguments made here are accepted, there is plenty more to be said about social scientific conceptions of interests. For instance, in this article I have not discussed the point that because of the interconnected character of social life, it will be important not to consider the interests of one group on their own, but for social scientists to look at the relationship between the interests of each group. I have also not discussed the relationship between evaluative and causal conceptions of interests. Nevertheless, I hope that the evaluative conception of interests defended here is a solid basis for developing a more extensive theory in this area. In particular, I hope that it helps to identify a way in which social scientists can move beyond both a non-judgemental stance on actors' understandings and a high-handed form of criticism which claims that social scientists are in touch with actors' 'real' interests.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All references to the first edition arguments are made using the pagination of the second edition, which incorporates the first edition as Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Lukes makes this alteration because he comes to argue that power as domination is a sub-type of the broader category of power as capacity (Lukes, 2005: 71).

<sup>3</sup> In my view, the well-being approach does not break from a subjectivity-conception of interests. It identifies interests with the realization of meta-preferences, but, in Lukes' terms, the latter are surely subjective.

<sup>4</sup> Much more could be said about the kind of example I have discussed. My intention is limited here to showing that, in the parameters that Shapiro gives us, there is a fairly straightforward alternative to the multiple competing interests argument.

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