

Part 3A

Background Theories of Qualitative Research

3.1 Phenomenological Life-world Analysis

Ronald Hitzler and Thomas S. Eberle

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1 THE IDEA OF A LIFE-WORLD PHENOMENOLOGY

The variant of life-world phenomenology, which was developed by Alfred Schütz on the basis of ideas derived from Husserl and re-imported to Europe from the USA by Thomas Luckmann, is today without question one of the most important background theories of qualitative research (cf. also Brauner as early as 1978). The main objective of this mundane phenomenology is to reconstruct the formal structures of the life-world.

From a historical point of view, Husserl's diagnosis (1936) of the crisis in European scholarship forms the scientific background to this focus on the life-world. For him, the crisis consisted of the fact that the scientific protagonists have (or at least had) forgotten that all science is rooted in the life-world. For Husserl, the explanation of the life-world essence of science therefore provided the only way to overcome the crisis in science. For when the 'meaning-basis' of the life-world is (again) revealed, scientific idealizations will – in Husserl's opinion – no longer be reified, and science will be able

to achieve an 'adequate' methodological self-awareness.

Life-world, in Edmund Husserl's sense, is the original domain, the obvious and unquestioned foundation both of all types of everyday acting and thinking and of all scientific theorizing and philosophizing (cf. also Welz 1996). In its concrete manifestations it exists in all its countless varieties as the only real world of every individual person, of every *ego*. These variations are built on general immutable structures, the 'realm of immediate evidence'.

Alfred Schütz adopted this idea of Husserl's and attempted to discover the most general essential features of the life-world, in respect of the particular problems of social as opposed to natural sciences (cf. Schütz and Luckmann 1973, 1989).

The general aim of life-world analysis, oriented to the epistemological problems of the social sciences, is therefore to analyse the understanding of meaning-comprehension by means of a formal description of invariable basic structures of the constitution of meaning *in the subjective consciousness of actors*.

Unlike the normal objective and inductive understanding of science, phenomenology

begins with experience of the individual and develops this in a reflexive form. The mundane phenomenology of Schütz and his followers, therefore, is not a sociological approach in the strict sense of the word, but a *proto*-sociological enterprise that underlies actual sociological work (cf. Hitzler and Honer 1984; Knoblauch 1996a; Luckmann 1993). It is therefore interested in the *epistemological* explanation of the 'foundation' of the life-world, which is on the one hand a point of reference and on the other hand an implicit basis for research work in the social sciences.

Nevertheless both 'normal' science and mundane phenomenology – in the extended sense of the term – proceed *empirically* (cf. Luckmann 1979). Of course, the specific 'difference' in *phenomenological* empiricism consists of the researcher beginning with his/her own subjective experiences. Whatever phenomenological 'operations', and on the basis of whatever epistemological interests, are then carried out, it is the personal subjective experiences that are and remain the only source of data, because they alone are evident. On the basis of this 'special' type of data, phenomenology advances towards controlled abstraction formulations of the basic layers of the processes of consciousness and reveals the universal structures in subjective constitution-behaviour.

But Schütz not only analyses the life-world in respect of how it is constituted meaningfully in the subjective consciousness: he also sees it as *produced* by the actions of people (cf. also Srubar 1988). This also explains the high level of compatibility of phenomenological life-world analysis with many of the problems of interpretative sociology in general and with the theoretical perspective of American pragmatism (cf. particularly Schütz 1962, 1964).

2 FROM MEANING-CONSTITUTION TO UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

Throughout his life Schütz worked on the problem of a sound philosophical basis for interpretative sociology. As his starting point he selected Max Weber's definition of sociology as a 'science that seeks to interpret social action and thereby provides a causal explanation for its sequencing and its effects' (Weber 1972: 1). According to Weber, what has to be understood is the 'subjectively intended meaning' that

actors relate to their actions. Consequently, Schütz recognizes the principal problem of a methodological basis for the social sciences in analysing the processes of meaning-creation and meaning-interpretation together with the incremental constitution of human knowledge. In other words: mundane phenomenology, in the methodological sense, is 'constitution analysis'. All meaning configurations – according to Schütz's main thesis (1932) – are constituted in processes of meaning-creation and understanding. To explain social phenomena from the actions of participating individuals therefore implies referring back to the subjective meaning which these actions have for the actors themselves.

In this process of reconstruction, Schütz builds on the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl: the meaning of experiences is determined by acts of consciousness. A meaning-relation arises when (individual) experiences are brought together to form a unit by syntheses of a higher order. The total coherence of the experience then forms the quintessence of all subjective meaning-relations, and the specific meaning of an experience arises from the way in which it is classified within this total coherence of experience.

Actions are experiences of a particular kind: their meaning is constituted by the design that anticipates the resulting action. For this reason Schütz keeps acting and action strictly apart. The meaning of acting is determined by the meaning of the projected action. The goal of an action is the 'in-order-to' motive of the action, while the stimulus or the reasons for the action-design form the 'because' motive. Weber's 'subjectively intended meaning' is, in this respect, nothing more than a self-explanation on the part of the actor of his/her own action-design. This self-explanation always derives from a process of 'now and in this way', and therefore necessarily remains 'relative': interpretations of meaning vary, according to the time when they occur, according to the momentary situational interest in the explanation, and also according to the underlying reservoir of knowledge specific to a particular biography and marked by typological and relevance structures.

In *analysing* the understanding of the other Schütz departs from the level of transcendental phenomenology: with his (everyday) 'general thesis of the *alter ego*' (Schütz 1962) he presupposes the existence of the fellow human and

analyses the way we understand the other from a quasi-natural perspective. His basic question is: how can other human beings be understood if there is no direct access to their consciousness? His analysis shows that the *alter ego* can only be understood in a 'signitive' way, that is, through he signs and indications. The act of understanding therefore always consists of a self-explanation on the part of the interpreter on the basis of a biographically determined reservoir of knowledge, adapted to his/her situational relevance system. In consequence of this, no more than fragmentary excerpts of the other's subjective context are ever accessible to the interpreter. Every meaning-interpretation can therefore be no more than an approximation, the quality of which depends on the degree of familiarity with, and the 'temporal proximity' of, the particular *alter ego* in the consciousness of the interpreter.

Unlike (transcendental) phenomenology, the social sciences are therefore obliged to take account, in methodological terms, of the semantic pre-constitution of the social world. This means that the theories and methods of social science are 'second order' constructs which (must) derive from 'first order' everyday constructs. Schütz expresses this in the form of two methodological postulates: the postulate of subjective interpretation, and the postulate of adequacy.

The *postulate of subjective interpretation* requires social scientific explanations to relate to the subjective meaning of an action. From the point of view of theory-construction this means that on the basis of typical patterns of an observed sequence of actions a model of an actor is constructed to whom an awareness of typical *in-order-to* and *because* motives is attributed. The *postulate of adequacy* requires that the social scientist's constructs be consistent with the constructs of the everyday actor. They must therefore be comprehensible and give an accurate explanation of acting. Complete adequacy is achieved when the concrete meaning-orientation of actors is captured accurately. In this way we explain the subjective perspective of the individual actors at truly the ultimate reference point for social science analyses, because 'holding on to the subjective perspective' offers, according to Schütz (e.g. 1978), the only really sufficient guarantee that social reality is not replaced by a fictitious non-existent world constructed by some scientific observer.

As Schütz has shown, however, the perspective of another actor can only be captured approximately. Complete adequacy therefore remains an unachievable ideal for interpretative social sciences.

3 ON THE SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF LIFE-WORLD ANALYSIS

If one sees phenomenological life-world analysis as both *proto*- and *para*-sociological epistemology, it then appears to be of immediate relevance to any kind of sociology based on the notion that our *experience* rather than 'objective' factual content is decisive in the way we define situations: we are, to use Schütz's (1962) term, 'activity centres' of our respective situations and thereby also capable of subjective definition – and, in our relation to one another, alternating between high-level agreement and crass opposition.

Accordingly, if our everyday world consists not simply of 'brute facts' but of (manifold) meanings, then the essential task of *sociology* is to understand, in a reconstructive way, how meanings arise and continue, when and why they may be described as 'objective', and how human beings adapt interpretatively these socially 'objectivized' meanings and recover from them, as if from a quarry, their 'subjective' significations, thereby collaborating in the further construction of 'objective reality' (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966). The empirical programme of phenomenology therefore includes, from the point of view of research practice, the *systematic reconstruction of multiple qualities of experience* (see 3.8).

In this sense the life-world is in no way a *marginal* theme in the social sciences, but their systematic central problem: since perception, experience and action constitute an original sphere that is only 'really' accessible to the perceiving, experiencing or acting subject, the so-called factual realities are only truly evident as phenomena of the subjective consciousness. Of course this experience can always 'deceive' in the face of an 'objectively' defined factual content. Nevertheless, it may be said to determine our behaviour 'objectively'. For not only is our consciousness necessarily intentional ('about something'), but also the correlates of this intentionality – at least in everyday experience – are meaningful (cf. Schütz 1967 for further discussion).

Because the life-world reveals at every moment fundamentally more experiential possibilities than an individual can truly bring into any thematic focus, the individual is constantly and inevitably selecting from the total of possible experiences available at any given moment (cf. Esser 1996). It is not generally important to us that, in consequence, our experience and action is always the result of elective procedures, because we are constantly concerned with completing our actual experience meaningfully or with creating a structure for every selected perception. This means that in respect of the meaningfulness of experiences we distinguish, according to our respective subjective relevances, between the important and the unimportant, or between the relevant and the irrelevant.

This meaningfulness can be distinctly situation-specific and short-term, but it can also be (almost) completely independent of situation and permanent; it can be of purely subjective or of general social 'validity' (to an extent that always has to be determined). This is because all individual human beings live in their own life-world as the sum total of their concrete world of experience. However, all concrete manifestations of life-world structures also have intersubjective features. To come to terms with our normal everyday life we make use of a large number of shared meaning schemata, and our various subjective relevance systems overlap at many points.

Shared beliefs first of all facilitate and determine our everyday life, which is always a matter of *living together*. To a certain extent the subject 'shares' his/her respective concrete life-world with others. To put this more precisely: the correlates of an individual's experience correspond to the correlates of the experience of others in ways that may be typologized. From this, meaning schemata may be created, which are shared by different subjects and are therefore intersubjectively valid, and these correlate to a greater or lesser extent with individual, biographically conditioned, meaning structures. To put this rather differently: human social practice is – inevitably – a practice of *interpretation*, of decoding signs and symbols, and essentially of *communication* (cf. Luckmann 1986, 1989).

In this sense, writers such as Werner Marx (1987) understand the life-world as a plurality of sometimes clearly defined, and sometimes undetermined, purposive individual worlds. Marx argues that Husserl distinguishes the life-world

from individual worlds by virtue of the fact that the former are pre-determined and not intentionally constituted, whereas the latter are goal-directed (for example, the world of the employed person, of the family member, of the citizen, and so on). Every immediate experience, every present world, according to Marx (1987: 129), has 'the content of an individual world'.

For a variety of reasons, Hitzler and Honer (e.g. 1984, 1988, 1991), following Benita Luckmann (1970), prefer the term 'small social life-worlds', but in a broad sense are referring to the same phenomenon: a small social life-world or an individual world is a *fragment* of the life-world, with its own structure, within which experiences occur in relation to a special intersubjective reservoir of knowledge that is obligatory and pre-existent. A small social life-world is the correlate of the subjective experience of reality in a partial or temporally restricted culture. This kind of world is 'small', therefore, not because it is concerned only with small spaces or consists of very few members. A small social life-world is described as 'small' rather because the complexity of *possible* social relevances is reduced within it to a *particular* system of relevance. And a small social life-world is called 'social' because this relevance system is obligatory for successful participations. Empirical examples of the analysis of small social life-worlds may be found in Honer (e.g. 1994a), Hitzler (1993, 1995), Hitzler et al. (1996), Hitzler and Pfadenhauer (1998) Knoblauch (e.g. 1988, 1997) and Soeffner (e.g. 1997).

Therefore, while, in principle, every person is indeed given his/her own and unique life-world, from an empirical point of view the individual subjective life-worlds seem only relatively original, because human beings typically refer back to socio-historically 'valid' meaning schemata and concepts of action in the process of orientation within their own world.

Particularly in modern societies, small social life-worlds are therefore the subjective correspondences to cultural objectivizations of reality showing multiple social diversity, as is manifested, for example, in divergent language and speaking environments (cf. Luckmann 1989; Knoblauch 1995, 1996b). The most important result of this is that the relevance structures of different members of society can only be the same in a very conditional and 'provisional' way. Moreover, in connection with the developing division of labour, the proportions of generally

known meanings and those of factual contents currently known 'only' to experts are diverging: the quantities of specialist knowledge are increasing; they are becoming ever more specialized and are increasingly remote from general knowledge (cf. Hitzler et al. 1994). It follows from this that contexts can be divided between what everyone knows and what is known by relatively few people. If, however, as Schütz and Luckmann (1973: 318) affirm, 'in a borderline case, the province of common knowledge and common relevances shrinks beyond a critical point, communication within the society is barely possible. There emerge "societies within the society".'

This is again a very significant insight in respect of the repeatedly postulated need for an ethnological attitude on the part of the sociologist towards his/her own culture; for it means that under such conditions, for every type of grouping, for every collective, even within a society, different kinds of knowledge and, above all, different hierarchies of knowledge types are or at least might be relevant.¹ And as the manifold life-worlds and the small social life-worlds of other people become the object of scientific interest, the problem of how and how far one can succeed in seeing the world through the eyes of these other people (cf. Plessner 1983), and in reconstructing the subjectively intended meaning of *their* experiences, becomes virulent not 'only' from a methodological viewpoint but also, and more particularly, in terms of *method*.

Admittedly Schütz himself was never concerned with the *methods* of empirical social research. Such implications of life-world analysis are already to be seen, however, in the works of Harold Garfinkel in particular (1967a; see 2.3) and Aaron V. Cicourel (1964). In Germany, Schütz's matrix is most often used for the systematic analysis of the way social scientific data come about (cf. Luckmann and Gross 1977), for the analysis of communicative genres (see 5.18), for the explanation of hermeneutic reconstruction procedures (see 3.5, 5.16) and to provide a theoretical base for ethnographic sociology (see 3.8).

Against the background of the above outline it becomes increasingly evident that the

epistemologically relevant antagonism in social research is not between qualitative and quantitative, nor even between standardized and non-standardized, investigations, but between hermeneutic and scientific methodologies and methods.

NOTE

- 1 In contrast, the testing of hypotheses in the deductive-nomological explanatory model presupposes – quasi-implicitly – that human beings under the same conditions will act in the same way. In societies with a predominantly traditional orientation this is indeed often the case, but in modern societies, only in the area of routine actions. As modern societies are marked by de-traditionalization, an increase in options and individualization (Gross 1994, 1999), and actors frequently re-interpret their situations, so their knowledge and behaviour becomes more contingent, the prognostic capability of 'if-then' statements becomes more disturbed and exploratory-interpretative research design becomes more necessary (cf. also Hitzler 1997, 1999b).

FURTHER READING

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A Companion to QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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