Phenomenology

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Phenomenology is a research approach to investigate how subjects constitute sense of perceived phenomena. Its contribution to empirical research methodology is fundamental and particular at the same time. Fundamental, because as a radical subjective approach to epistemology, it has decisively changed scholars’ understanding of the structures that constitute the human fabric of reality and its interpretation. Particular, because phenomenological methods of analysis have produced seminal findings not only for the methodology of the social sciences in general but with regard to particular substantial fields of social research as well. However, phenomenology does not merely establish new interpretive methods, given that phenomenological analysis begins before empirical data are even constituted. It points to a far more fundamental level than pragmatic strategies of data collection, processing, or analysis.

Put succinctly, phenomenology explores the very core of what constitutes “the things themselves.” Phenomenological philosophy, rooted in early 20th-century idealistic thinking, has been highly influential for the social sciences in at least three relevant realms: First, by proposing a radically innovative epistemology that has prompted a new methodology for the social sciences; second, as a sociological paradigm; and third, by generating a variety of empirical research procedures, some of which are considered in this entry.

Origins and Purpose of Phenomenology

It was the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who at the beginning of the 20th century established phenomenology as a “rigorous science” with an “autonomous philosophical method.” Decades later, it has grown into a broad phe-
nomenological movement that Herbert Spiegelberg (1982) described in its many ramifications. Often misunderstood as a notion equated with the mere description of “appearance” or “experience,” it was Husserl’s conviction that the study of phenomena requires a rigorous epistemological framework.

For Husserl, scrutinizing “the things themselves” needs to overcome the classical epistemological tenet that divides the \textit{res cogitans} (“subject”) from the \textit{res extensa} (“object”). Still in line with René Descartes, Husserl claims that there is no cognition without consciousness. However, contrary to his philosophical predecessor, Husserl pointed out the essential indivisibility of consciousness, sensual perception, and object constitution: \textit{Ego cogito (ergo sum)} [I cognize (therefore I am)] cannot happen as an act per se but is always bound to the \textit{cogitatum}, namely to something that is (re)cognized. Thereby, Husserl tries to overcome the aporia that empiricism and rationalism have produced by separating the cognizing subject and the objective world.

Husserl theorized this aspect with the concept of “intentionality,” which he borrowed from his teacher, Franz Brentano: Intentionality means that subjective consciousness is always a “consciousness of something.” If I perceive, think, feel, imagine—I always perceive \textit{something}, think of \textit{something}, feel \textit{something}, imagine \textit{something}. The ensemble of \textit{ego cogito cogitatum} is the phenomenon, or a noetic-noematic unity. The \textit{noesis} consists in the acts of consciousness, the \textit{noema} in the properties of the \textit{cogitatum}. If I perceive, for instance, a cat in my garden, I can observe it with great attention and see it fairly clearly; if I glimpse at it only hastily, my perception of that cat remains rather blurred and vague. My different kinds of attention constitute a different phenomenon—in each case a cat, but in one instance, with clear contours and in the other instance, with only vague contours. The \textit{noema} consists in the properties of the perceived. The cat is not an elephant, and if it has black ears, it does not have white ears, and if it is an old cat, it is not
a young cat, and so on. Whether I notice any of these noematic aspects depends on my noetic attention. Always a noetic-noematic unity, any phenomenon includes acts of consciousness as well as properties of their object.

Husserl, to pursue his goal of getting to the essential features of the phenomena, developed several “methods,” all egological and therefore pre-empirical. A phenomenologist investigates the phenomena in his or her own subjective consciousness. By *eidetic variation*, one mobilizes his or her imagination in order to determine the essence of phenomena. Imagine, for example, a cube. A cube is still a cube, irrespective if made of wood, plastic, glass, steel, or any other material, and irrespective of its color or size. But having six equal sides with all angles rectangular is essential. *Phenomenological reduction* and *eidetic reduction* or “bracketing” are further methods applied by Husserl to determine the “whatness” of the particular phenomenon at hand).

Husserl provided many insights on how we as humans constitute the sense of phenomena. The core is *apperception*: What do I actually perceive? Phenomena are constituted with an outer horizon—against a background, within a “context”—but they also have an inner horizon which is constituted by *appresentation*: I perceive not only what is perceivable but also appresent aspects that are not (e.g., we see a “building,” although we just look at its front side). Phenomena are constituted in passive syntheses and include sensuous apperception as well as meaning.

Moreover, Husserl explored the temporal structures of the ways in which any of our perceptions, and every bit of our cognition, are organized. In other words: Our experience is always part of an ongoing, irreversible stream of consciousness, more or less detached from the objective progress of time. Consequently, “meaning” cannot be conceived of as a static phenomenon but is imbedded in—and essentially tied to—an ongoing, ceaseless *process*. This basic philosophical insight into the temporality of the constitution of meaning
structures is the ground on which, in a number of following interpretive methodologies, notions of *sequentiality* of social interaction and interpretation and the several variants of sequential analysis have been elaborated.

**A Science of the Life-World: Mundane Phenomenology**

According to Husserl’s fundamental criticism, the crisis of modern—that is, natural—sciences was caused by the fact that they had taken their idealizations and abstractions, their mathematical and geometrical formulae for bare truth and forgotten that they originated in the life-world. Because the social world is meaningfully constituted in everyday life before any scientific research begins, the social sciences have to take this fact systematically into account. It was Husserl (1936–1954/1970) who coined the concept of the “life-world” that has become common in modern sociology.

Subsequently, Alfred Schutz’s effort was to introduce phenomenology into sociology, by developing an original analysis of the constitution of meaning in subjective consciousness, drawing on Husserl’s ideas. In 1932, when Schutz published his book *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (The Meaningful Construction of the Social World, 1932/1967), it was his aim to deepen the understanding of Max Weber’s approach to interpretive sociology (*Verstehende Soziologie*). If social action is the core element of all societal processes, and meaning is the defining element of action—as opposed to mere conduct—it is crucial to explore in more detail than Weber how subjective meaning is constituted in individual consciousness. Schutz endorsed Husserl’s search for universal, invariant formal structures of the life-world, but he advocated a mundane phenomenology that does not bracket the existence of things. Mundane phenomenology analyzes the *natural attitude* and accepts the *sociocultural a*
priori: An actor’s subjective stock of knowledge with its typifications and systems of relevancies are socially derived.

Drawing on similar ideas from William James (1907), Schutz (1962) postulated, furthermore, his concept of “multiple realities”: We are living in different “provinces of meaning,” not only in the mundane reality of everyday life but also in fantasy and imagination or dreams. But the world of everyday life as the realm of pragmatic actions is the paramount reality because our mundane activities have tangible results, and we experience this reality as shared with others. Thus, everyday life is dominated by sociality, communication, and the pragmatic imperative. Such is the world of scientific inquiry, but the theoretical attitude of scientists is characterized as de-pragmatized. In contrast to everyday life, where the actor is guided by matter-of-fact interests and not by scrutiny, the theoretical attitude of social scientists constitutes a province of meaning of its own: Unlike people in everyday life, scientists are oriented toward a different stock of knowledge—the one of their discipline and past research—and to a different system of relevance, controlled by, among others, research questions, methodical and theoretical concerns, and rules for data collection and examination. However, in terms of the principles that guide scientific reconstruction, Schutz emphasizes the role not only of well-known criteria like coherence, or logical consistency, widely accepted as guiding scientific inquiry by constituting its “quality criteria.” Beyond these, his methodology stresses the inescapable interpretativity of everything related to the study of the human world and the key principle of adequacy. His understanding of adequacy posits to check all sociological reconstructions (in his terminology called second-order constructs) against the people’s constructions in everyday life (or first-order constructs) to make sure they resonate (Schutz, 1953).

It took several decades to fully develop the program of a phenomenology-based social science, an enterprise that culminated
when Schutz and Thomas Luckmann published *The Structures of the Life-World* (1973; 1989). This oeuvre represents a systematic account of Schutz’s work, developed further into a foundational theory for the interpretive social sciences. Phenomenology and philosophical anthropology serve to explore those universal and invariant basic structure of human’s everyday life-world that has to be taken into consideration before any historical or empirical reconstruction can start. In that sense, mundane phenomenology is truly protosociological (Luckmann, 1973). But sociology calls for empirical analyses. Therefore, the question is, whether phenomenology can only be a useful foundation for the philosophy of the social sciences, thus restricting it to the presociological realm? Or are there approaches that use phenomenological insights directly to sharpen their analytical instruments, or methods, for interpretive social research?

**Phenomenology-Based Social Research**

Luckmann contends that the universal and invariant structures of the life-world represent a protosociology in the sense of a *mathesis universalis*, a formal matrix that provides a solution to the problem of measurement in the social sciences. They serve as a *tertium comparationis*, that is, they allow for translating propositions that are formulated as empirical observations in a certain language into a proper formal language.

Based on Schutz’s life-world analysis, Cicourel (1964) pointed out that the methodology of the social sciences has not sufficiently recognized and dealt with the interpretive procedures that are employed in research. These are crucial for the constitution of data but usually remain hidden and unexplicated in the research reports. Cicourel analyzed the relevant methods of data collection and analysis, elucidated their hidden assumptions and their implicit practices of commonsense reasoning,
and argued that half of the applied methods in empirical research remains in the dark, which heavily affects the possibility of intersubjective verification. As the social world is preinterpreted, the involved commonsense operations must be methodically reflected, too, in quantitative as well as in qualitative research.

The following subsections explore which other strands of interpretive social research exist that use phenomenology in another, more applied way.

**Phenomenological Sociology**

While the concept of phenomenology as protosociology establishes a strict separation between the two, the idea of a phenomenological sociology, which is common in the United States, argues for a closer connection, or integration, of both. George Psathas (1989) was the most influential representative of phenomenological sociology as a new sociological paradigm. He does not approach social reality with preconceived notions—as did the prevailing structural functionalism at the time—but investigates the social reality as it is experienced by the members of society. Phenomenological sociology is seen as a kind of synthesis of phenomenology and sociology and a promising alternative to positivist sociology.

**Ethnomethodology**

Phenomenological sociology in the United States is strongly influenced by ethnomethodology. Harold Garfinkel (1967) inspired many young sociologists to read Husserl, Schutz, and Aron Gurwitsch (and later Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in order to devise a new paradigm of sociological research. Garfinkel gave the phenomenological life-world analysis from the outset a sociological twist. He confronted Talcott Parsons’s structural functionalism in a careful analysis with Schutz’s phenomenological studies and interpreted the latter as an alternative approach to explain the problem of social order.
This view implied a methodological reorientation. Ethnomethodology investigates sense-making not egologically in the subjective consciousness but in empirical settings that are intersubjectively available. Insofar as ethnomethodologists reflect on the givenness of empirically observed, social phenomena and scrutinize what is seen by systematically bracketing their worldviews, assumptions, and specific intentionalities, they proceed phenomenologically. Ethnomethodology investigates the commonsense reasoning, the practices of sense-making, the members’ ethnomethods whereby a social setting is produced, and the accounting practices that make it identifiable, reportable, and intelligible.

The Phenomenological Analysis of Small Social Life-Worlds

Phenomenology has, in different degrees, directly inspired innovative research methods in the area of interpretive social research, disregarding the distinction of protosociology and empirical research. In order to arrive at richer research data and results, constitutional analyses and empirical scrutiny are either directly combined or used as two separate modes of analyses that are triangulated.

Life-world analytic ethnography is an approach developed by the German sociologists Anne Honer and Ronald Hitzler. The notion of “small social life-worlds” stems from Benita Luckmann (1970) who transformed the Schutzian concept into an operational concept for empirical research. In contrast to other ethnographic approaches, in life-world analytic ethnography “the native’s point of view” is not understood indirectly but is complemented by an “existential view from the inside” (Honer, 2004). Phenomenological and ethnographic analyses mutually inform each other. This way phenomenological researchers have explored a variety of small social life-worlds including fitness studios, techno raves, and religious happenings. Based
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on self-observation, experiments, and interviews, Siegfried Saerberg (2015), for instance, describes the specific style of lived experience, notably his specific style of the multimodal, intersensory perception as a blindman.

Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Phenomenological hermeneutics uses phenomenology not only for one’s own subjective experiences but for analyzing the experiences of an alter ego. The experiences of others are always understood on the basis of a subject’s own experiences. They are inaccessible to the researcher and thus require communication, that is, data on a predicative level. A phenomenological perspective, however, may help to elucidate deeper layers of sense connections of the other’s experiences. In recent collaborative research with a patient who suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, Thomas S. Eberle (2015) carefully reconstructs how the patient gradually regained sense connections after awakening from an artificial coma of several weeks. Research was based on data from audio recordings, diary entries by researcher as well as patient, field observations, and qualitative in-depth interviews.

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Ethnophenomenology is a cognate approach, primarily employed for analyzing other’s extraordinary experiences, such as near-death experiences or visions (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2001). In principle, phenomenologists cannot make any analytic statements regarding the constitution of transcendental experiences that the phenomenologists themselves did not have. But as the researchers detected, ordinary people, although philosophical laypersons, are quite able to reflect on, and produce accounts of, their own modes of extraordinary experiences. Their analysis of interview data reveals that segments including ethnophenomenological descriptions of form clearly differed from the descriptions of the experiences’ content. Comparing
several interviews, ethnophenomenology served to identify recurring features of such exceptional experiences—to be exact: its narrative reconstruction by those who experienced them.

Mundane phenomenology aims at establishing a protosociological general theory with universal relevance by describing general forms of human experience. Ethnophenomenology, however, reconstructs sociologically and empirically the communicatively conveyed descriptions of extraordinary experiences by everyday people in a certain historical epoch, and it transforms their generalizations into theoretical notions of “medium range.”

**Conclusion**

Disregarding their obvious differences, all approaches based on, or inspired by, phenomenology discussed in this entry share one common feature: Subjectivity is not an obstacle for sociological analysis, it is a necessary precondition to be systematically taken into consideration. Phenomenology emphasizes the fundamental relevance of the subject’s point of view. Thorough, in-depth investigation of the processes taking place in a subject’s embodied consciousness helps us to identify the very “essence” of any particular experiences. However, there are clear requirements, limits, and restrictions. Many realities remain inaccessible because the experience, the time, and the efforts of phenomenologists are limited. Phenomenological analysis proper can only be pursued in the state of wide awareness of an adult who is trained in phenomenology. It requires great sensitivity to analyze one’s subjective experiences in their multimodality and intersensuousness. Because the results are expressed in language, it also requires great skills in translating experiences into linguistic descriptions.
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Further Readings


References


