

## Chapter 3

# Phenomenological Sociology - The Subjectivity of Everyday Life

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### Introduction

Does phenomenology have any insights or theoretical resources to offer the sociology of everyday life? In the present chapter, we will suggest an affirmative reply to this question. Not only because sociality is a central theme in phenomenology, but also because phenomenologists consistently emphasize the importance of examining the world, including social reality, just as we experience it in everyday life. Or, as many phenomenologists prefer to put it, phenomenology must examine the ‘life-world’.

Phenomenologists generally stress that social reality should not be conceived as a fixed and objective external reality. Rather, social reality is essentially a product of human activity. *Inter alia* through processes of ‘typification’, we ‘constitute’ a meaningful social world around us. This is obviously not the achievement of isolated individuals acting alone; most of our typical assumptions, expectations and prescriptions, indeed, are socially derived. However, phenomenological sociologists insist that we must not downplay the role of individual subjectivities. Social reality cannot be reduced to relations between individual subjects; yet without the latter – that is, without *intersubjectivity* – there is ultimately no *social* reality. As we shall see in the present chapter, phenomenology continues to be of relevance to the sociology of everyday life and has the resources to respond to the criticisms typically directed against it.

### The Phenomenological Movement

The movement of phenomenology is more than a century old. In fact, the inauguration of the movement can be dated precisely to 1900-1901, the years in which the two parts of Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) *Logical Investigations* were published. Husserl was originally a mathematician, whose interests in the foundational problems of mathematics led him to logic and philosophy. Despite the title, the *Logical Investigations* does not merely address logical problems narrowly conceived. Rather, Husserl advanced what he believed is the right approach to philosophical problems in general: instead of resorting to armchair theorizing and speculation, we must consult the ‘the things themselves’, or that which ‘manifests itself’ or

‘gives itself’ (Greek: *phainomenon*). On this basis, Husserl claimed that the traditional notion of the mind as an inner, self-contained realm is misguided. Rather, the mind is in various ways directed upon objects external to it. Influenced by the Austrian psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917), Husserl labels this object-directedness ‘intentionality’. To watch a soccer game, to want a new bicycle, and to recall last year’s summer holidays, are examples of different experiences which have the character of ‘intentionality’, of being directed at an ‘object’ (the soccer game, a new bicycle, and last year’s holidays, respectively).

The *Logical Investigations* made Husserl widely known, and contributed to the formation of phenomenological schools in Göttingen, where Husserl himself taught from 1901, and Munich, where, among others, Max Scheler (1874-1928) advocated a phenomenological approach. However, in his second magnum opus, entitled *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy I*, Husserl pushed his phenomenology in a direction that many other phenomenologists considered problematic. The *Logical Investigations* had emphasized a purely descriptive approach, and Husserl had remained neutral on the question concerning the ontological status of the mind (or consciousness) and its objects. Many phenomenologists in Göttingen and Munich had consequently regarded the *Logical Investigations* as fully compatible with their own realist views. In this context, ‘realism’ is the view that the nature and existence of reality is completely independent of the mind. In the *Ideas*, however, Husserl argued that the world is ‘constituted’ by consciousness or ‘transcendental subjectivity’. Although Husserl denied that transcendental subjectivity ‘creates’ the world in any conventional sense, his new position did imply that the world cannot be conceived of as completely independent of a world-cognizing subject. This ‘idealism’ was unacceptable to many of the original adherents of the phenomenological movement. Yet, even though Husserl, in later works such as *Cartesian Meditations* and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, increasingly emphasized that transcendental subjectivity must be embodied and embedded in a community of subjects, he never abandoned the ‘transcendental phenomenology’ introduced in the *Ideas*.

After Husserl became professor of philosophy in Freiburg in 1916, the phenomenological movement became increasingly influential outside the old phenomenological strongholds. In Freiburg, Husserl became acquainted with the young philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who soon convinced Husserl of his great potential. When Husserl retired in 1928, he appointed Heidegger as his successor. By then, Heidegger was already something of a celebrity in philosophical environments across Germany, in particular on account of his unorthodox but enormously popular lectures. Heidegger’s early masterpiece *Being and Time* (1927/1962) is undoubtedly an important phenomenological work; but it is controversial to

what extent Heidegger remains faithful to Husserl's program (see Overgaard 2004). *Being and Time* revolves around an extremely complex problematic that Heidegger labels 'the question of the meaning of Being'. Central to this question is an analysis of the peculiar mode or manner of Being that characterizes the human being (or *Dasein*, as Heidegger prefers to say). In continuation of Husserl's analyses of intentionality, Heidegger claims that the human being cannot be understood independently of the world in which it is experientially and practically engaged. As he puts it, the Being of *Dasein* is 'Being-in-the-world'. Heidegger is particularly concerned to emphasize the *practical* involvement of humans in their environment. A human being is not primarily a spectator on its enviroing world, but an agent in it; and the world is not a collection of neutral objects or things, but more like a web of functional relations between practical 'tools' or 'equipment'.

It is in the space between Husserl and Heidegger that one must locate the main inspiration for the later French phenomenologists. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) studied philosophy in Freiburg when Heidegger succeeded Husserl. Even though the ostensible topic of Lévinas's dissertation *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, published in 1930, was Husserl's thought, Heidegger's influence is pronounced. Moreover, Husserl and Heidegger remain essential interlocutors in Lévinas's later works, such as *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), in which he attempts to develop an independent phenomenological ethics centring on the notion of respect for the other human being. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1906-1980) phenomenological magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1943, draws upon Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel, in an attempt to articulate a radical distinction between consciousness, which Sartre labels 'Being-for-itself', and all types of objective being, which he collects under the heading 'Being-in-itself' (Sartre 1943/1956). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) phenomenology of body and perception, elaborated in the 1945 masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception*, is to some extent a continuation of Husserl's later works. But Heidegger's influence is also tangible, not least in Merleau-Ponty's contention that the phenomenon of human embodiment is an aspect of the structure that Heidegger calls 'Being-in-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962).

The influence of phenomenology, however, extends beyond philosophy. Philosophical phenomenology offers general ideas of relevance to the social sciences (anthropology, economy, law, political science, and so on).<sup>1</sup> But in addition to this, there are phenomenological traditions in psychology and psychiatry, and, more relevant in the present context, there is a distinct phenomenological approach to sociology, which was developed by Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) and his students. Schutz's main inspiration was drawn from Husserl's later

thoughts on intersubjectivity and the life-world. In the next sections, we will briefly sketch these ideas.

### **Phenomenology and Intersubjectivity**

It is sometimes claimed that phenomenology has nothing valuable to offer sociology. Jürgen Habermas, for example, accuses Husserl's philosophy – and by extension phenomenology as such (Habermas 1992:42) – of being solipsistic, that is, of being able to conceive of the existence of only one single subject (*solus ipse* is Latin for 'only I'). Thereby, Habermas obviously questions the relevance of phenomenology for social thought in general.

However, there is reason to regard Habermas' claim with a good deal of scepticism. For the criticism seems based on a misunderstanding of the phenomenological perspective on sociality. Instead of viewing the individual and society – or subjectivity and sociality – as mutually exclusive options, phenomenology explicitly attempts to combine them. Husserl's claim that a subject can only be a world-experiencing subjectivity insofar as it is member of a community of subjects (Husserl 1995:139) suggests a key phenomenological claim: the individual subject qua world-experiencing is dependent on other world-experiencing subjects. But on the other hand, one should not downplay the role of the individual subject. Phenomenology insists on understanding sociality in its most fundamental form as *intersubjectivity* (see Zahavi 2001a). It only makes sense to speak of intersubjectivity if there is a (possible) plurality of subjects, and intersubjectivity can therefore neither precede nor be the foundation of the individuality and distinctness of the various subjects. Thus, one cannot invoke the notion of intersubjectivity without committing oneself to some form of philosophy of subjectivity. Yet, on the other hand, Husserl maintains that a sufficiently radical and thorough phenomenological reflection not only leads us to subjectivity, but also to intersubjectivity (Husserl 1962:344). Accordingly, he sometimes refers to his project as that of *sociological* transcendental philosophy (Husserl 1962:539), and states that a full elaboration of transcendental philosophy necessarily involves the move from an egological to a transcendental-sociological phenomenology (see Zahavi 1996, 2001b).

### **The Life-World**

As part of their ongoing concern with the relation between science and experience, phenomenologists have often emphasized the importance of the 'life-world'. The life-world is the world we ordinarily take for granted, the pre-scientific, experientially given world that we are familiar with and never call into question. The life-world needs rehabilitating because, although it is the historical and systematic sense-foundation for science, the latter has forgotten

or ignored the life-world. Even the most exact and abstract scientific theories rely on the type of pre-scientific evidence that the life-world offers. And life-worldly evidence does not merely function as an indispensable but otherwise irrelevant station that we must pass through on the way toward exact knowledge; rather, it is a permanent source of meaning and evidence (Husserl 1970:126). In pursuit of exact knowledge, science has made a virtue of its radical transcendence of bodily, sensory, and practical experience, but thereby it has overlooked the extent to which it is made possible by those kinds of experience. When experiments are designed and conducted, when measurements are noted down, when results are interpreted, compared and discussed, scientists rely on the common life-world and its common kinds of evidence. Even though scientific theories transcend the concrete, perceptible life-world in terms of precision and degree of abstraction, the life-world remains the meaningful foundation and ultimate source of evidence (Husserl 1970:126). However, the relation between science and the life-world is not static but dynamic. Science is founded on the life-world, and bit-by-bit it may, as it were, sink into the ground on which it stands. With the passing of time, theoretical assumptions and results may be absorbed by everyday practice and become part of the life-world.

When phenomenologists emphasize the significance of the life-world it is not at the expense of science. Phenomenologists have no desire to deny the immense value of science, and they agree that science has the potential to profoundly expand and alter our conception of reality. They do reject, however, the tendency within the natural sciences to advocate scientism and objectivism. A critical attitude towards the scientist self-image of science is one thing, and hostility toward science as such is a very different thing. Phenomenology has none of the latter. It is no coincidence that a famous manifesto of Husserl's was entitled *Philosophy as a Strict Science*.

According to scientism, it is natural science alone that decides what is real; reality is thus identical with what can be conceived and explained by natural science. Historically, reflections of this kind led to the claim that only the form, size, weight and movement of an object – that is, those characteristics that, in principle, could be described quantitatively with mathematical exactness – were objective properties. On this view, colour, taste, smell, and so on, were considered merely subjective phenomena that lacked real, objective existence. In the course of centuries, this classical distinction between primary (or objective) qualities and secondary (or subjective) qualities has consistently been radicalized. Ultimately, it was not merely the objectivity of certain characteristics of the appearing object that was questioned, but rather the objectivity of anything that appears. The appearance or manifestation as such was regarded as subjective, and it was this appearance, this phenomenal manifestation as

such, which science, according to its understanding of itself, had to reach beyond in order to achieve knowledge of the real nature of things. A consequence of this view is that the world in which we live is very different from the world that the exact sciences describe, the latter having an exclusive claim to reality. The life-world, by contrast, is a mere construction, a result of our response to the stimuli we receive from physical reality.

Phenomenology, however, rejects the idea that natural science is the sole judge of what is real and what is not, and that all concepts that we wish to take seriously must be reducible to concepts of the exact sciences. According to phenomenology, the exact sciences do not describe a world that is different from the ordinary world. Rather, they simply employ new methods to describe and explain the world we already know and thereby enable us to obtain more precise knowledge about it. The scientific ambition of describing reality objectively – that is, from a third-person point of view – is a thoroughly legitimate one. Yet, one should not forget that any objectivity, any explanation, understanding and theoretical construct, presupposes a first-person perspective as its permanent ground and precondition. To that extent the belief that science can provide an absolute description of reality – a description purged of any conceptual or experiential perspective – is an illusion. Science is rooted in the life-world: it draws upon insights from the pre-scientific sphere and it is conducted by embodied subjects. For the phenomenologists, science is not simply a collection of systematically related, well-established propositions. Rather, science is something that people do; it is a particular – markedly theoretical – way of relating to the world.

Phenomenology does not attempt to explain human nature through science. Rather, it aims to make sense of scientific rationality and practice through detailed analyses of the cognizing subject's various forms of intentional experience. A central task is thus to give an account of how the theoretical attitude that we adopt when we are doing science – including sociology – arises out of, as well as influences and changes, our everyday 'Being-in-the-world'. The phenomenological examination of the life-world obviously constitutes an important part of this project. Husserl himself articulated the basic ideas for such an analysis, and other phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, made important contributions. All of these thinkers, however, considered the analysis of the life-world a mere part of a larger philosophical project. A more independent interest in the phenomenology of the life-world – in particular its social structure – is found, above all, in Alfred Schutz and his successors within *phenomenological sociology*.

### **The Phenomenological Sociology of Everyday Life**

Among the key figures in phenomenological sociology are Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), author of the works *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932/1972), *Collected Papers I-III* (1962-1966), and *The Structures of the Life-World*, co-authored by Thomas Luckmann and published in 1973; Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, authors of the book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966/1991); and finally Harold Garfinkel, whose most important publication in this context is *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). These will be dealt with below.

### *Alfred Schutz*

Alfred Schutz is often referred to as the founder of phenomenological sociology.<sup>2</sup> Schutz originally studied law and obtained his PhD from Vienna in 1921. Subsequently, he worked in a bank, however, and it was not until 1943, after his emigration to the USA, that Schutz obtained a part-time position at a university, namely *New School for Social Research* in New York. In 1952 he became professor at the same institution.

Schutz was initially inspired by Max Weber's interpretive sociology. However, although Weber regarded meaningful action as the central topic of the social sciences, and although he emphasized the importance of an explicit thematization of the meaning that the individual actor attributes to her own action, he did not examine the constitution of social meaning as such, and was generally uninterested in fundamental questions in epistemology and the theory of meaning. It is precisely this gap that Schutz attempts to fill by combining Weber's sociology with Husserl's phenomenological methodology (Schutz 1932/1972:13).

Schutz claims that we experience the world as containing various relatively distinct and independent provinces of meaning (Schutz 1962:230). Dreams, for example, have their own unique temporal and spatial 'logic'. The same goes for children's play, stage performances, religious experience, and so on. According to Schutz, science and research, too, take place within a distinct province of meaning. One region has a special status, however, and that is the life-world. This is not only because it is the region in which we spend most of our lives. Equally important is the fact that each of the other regions, or limited 'realities', is a modification of the life-world. The 'realities' of science and of dreams, for example, are regions that one enters by 'bracketing' or 'switching off' in some way the quotidian life-world; and to that extent they both fundamentally presuppose the reality of the life-world (Schutz 1962:231-233; see Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:39-40). Following Husserl, Schutz employs the term *epoché* for such 'switching off'. When we dream, for example, we perform an *epoché* on the rules that in everyday reality govern the identities of persons and places. Most of us are thus

familiar with dreams in which an event that takes place in one country switches to another location, without this being perceived as particularly odd within the universe of the dream.

Since it is the life-world rather than the mathematicized world of science that constitutes the frame and stage of social relations and actions, the sociologist, Schutz argues, should take her point of departure in the former. What is needed is a systematic examination of everyday life, and this requires a new type of sociological theory. Schutz's concrete contribution here is twofold. First, he aims to describe and analyze the essential structures of the life-world. Second, he offers an account of the way in which subjectivity is involved in the construction of social meaning, social actions and situations – indeed social 'worlds'. Relying on Husserl's analyses of intentionality and the life-world, Schutz accordingly claims that the social world reveals and manifests itself in various intentional experiences. Its meaningfulness is constituted by subjects, and in order to understand and scientifically address the social world it is therefore necessary to examine the social agents for whom it exists as such.

It is partly for this reason that Schutz claims that the subject matter of the social sciences is more complex than that of the natural sciences. As he puts it, the social sciences must employ 'constructs of the second degree' (Schutz 1962:6), because the 'objects' of these sciences – social agents – themselves employ 'first-order constructs' of the reality around them. Of course, the social sciences must satisfy the same sorts of requirements as other empirical sciences: scientific results must be controllable and reproducible by other scientists working in the field, and scientific theories must be precise, consistent, and so on (Schutz 1962:49-52). Schutz also stresses that social scientists and natural scientists alike are motivated by other, more theoretical interests than the everyday person is guided by. The everyday person is an agent rather than a theoretical observer; she has practical interests and is normally guided by common-sense knowledge and understanding. The social scientist, by contrast, is not an agent in the social relations she studies. A scientific researcher, regardless of whether she studies social hierarchies in Scottish factories or electrons and amino acids, is an observer, not a participant. Schutz thus insists that the social scientist must maintain a distance to the phenomena she studies. However, the social sciences examine human beings in manifold social relations, and human agents have interests, motives, self-interpretation and an understanding of the world they live in – all of which must be taken into account if we want to understand social reality in its full concretion (Schutz 1962:6; Gurwitsch 1974:129). This radically distinguishes social science from natural science: the latter obviously has no need to take into account the self-understanding and self-interpretation of the objects studied (electrons and amino acids have no self-understanding). Schutz thus emphatically rejects reductionist programs, such as behaviourism and positivism, which attempt to reduce human action to observable behaviour

and stimulus-response mechanisms. The social scientist must construct credible models of everyday agents – models that include such things as consciousness, motives and understanding. The task is to make explicit the meaning and significance these structures and relations have for the observed agents *themselves* (see Schutz 1964:7).

For Schutz, the investigation of intersubjectivity – in particular, of how one subject has experiential access to another subject, and how a community of ‘we’ is constituted – has a central place in sociological theory (see Schutz 1932/1972:97-99). A further task is to give an account of how a multitude of experiences can constitute the structures of meaning that make up social reality. As Schutz writes, every science of social meaning refers back to our meaning-constituting life in the social world: to our everyday experience of other persons, to our understanding of pre-given meanings, and to our initiation of new meaningful behaviour (Schutz 1932/1972:9). Schutz’s phenomenological perspective thus emphasizes that the primary object of sociology is not institutions, market conjunctures, social classes or structures of power, but *human beings*, that is, acting and experiencing individuals, considered in their myriad relations to others, but also with an eye to their own, meaning-constituting subjective lives. Schutz’s point, of course, is not that sociology should have no interest whatsoever in institutions, power structures, and the like. Rather, he merely insists that a concept such as ‘power structure’ must be regarded as a sort of ‘intellectual shorthand’, which can be useful for certain purposes, but must never lead us to forget that, in the end, power structures presuppose experiencing, interpreting and acting individuals (Schutz 1962:34-35; 1964:6-7). Along with Husserl and other phenomenologists, Schutz thus understands sociality as intersubjectivity – that is, as something that is ultimately anchored in individual subjects.

According to Schutz, each of us experiences his or her social environment as structured in ‘strata’ or ‘layers’ around himself or herself. Temporally as well as spatially, these layers are, for each individual, structured with that individual as the centre. With regard to the temporal structure, Schutz distinguishes between three layers or spheres:

In the dimension of time there are with reference to me in my actual biographical moment ‘contemporaries’, with whom a mutual interplay of action and reaction can be established; ‘predecessors’, upon whom I cannot act, but whose past actions and their outcome are open to my interpretation and may influence my own actions; and ‘successors’, of whom no experience is possible but toward whom I may orient my actions in a more or less empty anticipation. All these relations show the most manifold forms of intimacy and anonymity, of familiarity and strangeness, of intensity and extensity (Schutz 1962:15-16; see Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:46-49).

With regard to my contemporaries, there are various layers of ‘spatial’ proximity and distance, familiarity and strangeness. Some people are part of my immediate environment. Schutz says that I have a ‘face-to-face’ relationship with those people, but this expression is intended to refer to ‘a purely formal aspect of social relationship equally applicable to an intimate talk between friends and the co-presence of strangers in a railroad car’ (Schutz 1962:16; see Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:43-46).<sup>3</sup> Obviously, even in the course of a whole lifetime, I have this sort of spatial proximity with only a very small percentage of the population of the world. This does not mean, however, that the rest of humanity is not part of my environing world at all. There is some mutual contact and influence, however vague, indirect and insignificant, between most of my contemporaries and me.

According to Schutz, the experience of the life-world is a process of typification. We employ a repertoire of maxims and recipes – a type of practical ‘know-how’ – for understanding and dealing with the world and other people. Objects in the life-world are not simply unique, individual entities, but ‘mountains’, ‘trees’, ‘houses’, ‘animals’, and ‘persons’. No matter what we encounter, it is something whose more or less general ‘type’ we are familiar with. A person who has only very limited knowledge of trees can perhaps not tell whether the tree she passes in the woods is an elm or a beech, but she sees it immediately as ‘a tree’. In other words, we have a kind of immediate knowledge about how to understand our environment. The primary source of this knowledge is previous experience – both experiences we have had ourselves, and experience transmitted to us by others.

Obviously, typifications also play an important role in our social life. We immediately experience others in a typified manner. Not only people with whom we are personally acquainted or bump into on the train, or with whom we communicate via the internet, but also people with whom we never have any direct contact; indeed, we even typify in various ways our predecessors and possible successors. In fact, we do not only experience objects and living creatures as typified, but also actions, situations, motives, personalities, and so forth. Schutz writes:

Putting a letter in the mailbox, I expect that unknown people, called postmen, will act in a typical way, not quite intelligible to me, with the result that my letter will reach the addressee within typically reasonable time. Without ever having met a Frenchman or a German, I understand ‘Why France fears the rearmament of Germany’. Complying with a rule of English grammar, I follow a socially approved behaviour pattern of contemporary English-speaking fellow-men to which I have to adjust my own behaviour in order to make myself understandable. And, finally, any artefact or

utensil refers to the anonymous fellow-man who produced it to be used by other anonymous fellow-men for attaining typical goals by typical means (Schutz 1962:17; see Schutz 1932/1972:185).

An action such as putting a letter in the mailbox involves a typification of other people and their motives in time and space. I implicitly assume that certain typical other people have certain typical motives (for example, that they want to do their job well) and therefore will perform certain typical actions in such a way that my letter will arrive at its destination. According to Schutz, another element in this pattern of typification is an assumption that others have ‘systems of relevancies’ that are similar to my own (Schutz 1962:12); in other words, that others will by and large consider those things important that I myself regard as important. Of course, Schutz does not claim that we implicitly assume that others’ interests, projects and tastes are exactly like our own. Rather, he is trying to direct attention to something much more fundamental. If I send a letter to China, for example, I assume that Chinese postal workers will consider the address written on the envelope more important than, say, the size or colour of the envelope, when determining to which part of China the letter should be sent. According to Schutz, this idea about the ‘congruence of the systems of relevancies’ is part of a larger complex of implicit assumptions, which he calls the thesis of ‘the reciprocity of perspectives’ (Schutz 1962:11, 147). We do not merely assume that our systems of relevancies are in tune, but also that we should view things in the same way if we could view them from other people’s perspectives. This point applies not only to spatial perspectives, but also to culturally, historically and biographically conditioned ‘perspectives’.

As an agent in the life-world, however, I not only typify others. For example, my very imperfect understanding of the motives and actions of postal workers will lead me to typify some of my own actions when posting a letter. I try to write in such a way that a typical postal worker will be able to decipher my handwriting; I write the address in a typical place on the envelope, etc. Briefly put, I try to make myself the typical ‘sender of a letter’ (see Schutz 1962:25-26).

In connection with his analyses of the typifying assumptions that are implicit in any life-worldly action, Schutz also offers a close analysis of the *motives* for actions. He argues that we need to distinguish between two types of motives: ‘in-order-to’ motives and ‘because’ motives. An agent’s in-order-to motive is what she wants to achieve with the action – her aim or purpose. From the perspective of the agent, the in-order-to motive is thus directed at the future, that is, at the state of affairs that the action is supposed to realize. The because motive, in contrast, has to do with the agent’s past and the circumstances that made her seriously consider the course of action she adopts. Schutz’s favourite example involves a person who

commits murder in order to obtain the victim's money. The in-order-to motive is straightforward: the purpose is to obtain money. The because motive is rather more complex, in that it includes all the factors that contributed to putting the agent in a situation where she could project and carry out this action. Her problematic childhood and her drug addiction may, for example, be part of the because motive. In ordinary language, both types of motive can be expressed by 'because' utterances, while only in-order-to motives can be expressed by 'in-order-to' utterances. It makes sense to say both 'I hit him because I wanted his money' and 'I hit him because I was abused as a child', but only the former sentence can be turned into an 'in-order-to' sentence. 'I hit him in order to get his money' makes perfect sense; 'I hit him in order to have been abused as a child' does not (Schutz 1962:69-72).

My aims and interests decide how I experience things and people around me. As already suggested, these interests are mainly practical rather than theoretical (Schutz 1962:208). Thus, although I have many levels of typification at my disposal, my interest usually picks out one such level as salient. With regard to some people and objects, I am only interested in certain typical features or aspects, whereas other things may not interest me in their typicality, but only in their uniqueness. My interest in the postal worker usually does not go beyond her typical motives and actions qua postal worker: her blood type and hobbies, for example, are of no interest to me. In fact, it would not matter much if pigeons or robots rather than human beings delivered my letters, as long as something 'performed' certain typical actions in such a way that my letters would reach their addressees. If I encounter a large, growling animal in the woods on a dark night, this creature does not strike me as an example of a spatially extended thing, but as a dangerous animal. The book a good friend gave me as a birthday present ten years ago, on the other hand, is not for me a typical 'book', nor is it, more specifically, 'a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*' that could simply be replaced by another, identical copy. Rather, for me this object is unique. The same obviously goes for my friends and family. I do not regard them as 'mammals', specimens of *homo sapiens* or 'postal workers', which could in principle be replaced by other specimens of the type (Schutz 1962:8-10).

These ways of understanding my environment are generally so natural and familiar to me that I never pause to reflect on them. As Schutz often puts it, I take them *for granted*, without questioning their validity, and without subjecting them to scrutiny (Schutz 1962:74). Like Husserl, Schutz calls this unquestioning and uncritical attitude to one's environment the 'natural attitude' (see Husserl 1982:§27). When I am naturally attuned, the entire system of practical knowledge or 'know-how', to which my typifications belong, remains in the background, as it were. This is obviously connected with the practical focus of the everyday subject: we have letters to send, groceries to buy, children to take to school, and so on. These

activities and the various projects of which they form part guide our interests and priorities. Our practical knowledge, including the various typifications, are tools that we employ immediately and take for granted in order to navigate in the life-world and accomplish our aims.

Our background knowledge, however, is not immune to revision. As long as my typifications help me achieve my aims and objectives, they will remain in force; but if they are repeatedly defeated, I will typically revise them. As Schutz puts it, our background knowledge is taken for granted, but only 'until further notice' (Schutz 1962:74; Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:58). If, for example, I repeatedly experience that the addressees do not receive my letters, I will revise some of my assumptions concerning typical postal workers and their typical motives. On the other hand, I can only deal with such a situation by relying on other assumptions and typifications. I may file a complaint with The Royal Mail, for example, thereby tacitly assuming that certain officials will react in certain typical ways (read my complaint, rather than simply ignore it). Alternatively, I may decide that from now on I will use electronic mail only, thereby assuming typical courses of action on the part of my internet service provider, and so on. Thus, even if individual typifications are only taken for granted 'until further notice', it would be practically impossible to abandon them unless other typifications and assumptions at the same time remained in operation. Schutz accordingly concludes that it is within the context of a world taken for granted that I can question and doubt individual cases. The life-world itself is the undoubted 'foundation of any possible doubt' (Schutz 1962:74).

We perceive, experience and understand in accordance with normal and typical structures, models and patterns, which previous experiences have inscribed in our subjective lives (Schutz 1962:7-10). These structures and models prescribe what we should do in a particular situation, and they give us a sense that we can count on social reality, that it is reliable and can be comprehended, and that others experience it as we do. Obviously, intersubjectivity plays an important role in this. The stock of typical assumptions, expectations and prescriptions, which I make use of with complete naturalness, is for the most part socially derived and socially accepted.

Normality is also *conventionality*, which essentially transcends the individual person. My relations with others go as far back as I can remember, and my understanding is structured in accordance with the intersubjectively handed-down ways of understanding, which I have acquired through my upbringing and through learning a language (Schutz 1962:13-14; see Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:150-153). The same goes for a wide range of my opinions and actions. As already Husserl pointed out, beside the influences of concrete individual others, there are the more indeterminate, general commands that custom and tradition issue:

‘one’ thinks this about that; ‘one’ holds a fork like this, and so on (Husserl 1989:281-282; Heidegger 1927/1962:149-168). In sum, it is from others that I learn what is normal – in particular those others that are closest to me, those who raise me and those I grow up together with and live with. I am thereby part of a common tradition that, through a chain of generations, stretches back into a distant past.

My background knowledge, implicit assumptions, expectations, and so on, are hence not primarily *mine*, understood as my own personal and unique constructions. On the contrary, they are *social* constructions. In connection with this general point, Schutz subjects *knowledge* to a close analysis. He focuses on three aspects of the socialization of human knowledge: its *structural* socialization, its *genetic* socialization and its social *distribution* (Schutz 1962:11). As for the structural aspect, Schutz emphasizes that the knowledge we have is knowledge that others could have as well, if they had access to the same facts as we have access to. Conversely, I could know what others know, if only I could view things from their perspective, with their background knowledge, etc. This is, of course, connected with the already mentioned point about the ‘reciprocity of perspectives’. Knowledge, however, also has a social genesis, in that, as mentioned, most of our knowledge has been transmitted to us through others (parents, friends and teachers, who were themselves taught by teachers, and so on). Finally, Schutz emphasizes that knowledge is socially distributed. This claim includes the obvious point that most of us know something about certain things, but very little about other things. A person can be an expert in Slavic languages and have no idea what to do if he cannot start his car. Fortunately, others (mechanics) do know how to deal with this sort of thing. And most of us have sufficient knowledge, even outside our fields of expertise, to get by in everyday life. We know how to fill up the tank and check the oil; and besides, we have some rough knowledge of how to find someone who can fill the gaps in our own stock of knowledge (Schutz 1962:14-15).

### *The Successors of Schutz*

With Schutz’s immigration to the U.S.A. shortly before the Second World War, American social scientists were introduced to phenomenological sociology. Nevertheless, it took considerable time for Schutz’s perspective to achieve any real impact on American sociology. There are several reasons for this. First, Schutz only became a full-time professor after more than ten years in the U.S.A. Second, he was attached to the *New School for Social Research* in New York, which at that time was not regarded as a prestigious institution. Third, Schutz’s publications were not very successful. The English translation of his early book *The Phenomenology of the Social World* was only published posthumously; while he had begun a

similarly comprehensive and systematic account of his ideas after immigrating to America, he was unable to complete it; and his papers were primarily published in philosophical rather than sociological journals. Finally, due primarily to misunderstandings, Schutz fell out with the influential Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons.<sup>4</sup> Despite all of this, Schutz managed, albeit with some delay, to influence the American sociological scene, and it was thus in the U.S.A. that two new phenomenological sociologies were first introduced: the *sociology of knowledge* and *ethnomethodology*.

Schutz repeatedly points out that the social distribution of knowledge is a topic that has been insufficiently studied – a topic that would deserve the title ‘sociology of knowledge’ (Schutz 1962:15, 149; 1964:121). Originally, the sociology of knowledge was a discipline that primarily addressed epistemological issues, such as how true knowledge is acquired, by which methods, etc. Its focus was on theoretical ideas and the knowledge of the ‘elite’ – i.e., the established sciences, the cultural elite, and so on. Schutz, however, emphasizes that also the mechanic and the supermarket check-out assistant have their ‘knowledge’ and that such knowledge is just as legitimate an object for a genuine sociology of knowledge as is the knowledge of the scientific and cultural elite. Besides, it is not the task of sociology as an empirical science to address general epistemological questions. Rather, in Schutz’s view, sociology should focus on the life-world as it is experienced by everyday subjects (Schutz 1962:144-145).

These ideas were taken up by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. This influential book attempts to combine Schutz’s phenomenological outlook with the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead.<sup>5</sup> But Berger and Luckmann also draw upon German anthropology and figures such as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen, as well as Karl Marx, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Berger and Luckmann were born in Austria and Slovenia, respectively, but both immigrated to the United States, and studied with Schutz at the *New School for Social Research*.

Berger and Luckmann seek to apply the theoretical perspective of phenomenology to crucial notions such as identity, socialization, social roles, language, normality/abnormality, and so on. They claim that it is the task of the sociology of knowledge to analyze the societal conditions for the formation and maintenance of various types of knowledge, scientific as well as quotidian. Berger and Luckmann thus widen the focus of the sociology of knowledge beyond the question of the social distribution of knowledge that Schutz had singled out as the central problem (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:28). But they share Schutz’s basic intuitions. The sociology of knowledge is, briefly put, interested in how knowledge is produced,

distributed, and internalized; it examines how the validity of any form of knowledge (that of the Tibetan monk no less than that of the American businesswoman or the criminologist) becomes socially established (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:15). But as they also stress,

the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, common-sense 'knowledge' rather than 'ideas' must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:27).

This project involves a challenge to any objectivist and positivist social theory. Berger and Luckmann reject any attempt to view social reality as an objective entity, as a non-human or supra-human *thing* (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:106). As they write, the social order is a product of human activity; it is neither biologically determined, nor in any other way determined by facts of nature: 'Social order is not part of the "nature of things", and it cannot be derived from the "laws of nature". Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity' (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:70). The task of social theory is to provide an account of how human beings, through manifold forms of interaction, create and shape social structures and institutions, which may first have the character of a common, intersubjective reality, but eventually become 'externalized' and achieve objective reality. As also Schutz would say, this happens largely through institutionalized typifications (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:85-96). Through institutionalization, human activity is subjected to social control. The constructed social structures define what is normal, and sanctions are introduced to maintain the social order and avoid digression. With time, institutions come to appear inevitable and objective. Yet:

It is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity ... The institutional world is objectivated human activity, and so is every single institution ... The paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product will concern us later on. At the moment, it is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one. That is, man (not, of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:78).

Social reality is thus not only an externalized and objectified human product; it acts back upon human beings. Not only in the sense that we may feel it as an oppressive external force that we cannot resist, but also in the sense that social reality is something individual human beings 'internalize'. We are not raised outside society, but grow up in it. And as we grow up and mature, we take over from others (and make our own) a language, roles, attitudes and norms (see Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:149-157). Human society, Berger and Luckmann emphasize, must therefore be 'understood in terms of an ongoing dialectic of the three moments of externalization, objectivation and internalization' (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:149).

*The Social Construction of Reality* became very popular in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, and was the book that made Schutz's ideas accessible to a wider audience. Another brand of American sociology that received crucial impulses from Schutz was the *ethnomethodology* introduced by Harold Garfinkel in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Garfinkel was influenced by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, but his main inspiration came from Schutz, Aaron Gurwitsch and Talcott Parsons. Unlike Berger and Luckmann, Garfinkel was never a student of Schutz; but Garfinkel's approach to sociology nevertheless betrays an important Schutzian inspiration. While Schutz remained a social *theorist*, however, Garfinkel applied phenomenological ideas in carrying out actual empirical research.

Briefly put, the task of ethnomethodology is to examine how social agents structure their social environment in a meaningful way. Like Schutz, the ethnomethodologist seeks to view things from participants' perspectives and attempts to understand how their life-form can be viewed as a result of their interaction with each other. The point is not to establish whether a given life-form is 'true' or 'false', but rather to determine how agents have formed the interpretations and opinions that they hold. Ethnomethodology regards social structures (roles, institutions and systems of cultural meaning and value) as products of social interaction, rather than as pre-existing and determining factors. Social reality is thus conceived of as a fragile and vulnerable construction. It is a construction that is actively maintained by the participants.

According to Garfinkel, we are all busy constructing a world in which we feel at home. As also emphasized by Schutz, this happens in part via a process of typification. We make use of various routines and maxims in coping with social reality. These routines and maxims are gradually internalized and thereby recede from our view. In this way, the preconditions for our production of social meaning and order become inaccessible to us. Our understanding can never be made completely explicit and will always involve a horizon of background assumptions. But ethnomethodology has developed special techniques to reveal the practices that

people engage in when establishing a social order. One such technique involves creating situations in which our normal background assumptions are undermined and thereby made explicit. In one experiment, Garfinkel thus asked his students to act like guests in their own homes and record the reactions of their family members. These reactions varied from confusion to anger, and thus, according to Garfinkel, illustrated the fragility of the social order: an order that we ourselves help to produce, but which we nevertheless tend to take for granted (Garfinkel 1967:42-43).

A famous empirical study informed by phenomenological ideas is Aaron V. Cicourel's study of the treatment of juvenile delinquents in two Californian cities. According to Cicourel, the process of classifying a young person as a delinquent crucially involves certain background assumptions on the part of police officers, probation officers, court officials, and others. The police may, for example, have a tendency to pick out likely candidates on the basis of an implicit picture of the 'typical delinquent'. The picture includes such factors as family background, school performance and ethnicity. By applying such 'typifications', police officers and others involved make sense of the cases they are faced with (Cicourel 1976). A similar approach is adopted in J. Maxwell Atkinson's work on suicide statistics (Atkinson 1978). Atkinson found that coroners often rely on 'common-sense theories' about suicide and its causes when determining whether a particular death should be classified as a suicide or an accidental death – theories that to a remarkable extent converge with the typical picture of suicide propagated by news media. For coroners as well as for other agents, Atkinson suggests, such theorizing 'provid[es] for the social organization of sudden deaths by rendering otherwise disordered and potentially senseless events ordered and sensible' (Atkinson 1978:173).

Phenomenology and ethnomethodology have often criticized sociologies that attempt to analyze social reality in terms of various pre-defined categories, such as gender, class struggles, and the like. The claim is that such a procedure theorizes about the world instead of describing it. This critique suggests the phenomenological point that sociology must return to 'the things themselves', to the 'phenomena'. Rather than moulding the social world to fit various pre-defined theoretical categories, we ought to examine how people themselves experience their social reality. For ethnomethodology, the main sociological task is thus to understand how social agents themselves cope with the task of describing and explaining the order of the reality in which they live.

### **Criticism of Phenomenological Sociology**

Let us briefly consider some of the criticisms that phenomenological sociology has been met with. Nick Crossley (1996:95-98) lists a number of allegedly problematic features of Schutz' work, one of which merits consideration here.<sup>7</sup> According to Crossley, 'Schutz tends to stick to the sorts of relationship which an individual takes to other individuals or groups at the expense of a consideration of relationships, practices and processes viewed from the trans-individual position of the systems which they form' (Crossley 1996:98). In other words, Schutz seems to adopt an 'individualist' perspective and thereby loses sight of the way 'the community itself functions as a system, perpetuating itself through space and time' (Crossley 1996:98).

A phenomenological reply to this criticism consists of two parts. First, one should not think that Schutz's shortcomings are necessarily the shortcomings of the phenomenological perspective as such. Thus, even if it is correct that Schutz failed to consider the community as a system that perpetuates itself through space and time, this need not be because of his commitment to phenomenology. In fact, Berger and Luckmann, in part two of *The Social Construction of Reality*, give detailed consideration to how society perpetuates itself as an impersonal, 'trans-individual' system.

That said, however, Crossley does have a point. As readers of the present chapter may have noticed, some sort of emphasis on the individual person or subject is found in all the phenomenological thinkers we have considered – from Husserl, through Schutz, to Berger and Luckmann and Garfinkel. The phenomenologists, however, would insist that this is ultimately no ground for criticism. A society cannot be reduced to the sum of its individual members; but on the other hand, the phenomenologists maintain that there is no society without individual subjects. To speak of a 'social system' in the absence of a robust notion of individual subjects makes little sense; for in what sense would the system in question be *social*? What could make it social except the fact that it involves (which is not the same as: 'can be reduced to') individual subjects standing in various relations to each other? A community of *no one* is hardly a *community*. An impersonal 'system' will never yield a society. For that, we need the *interpersonal* – and without the *personal*, there is no interpersonal (see Overgaard 2007, esp. chapter 5).

As another general criticism of phenomenology, one might maintain that its strengths could easily become its weaknesses. The phenomenological rehabilitation of the life-world, and the insistence on the importance of the everyday human being and its 'common-sense' knowledge, may seem to verge on celebrating the ordinary or mediocre. For example, the idea that common-sense knowledge is as legitimate a sociological theme as is scientific knowledge may seem to imply that these two kinds of knowledge are equally valuable. But, if so, the

phenomenological perspective would implicitly legitimize intellectual laziness. Other critics have claimed that phenomenological sociology is conservative, that it implies a defence of the status quo – even when status quo is an unjust social order. Finally, the phenomenological emphasis on subjectivity as active and creative must not lead to blindness regarding the manifold ways in which individuals can be subjected to, and controlled by, institutions or other individuals.

However, phenomenology has largely pre-empted these criticisms. The notion that the phenomenological sociologist must primarily examine the everyday person, and that she must take seriously this person's 'knowledge' and perspective, is fully compatible with maintaining a critical distance. Schutz himself stresses that the sociologist must be an observer of, rather than a participant in, the social phenomena she examines. And he emphasizes the fact that our common-sense knowledge is limited and incomplete. A phenomenologist such as Heidegger couples an examination of the everyday human being and its 'average' understanding with a rather critical perspective on this everyday understanding (allegedly superficial and with a tendency to rely on hearsay) (Heidegger 1927/1962:210-219). Indeed, he emphasizes that the everyday subject may be blinded by habit and convention (Heidegger 1927/1962:149-168). Thus, a phenomenological examination of the everyday subject need not glorify or idealize it. Similarly, a descriptive analysis of social reality as it is need not legitimize it. On the contrary, a sober description is an important element in any rational deliberation on what, precisely, ought to be changed about the status quo.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, however, the phenomenologists would insist that it is not an option to devalue entirely – let alone reject – our ordinary everyday knowledge. For even scientists and political revolutionaries *must* rely on this knowledge in the greater part of their lives. Moreover, in spite of its many imperfections and limitations, this knowledge is usually adequate enough for practical purposes. Nor, as already mentioned, is it an option to ignore completely the individual subject or to insist that it is nothing but a plaything in the hands of society. As individual subjects we are not merely subjected to the social reality in which we live; we also take part in its creation and maintenance. And for that very reason it is possible for us to change it. As Berger and Luckmann write: 'However objectivated, the social world was made by men – and, therefore, can be remade by them' (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1991:106).

## **Conclusion**

Let us briefly recapitulate some of the crucial features of phenomenological everyday life sociology. First, all phenomenologists share an insistence on description and a resistance toward theoretical speculation. A second important feature of phenomenological sociology is its

emphasis on the need to take everyday life seriously. The ‘naturally attuned’, practically oriented common-sense person and her experienced life-world is the primary object of sociology. Thirdly, phenomenology maintains that an examination of sociality and social reality has to take subjectivity into account. Human subjectivity is not merely moulded and determined by social forces. In interaction with others, subjectivity also shapes social reality.

Phenomenological sociologists have consistently issued warnings against the tendency to substantialize and reify social matters and they have offered a corrective to traditional positivistic research methodologies. Societal reality, including institutions, organizations, ethnic groupings, classes, and so on, must be regarded as a product of human activity. The sociological task is to understand the workings of this productive or constitutive process. No account of everyday social life can be complete if it does not take into account the contribution of individual subjectivities. This is the fundamental message of phenomenological sociology.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Natanson (1973) contains papers addressing concretely the significance of phenomenology to various social sciences.

<sup>2</sup> See Barber (2002) for an excellent introduction to Schutz. Schutz's paper 'Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action' contains a concise account of the main tenets of his phenomenological sociology.

<sup>3</sup> It is thus essential to make a sharp distinction between Schutz's notion of the 'face-to-face' relation and Lévinas' notion of 'face to face'. The latter is a communicative social relation with a special ethical status (see Lévinas 1969).

<sup>4</sup> An account of Schutz's influence on American sociology, including the factors that impeded and delayed it, is found in Psathas (2004).

<sup>5</sup> The title of Berger and Luckmann's 1966 book were later appropriated by the movement of *social constructivism*. Yet, most social constructivists do not regard themselves as phenomenologists, and phenomenologists do not necessarily share the relativism and nihilism advocated by some social constructivists.

<sup>6</sup> Ethnomethodology is discussed in detail elsewhere in this book. We shall therefore restrict ourselves to mentioning a few points that illustrate Garfinkel's debt to Schutz.

<sup>7</sup> Crossley's other points concern omissions or limitations in Schutz's work that have little to do with his phenomenological perspective as such; most of the defects, indeed, are remedied in Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991).

<sup>8</sup> Cicourel's study illustrates the critical potential of phenomenological descriptions of the status quo.