representation, the constructivist aspects of the approach have been more fully elaborated.

We are concerned here (see 3.4) with certain approaches to a constructivist perspective that belong not only to qualitative research but which have led to particularly intensive discussion and further developments in this area. Here, in addition to methodological considerations, there is also some treatment of epistemological questions concerning the character of social reality; this involves discussion of the links with a theory of science deriving, on the one hand, from system-theory and, on the other hand, from literary studies, with regard to their importance for theory construction in qualitative research.

Hermeneutic approaches constitute, after phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, the third major tradition within qualitative research (see 3.5). Qualitative data such as protocols, memos, interview transcripts, photographs or films do not speak for themselves; in qualitative research they are viewed as texts that have to be read (in the sense of interpreted) and related to available research results. In the different hermeneutic approaches there is a broad tradition of transforming these interpretative endeavours into theory-driven methodologies.

**Part 3A**

**Background Theories of Qualitative Research**

### 3.1 Phenomenological Life-world Analysis

**Ronald Hitzler and Thomas S. Eberle**

1. The idea of a life-world phenomenology
2. From meaning-constitution to understanding the other
3. On the sociological relevance of life-world analysis

#### 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 reintroduced 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 sense of consciousness of actors.

Unlike the normal objective and inductive understanding of science, phenomenology...
According to Weber, what has to be understood is a 'science that seeks to interpret social action interpretatively'. This is interpretative sociology. As his starting point he proceeded by the actions of people (cf. also Schütz 1962) - and emphasized 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-relationship arises when (individually) experiences are brought together to form a unit by a process of meaning. This total coherence of 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 qualified 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 an action 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 subjective intentional 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 'how and in this way', and therefore necessarily remains 'relative': interpretations of meaning vary according to the time when they occur, according to the momentary interest in the explanation, and also according to the underlying reservoir of knowledge specific to a particular group 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 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 and understanding? Schütz can only be understood in a 'sensitive' way, that is, through his 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, whatever more fragmentary excerpts of the other's subjective context are 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-construction of the social world. This means that the theories and methods of social science are 'second order' constructs which (must) 'make' the 'first order' everyday conscious. 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 social actions are constructed to whom an awareness of typological and relevance structures 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 action. Complete adequacy is achieved when the 'how and in this way' motive is attributed to the everyday actor. 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.
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, meaningful schemata may be created, which are shared by different subjects and are therefore inter-subjectively valid, and which 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 of 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, the family member, 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 Homer (1994, 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 relations is reduced within it to a particular system of relevant and pre-existent bonds 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 Homer (e.g. 1994a), Hitzler (1995), Hitzler et al. (1996), Hitzler and Pfadenhauer (1993), Knoblauch (e.g. 1988, 1997) and Soettnet (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 they are being typified and historically conditioned, 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 1993, 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 that from this contexts can be divided between what everyone knows and what is known by relatively few people. If, however, as Schütz and Luckmann (1973: 218) 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; 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.

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 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 seen to be necessary, 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 5.16), and to provide a theoretical basis 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 – quasiimplicitly – 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


