

Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Phenomenology

Contributors: Martyn Hammersley
Editors: Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao
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In its most influential philosophical sense, the term *phenomenology* refers to descriptive study of how things appear to consciousness, often with the purpose of identifying the essential structures that characterize experience of the world. In the context of social science methodology, the term usually means an approach that pays close attention to how the people being studied experience the world. What is rejected here is any immediate move to evaluate that experience (e.g., as true or false by comparison with scientific knowledge) or even causally to explain why people experience the world the way that they do. From a phenomenological viewpoint, both these tendencies risk failing to grasp the complexity and inner logic of people's understanding of themselves and their world. Phenomenological sociology shares something in common with anthropological relativism, which insists on studying other cultures "in their own terms"; and with symbolic interactionist approaches, which emphasize that people are constantly *making* sense of what happens, and that this process generates diverse perspectives or "worlds."

The phenomenological movement in philosophy was founded by Edmund Husserl at the end of the 19th century and was later developed in diverse directions by, among others, Heidegger, MerleauPonty, Sartre, and (most influentially of all for social science) Schutz. The fundamental thesis of phenomenology is the intentionality of consciousness: that we are always conscious *of* something. The implication is that the experiencing subject and the experienced object are intrinsically related; they cannot exist apart from one another. The influence of phenomenology has been especially appealing to those social scientists who oppose both positivism's treatment of natural science as the only model for rational inquiry *and* all forms of speculative social theorizing. It serves as an argument against these, as well as an alternative model for rigorous investigation.

One of the phenomenological concepts that has been most influential in social science is what is referred to as the "natural attitude." Husserl argued that rather than people experiencing the world in the way that traditional empiricists claimed, as isolated sense data, most of the time they experience a familiar world containing all manner of recognizable objects, including other people, whose characteristics and behavior are taken as known (until further notice). Although there are areas of uncertainty in our experience of the world, and although sometimes our expectations are not met, it is

argued that these problems always emerge out of a taken-for-granted background. The task of phenomenological inquiry, particularly as conceived by later phenomenologists such as Schutz (1973), is to describe the constitutive features of the natural attitude: how it is that we come to experience the world as a taken-for-granted and shared reality. They argue that this must be explicated if we are to provide a solid foundation for science of any kind.

Phenomenology has probably had its most direct influence on social research through the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967)—which stimulated some kinds of social constructionism—and through ethnomethodology.

Martyn Hammersley

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