

Life-World-Analytical Ethnography: A Phenomenology-Based Research Approach

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Abstract

Life-world-analytical ethnography aims to investigate the subjective perspective—the life-worlds—of other people. Life-world-analytical ethnography is based on the premise that any world which is not apprehended as a life-world—that is, as the totality of a world that is subjectively experienced—is a fiction. For we do not, in fact, have any knowledge of a world that is not subjectively experienced—of the world *per se*, as it were. The investigation of one's own life-world is a difficult program in itself, a program that mundane phenomenology, in particular, endeavors to pursue. However, the investigation of the life-worlds of other actors calls for numerous additional precautions and measures. This article discusses the origins and foundations as well as particular challenges of life-world-analytical ethnography.

Keywords

life-world analysis, lived experience, mundane-phenomenology, small social life-worlds, observant participation

With this contribution to a phenomenology-based ethnography, we present an empirical research concept that is strongly oriented toward the description of the experiences that people have. In other words, it is aimed at the

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understanding of the (typical) subjective meaning that people attach to their actions rather than at the reconstruction of the so-called *a tergo* causes of what people do, or refrain from doing. For, as Helmuth Plessner (1982, 229) argues, *before* attempting to explain phenomena from factors or to interpret them according to their purposes, one should always endeavor to understand them in their original living context. A research concept such as this implies a methodology that leads away from the pseudo-objectivist *over-view*—that is, the view over the heads of the actors—characteristic of, but not exclusive to, conventional sociology, and leads toward an arduous *inside view* through the eyes of the actor. This approach has hitherto been pursued most consistently—at least in principle and as an ideal—by life-world analysis in the mundane-phenomenological tradition of Alfred Schutz, who notes that “[s]afeguarding the subjective point of view is the only, but sufficient, guarantee that social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world constructed by some scientific observer” (Schutz 1978a, 50; cf. also Hitzler and Eberle 2004).

Life-World Analysis

Hence, the “life-world” can be described only on the basis of concrete subjective consciousness—as the self-evident, unquestioned foundation of all everyday lived experience (*Erleben*) and action, and of all dreams, phantasms, and theories. A life-world can neither be captured by means of a model of “outside versus inside” nor with the help of socio-temporal and spatial measurements. It is not something in which the subject is incarcerated, nor is it something in which he¹ wanders around. Rather, “life-world” refers to the subject’s horizon of perception, orientation, and action. It does not exist without the subject; nor does the subject exist without it. However, the subject *is not* his life-world; he *has* a life-world. His relation to his life-world and to himself is—to quote Plessner ([1928] 1981, 360)—determined by his “eccentric positionality,” by the “ambiguous character” of his existence in the modes of orientation in lived time, in the sphere of experience and the sphere of actions, in his concrete dealings with things (*Dinge*) and useful things (*Zeug*), with his own live corporeality, and with other (taken-for-granted) subjects.

Phenomenologists endeavor by means of controlled abstraction to remove the strata that form the foundation of the processes of consciousness in order to uncover the universal structures of the subjective constitution processes and, via successive reductions, to reach the “realm of original self-evidences” (Husserl [1954] 1970, 127), the a priori of history, the completely abstract, invariant basic structures of human beings’ immediate experience of the world—such as its temporal, spatial, and social dimension; such as the strata of

forms of knowledge; such as relevances and typifications, action and acts, transcendencies and the mastering of transcendencies, etc.—and thus “to translate historically objectivized meaning-structures of a culture and society . . . into a ‘universal’ human hermeneutics that bridges all component cultures, all complete cultures and all historical epochs” (Luckmann 1989, 35).

Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1973, 1989) started the mundane-phenomenological enterprise in order to uncover universal structures of the way human beings experience the world. According to Luckmann (1978), the ultimate aim of this project is to develop a formal language (“*mathesis universalis*”) by means of which multiple social science data (in the broadest sense) can be related to each other. This is an extremely challenging undertaking, and it is far from accomplished. However, if, and to the extent that, it succeeds, it will ideally be possible to clarify in what respect concrete (historical-empirical) life-worlds are identical with, similar to, or different from each other. This methodological groundwork, which Thomas Luckmann (1993) has termed “protosociology,” is based on the assumption that, although the multiple life-worlds are factually different, they are only *relatively* so because—and this is where the “actual” sociological work starts—people appresent parts of their lived experience (*Erleben*) and communicate them in the form of meaningful experiences (*Erfahrungen*), thereby coordinating the meanings (or sense) of their lived experience in diverse complicated processes. This results in certainties—for example the “reciprocity of perspectives”—in, or of, the world of everyday life. *Vis-à-vis* other sub-universes of reality—the world of dreams, the world of phantasms, the world of scientific theory—the world of everyday life is the *only* world that, from a mundane-phenomenological perspective, is characterized by the pragmatic tension of consciousness—namely wide-awakeness—that renders intersubjectivity possible (see Schutz 1945).

Phenomenologically speaking, any world that is not a *subjectively experienced* (*erlebte*) world within the meaning of this structural definition—in other words, any world that is not a *life-world*—is a fiction: for example, a fiction of the Copernican–Galilean–Newtonian paradigm (see Luckmann 1978), which is fundamental to what “modern-thinking” people consider to be “objectively correct.” Hence, the belief that it is possible, at least in principle, to acquire, (all) knowledge—which is in agreement with Copernican–Galilean–Newtonian epistemology—is also a characteristic of a symptomatically modern life-world. Therefore, the evident relevance for sociology and ethnography of the concept of the life-world—which, following Husserl and Schutz, is genuinely egological—lies mainly in the fact that it epistemologically substantiates the Thomas theorem. (“If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”) Moreover, it does so in a

way that runs contrary to the rather socio-behaviorist approach adopted by William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas (1928, 572) insofar as it identifies the *subjective experience* (*Erleben*), or the *definition*, of things—rather than any “objectivity” that may be ascribed from without, as it were—as constitutive of the perception of a situation and its (action-related) consequences. The term “situation” itself implies experience as it is being lived, which inevitably confronts the subject with the question of what is actually going on (here and now)—a question that is, for the most part, answerable as a matter of routine (see Hitzler 1999; cf. also Bahrdt 1996).

From the perspective of the sociologist who has recourse to mundane phenomenology, the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) (epistemo-)“*logically*” develops from the nucleus of the definition of the situation. Empirically, by contrast, every definition of the situation—and *all* action—self-evidently takes place *in* socially constructed reality. Habitualizations, typifications, institutionalizations, functionalizations, legitimations, socializations, etc. are only some of the conceptual building blocks employed in the reconstruction of the thus implied, highly complex “dialectic” of externalizations, objectivations, and internalizations.

From this phenomenological and sociological groundwork, socio-structurally explainable specifics of life in *modern* societies can, in turn, be derived and observed from diverse perspectives (see Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Modern life is highly *pluralized*—that is, it is lived in a *market* where diverse interpretations of the world are on offer (see Berger and Luckmann 1995); it is highly *optionalized*—that is, it is lived under the obligation to choose between alternatives (see Gross 1994); and it is increasingly *individualized*—that is, it is lived without subjectively adequate “instructions” (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). As a result, people are typically entangled in numerous *disparate* relationships, orientations, and attitudes. They participate on a daily basis in very disparate social events that, although each appears meaningful in itself, hardly provide recipes for orientation in other social contexts. People are therefore constantly obliged to deal with heterogeneous schemes of interpretation and to undertake uncoordinated re-orientations in order to be able to participate in everyday life. They must cobble their lives together, so to speak, out of participations in various single-purpose communities with often completely heterogeneous relevance systems, each of which relates merely to a *limited* segment of their experiences. In other words, life takes place to a large extent in meaningfully segregated part-time orientations, in so-called “small life-worlds or worlds of lived experience,” which are, for the most part, (subjectively) experienced as socially or culturally pre-constructed (see Hitzler 2008).

A Form of Ethnography

If there is one good reason to qualify *one* form of ethnography as “life-world analytical” (see Honer 2004; cf. also 1989 and 1993), then it is that ethnographers interested in the life-world devote themselves more determinedly and more explicitly than others to investigating how people subjectively experience their world and the certainties that shape it. For “life-world” simply refers to lived experience in total, or to the world as it is subjectively experienced. In contrast to the phenomenological description of *one’s own* lived experience, the investigation of the life-worlds of *other actors* obviously calls for numerous additional precautions and measures because, when the life-world of another subject becomes the object of scientific interest, one problem becomes methodologically acute, namely, how, and to what extent, can one succeed in seeing the world with the eyes of the other person (see Plessner 1978) and in understanding the subjective meaning that he attaches to his experiences, *thereby* explaining his actions and, subsequently, the consequences of his actions in (by no means always harmonious) interaction with the actions of others (cf. Weber 1978, 4)?

Alfred Schutz himself trusts that the scientist “constructs (obviously, according to quite definite structural laws) the pertinent ideal personality types with which he peoples the segment of the social world he has selected as an object of his scientific research” (Schutz 1978b, 139, footnote 21). However, the construction of scientific homunculi that Schutz propagates does not apply until the scientist theoretically *reflects* on analyzed data; on no account does it apply to the *generation* of data. Because it is extremely questionable whether other people’s *reports* of social phenomena may be considered to be data on the phenomena themselves, skepticism is always advisable regarding the quality of data that are provided by others. Without doubt, these data are (at first) simply reported data—that is, data about the way in which a matter is situatively *described* (by whomever). Considerably more valid, by contrast, are data generated by the field researcher’s own *practical* co-participation in a social context, in the course of which he also reflects on his concrete viewpoint as a participant in social action and is accountable (to himself) for how and where he should be located in the network of social relations.

However, this still does not solve the fundamental dilemma, which stems from the insurmountability of “medium transcendencies,”²² that, although the subjective knowledge of the Other is not directly accessible, its accessibility is regarded as self-evident in social science research. Nevertheless, this can, in our opinion, be “compensated” to a certain extent by the fact that the researcher participates in the everyday life of the respective field for a relatively long time; that he avoids, as far as possible, influencing or changing it

through *external* values; that he recognizes as important what is important to those in whom he is interested; and that, if necessary, he also more or less condones possible consequences of this approach (see Eisewicht 2014; Schmid 2015). However, in our view, this inevitably implies that the researcher engages unconditionally with the worldviews (and the corresponding special practices) of the actors of interest to him; that he actually co-experiences their own meanings (or sense); and that, in this way, he undertakes a (temporary) shift in perspective.

Existential Engagement

We regard the aforementioned form of existential engagement as an ideal way of practicing *our* idea of ethnography. And this existential engagement calls, in turn, for a genuinely *phenomenological* justification of the form of ethnography we favor. As explained above, practicing ethnography differs fundamentally from other scientific endeavors in that, for epistemological reasons, the phenomenologist takes as his *exclusive* starting point *his own* subjective experience (*Erleben*) (for a fundamental description, cf. Schutz 1962, part II; Schutz 1964). Irrespective of the phenomenological “operations” performed and the knowledge interest followed, the phenomenologist’s only primary data are (and remain) his own experiences because only they are self-evident. According to Thomas Luckmann (1978), other scientific enterprises, including sociology, are, by contrast, *cosmologically* oriented. That is to say, their protagonists basically rely on data from hearsay—which is epistemologically naïve but practically successful. In other words, they use what they read or what they are told by others as the basis of their secondary constructions of reality (see Schutz 1953).

Now, we do *not* by any means believe that the canon of field-adequate data collection methods that is available, in particular, within the framework of the so-called “interpretive paradigm” (cf. Wilson 1970; Keller 2012) should be *replaced* by the phenomenological method. Nor do we believe that one should henceforth perform “introspection” instead of conducting method-driven practical field research, in other words, looking over people’s shoulders, studying their documentation—that is, their texts and other artifacts—while (at the same time) constantly seeking to engage them in conversation. We are merely advocating that one should also reflect on one’s own lived experience (*Erleben*) and one’s own meaningful experiences (*Erfahrungen*) as self-evident data, and that one should integrate them more into the methodological canon of empirical social research. However, because—from a phenomenological perspective—one can reflect only on experiences that one has (had) oneself (cf. also Douglas 1976, 107ff), as an ethnographer one must always take into account the (kind

of) experiences—relating to a certain topic—that one has actually (had) *oneself*. If one has read something about a topic, then one has had a reading experience; if one has spoken to people who are relevantly involved (in one way or another), then one has (had) a communication experience; and if one has watched these people doing things, then one has (had) an observation experience.

By combining these data collection methods, one has a methodologically pluralistic approach to one's research topic, irrespective of whether one combines so-called "quantitative" methods with "qualitative" methods (see Burzan 2010; Soeffner 1985), or one combines several different so-called "qualitative" methods (see Breuer and Reichertz 2002). However, contrary to a certain tendency in the English-language literature to describe an approach as "ethnographic" simply because it entails the use of so-called "qualitative methods" (cf., Atkinson and Coffey 2001), neither the combination of "quantitative" and "qualitative" methods, nor the combination of several different "qualitative" methods, constitutes a research design that may be qualified as "ethnographic" *per se*. (Here we agree with representatives of other ethnographic approaches—cf., Breidenstein et al. 2013; Dellwing and Prus 2012.) And, anyway, one has not yet had any "*inside*" experience of the topic in question because such experience can be gained only by (also) engaging *existentially* with the topic from the inside; by "handling" the topic oneself in a practical (everyday) way at least for a certain period of time; and by participating in the activities of the people in whom one is interested. From a research-practice perspective, this means that, ideally, one endeavors to become like those people in the field whose "subjective point of view" one wishes (for whatever reason) to understand—no matter how strange it might appear from outside (cf. Kirschner 2015; cf. also Eisewicht and Kirschner in this issue).

Such an existential engagement constitutes an additional, and fundamentally different, *kind* of data. In our view, this kind of data is of immense importance for the *understanding* of human (social) action. For it not only enables diverse, "quasi natural" observations to be carried out. Because of the intimate knowledge of the field acquired through these observations, it also usually makes it easier to obtain and assess the information one desires or needs. In other words: the fact that the social researcher aspires to understand (*verstehen*), obliges him to appropriate the *typical* perspective of the actor whom he seeks to understand, for "only this methodological principle gives us the necessary guarantee that we are dealing in fact with the real social life-world of us all, which, even as an object of theoretical research, remains a system of reciprocal social relations, all of them built up by mutual subjective interpretations of the actors within it" (Schutz 1964, 16). *Practically*, however,

this is for the most part an extremely problematic premise because our research approach—in which we make the problem of perspective the focus of our methodological deliberations—is continually faced with the difficulty that the assumption of certain perspectives is not empirically possible for various reasons that constrain the investigation of the field. For example, there are sociocultural events in which it is not possible to participate, period; there are other events from which one is excluded from participating because one does not fulfill personal “admission requirements,” for example, with regard to age, gender, education, and training; and there are events in which one cannot participate because of special circumstances or at certain times, etc. By contrast, although some fields are accessible in the practical (everyday) sense of the word, (the) people whom one encounters there may live in such a *different* world that it is almost impossible to get to know—let alone understand—their “subjective point of view” (see Honer 2011, 121–39; Hitzler 2012, 2014).

However, if one cannot—for whatever reason—acquire an inside view qua membership, that effectively means that one can get to know what is subjectively experienced (*erlebt*) and acquired through action (*erhandelt*) in the social world in question only *from the outside*, only *indirectly* through *descriptions*, through (symbolic and indexical) appresentations, representations, and/or objectivations. This is a trivial insight, and it would be hardly worthy of mention if it were not, as a rule, at most proclaimed but rarely systematically taken into account when interpreting and assessing the validity of data. In any case, far too often, “qualitative” researchers tend not to initially interpret descriptions of experiences as *descriptions* of experiences, but rather to immediately and primarily interpret them as descriptions of *experiences* and then to present them as experiences rather than descriptions. Such “short circuits” contribute significantly to perpetuating the kind of pseudo-objectivity with which social scientists—observing all the goings-on in society and believing that they can do so without having to adopt a certain perspective—describe, or even believe they can explain, social reality. In our experience, neither the plurality of the methods applied nor the achievement of participant status by the researcher can be dispensed with without losing interpretive and reconstructive competence. In particular, *elementary* components of people’s lived experience of the world and their constructions of reality are almost impossible to elicit through interviews of any kind. To put it in very simple terms: while readily retrievable (explicit) *stocks of knowledge* can be reconstructed through interviews (see Honer 1994, 2003), observations are preferably suitable for capturing (implicit) *schemes of action*—irrespective of the question that must be taken into account especially from a *research-ethics* point of view, namely, whether observation should be conducted covertly or overtly, and irrespective of the research-practice-related question as to

whether observation should be standardized or nonstandardized, nonparticipant or participant.

Observant Participation

The main purpose of observations (of any kind) is to acquire sensory impressions, to experience things, and to register phenomena (see Gilham 2008). “Participant observation” refers to a form of observation in which participation takes place because, and to the extent that, it is necessary in order to be able to conduct observations in the first place (see DeWalt and DeWalt 2012). However, the type of observation is not predetermined (see Spradley 1980). Rather, in the course of the research process, the observations are refined and systematized and then gradually brought together.

In the relevant literature and research practice, participant observation is, of course, deemed to be *the* basic ethnographic behavior par excellence. And in *life-world-analytical* ethnography, this basic ethnographic behavior is symptomatically *supplemented* with (and not replaced by) a procedurally reflective form of co-experiencing, which we term “observant participation.” Observant *participation* differs from participant observation (1) in terms of its intent: namely, to produce observation data *and* data on lived experience; (2) in terms of technique: in case of doubt, participation takes priority over observation; (3) in terms of the quality of the data: what is desired is the achievement of an existential inside view through subjective lived experience rather than a distant outside view; and, finally, (4) in terms of the evaluation problems involved: if one wants to avoid psychologizing, or even moralizing, “bleeding-heart lyricism,” the interpretation of subjective experiential data calls for a special kind of analysis—namely *phenomenological* analysis—or at least analysis that has recourse to techniques of eidetic description and reflection.

However, *observant* participation also differs from “normal” participation, namely, in terms of its intent. The observant participant tries to experience and find out more than he actually needs as a *participant*. He tries to participate in as many things as possible, and he tries to find out something about the things in which he cannot participate. Hence, observant *participation* means becoming existentially involved, or allowing oneself to be existentially involved, in as many things as possible; it means taking different roles; it means joining in things that it is “normal” to join in; and it means that, when doing so, one observes not only other people but also oneself—while one is participating and while one is observing. This is quite a difficult undertaking because participation and observation are actually *contradictory* behaviors. When one is really observing something, one hardly gets a chance to participate (as can be seen from dancing, for example).

Even *we* do not have a fundamental solution to this dilemma. Rather, we attempt to cope with it pragmatically “somehow” on a case-to-case basis. However, it does indeed imply that, *in case of doubt*, we try to conduct not so much participant observation but rather observant participation. And that means above all that we enter the social field under investigation *intensively* and endeavor to become as similar as possible to the people we are researching—going as far as assuming communicatively intended and habitual idiosyncrasies—even if it means “getting our hands dirty” in the process. Of course, as already mentioned, for various reasons this does not always succeed and it definitely does not always succeed equally well. In fact, one is almost always obliged to make compromises between the ideal performance of life-world-analytical ethnography—that is, participation in “everything” that is happening—and the research conditions and restrictions in the respective field. However, to the extent that this (temporary) “going native” does indeed succeed, we acquire data on how and what one actually *experiences* in small social life-worlds (see Hitzler and Honer 1988 with explicit recourse to Benita Luckmann 1970), data on what is deemed important, problematic, pleasant, interesting, boring, etc. To put it briefly and technically, we attempt to achieve a high degree of familiarity with the relevances of the respective field.

This integration into the field, which should be as unconditional as possible, this existential engagement with the prevailing relevances, does *not*, for example, yield better *observation data*. On the contrary, it continually calls for a high degree of (self-) discipline to *also* take the role of observer seriously, that is, to *systematically* observe things (adequately). For this reason, we strongly advocate conducting fieldwork at least in twos in order to avoid getting “swamped” in the field and having to pull oneself out of the swamp by one’s own hair like the notorious teller of tall-tales, the eighteenth-century German nobleman Baron Munchausen. Rather, our argument in favor of observant participation as a method to be employed as a *supplement* to what ethnographers usually do—observing goings-on, acquiring documents, and talking to people—stems from the realization that *only* in this way is it possible to obtain a special kind and a special quality of data, namely, the data on the researcher’s own lived experience in the field. Although these data are only partly objectifiable and are in principle inadequately “capturable,” their exact description and analysis makes a special contribution to the interpretive description and descriptive understanding of the life-worlds of other people.

Hence, the purpose of observant participation is to independently generate data and to become familiar with the small social life-world as which the field, or something in the field, can be experienced. Therefore, the ideal attitude to assume when entering and moving around in the field is characterized

by a willingness to engage as completely as possible with all kinds of things and to assume for the (theoretically justified) time being that, initially, *everything* is of interest, and that one simply cannot know beforehand what can be classified in the course of the investigation as *not* of (any further) interest and therefore disregarded. What is ultimately registered and reconstructed, and how this is done, depends on the theoretical questions that arise in the course of the research process and that, at the same time, “control,” data collection (see Zifonun in this issue; see also Glaser and Strauss 1967; Bulmer 1979). On the one hand, this technique of constantly comparing data and theory brings order to the researcher’s “chaos of lived experience,” which results from his unbiased and open approach to the phenomena of interest and which is, at first, intended in order to heighten his awareness of what is going on in the field. On the other hand, the constant comparative method prevents unsubstantiated theoretical speculations and connects the theory back to the empirical material (see also Reichertz 2009).

Data Interpretation

The methodological canon of social scientific hermeneutics does of course provide us with a sizeable number of methods for the theory-driven interpretation of the material at hand or the recorded data (cf. the contributions in Hitzler and Honer 1997). *None* of these methods can claim to be *the* method par excellence for the analysis of all research questions (see Hitzler 2005). Rather, each analytical method provides answers to one *specific* type of question that can be put to the respective material. *What* questions should be asked can be determined only on the basis of the respective researcher’s *theoretical* interest. We believe that the hermeneutic sociology of knowledge, which was developed mainly by Hans-Georg Soeffner (see 1996, 2004, 2014; Soeffner and Hitzler 1994; cf. also Reichertz 2004), is, as a rule, best suited to *our* central questions, or to *our* central knowledge interest. Soeffner’s approach is (also) based on the anthropological premise that people endeavor to give their perceived utterances (as opposed to utterances made during sleep, for example) a consistent meaning because they basically strive to be one with themselves, because they consider *their* views to be part of themselves. Because of the aforementioned insurmountability of “medium transcendencies,” the reconstruction of the (basically inaccessible) *subjective meaning* that an *Other* attaches to his utterances succeeds at most in the form of getting close(r) to the *typical* meaning that that other person attaches to his utterances. For it is evidently *not* the consciousness of the Other that is accessible. Rather, all that is accessible, graspable, and therefore interpretable, is the intersubjectively perceivable—intended and unintended, reflective and

unreflective—utterances of the Other. Accordingly, the basic attitude of the hermeneutic interpreter primarily entails temporarily suspending previous knowledge and pragmatic understanding; formulating *falsifiable* hypotheses; exhibiting the greatest possible skepticism toward these hypotheses; and explicating why one thinks that one understands what one thinks one understands.

In contrast to the interpretation of objectifiable and “capturable” data, the interpretation of data on *one’s own lived experience* (i.e., the lived experience of the researcher himself) calls for a *phenomenological* description. The main purpose of the phenomenological description of one’s own experiential data is to relate one’s own subjective views (*An-Sichten* [*sic*], lit. “sights”) as a researcher to other viewpoints present within and outside the field and to reflect on them until such time as they become self-evident as actually experienced in-sights (*Ein-Sichten* [*sic*]). Therefore, “relying on phenomenology . . . in the sense of Alfred Schutz, will clarify in the context of our area of research interest the social scientist’s own approach to reality—in the sense of a reflexive reconstruction of his own modes of experience and consciousness procedures—in the study (by whatever means) of the particular (sociological) object” (Hitzler and Eberle 2004).

Understood in this sense, phenomenological description, as a *method*, is by no means something mysterious. On the contrary: provided one is sufficiently “free from the burden of action,” it could be applied by any “wide-awake grown-up man” (Schutz 1945) because the most relevant aspect of phenomenological description in the social sciences is without doubt simply to (temporarily) abstain from preconceived opinions or pre-judgments. This corresponds—very simply put—to what Husserl (1985) means by “eidetic reduction”: eidetics (essential intuition: *Wesensanschauung*) asks what the essence of a thing of which I am conscious is, or what determines its structure. Eidetic reductions are the main activity of sociologists who see themselves as being phenomenologically oriented. When phenomenology is performed within the framework of empirical social research, it is usually neither necessary nor meaningful to do any more than eidetic reduction because the essential feature of phenomenological description in this context is that it aims to describe objects of consciousness exactly—starting with their *specific* modes of appearance and working toward their *essential* elements or their *general* structures, which, from a phenomenological perspective, are the (only) reliable basis for the reconstruction of all possible kinds of “systems” of claims to reality, stocks of knowledge, sedimented memories, references to meaning (sense), and modes of givenness into which our lived experience and our meaningful experiences are interwoven and out of which, in turn, our reality is built. If at all, the phenomenological method appears to

be something special only insofar as it questions certain—plausible and indeed vital—commonsense assumptions (see Hitzler 2007).

The Dual Role of the Ethnographer

With life-world-analytical ethnography, we naturally aim to capture and make interpretively accessible as many different current and sedimented forms of expression and performance as possible in the field under investigation. This is also the aim of more or less *every* form of ethnography. However, with the combination of observation and participation, and hermeneutics and phenomenology that characterizes life-world-analytical phenomenology, we aim at understanding, at least approximately, the (inside) view of normal participants in sociocultural events and making it understandable to (nonparticipant) others. We do not associate with this any claim to judge other forms of ethnographic work. We merely state that the decisive criterion for the quality of both data collection procedures and data analysis methods within the framework of *our* ethnographic research work lies in the answer to the question of whether, or to what extent, they are suitable for the reconstruction of relevances, knowledge, and practices of the researched, in short: the ways in which people constitute *their* respective worlds in interaction with others.

Although we consider the broadest possible knowledge of empirical social research methods suitable for explorative-interpretive research questions to be essential for the development of an appropriate ethnographic design, we believe that compliance with canonical rules of procedure is of secondary importance for *our* basic knowledge interest. The variant of ethnography that we favor is characterized by trust in the fact that, ultimately, the researcher himself is his own best instrument, both during data collection and data analysis.

With this in mind, we explicitly insist that, in the research process, the researcher must comply with two radically different bundles of expectations: on the one hand, we see ourselves as researchers who are existentially involved in the field and who reflect on this existential involvement and use it perspectively. We thereby invoke, in particular, the tradition of “existential sociology” established by Kurt H. Wolff (see Wolff 1976; Douglas 1976; Douglas and Johnson 1977; Kotarba and Fontana 1984; Kotarba and Johnson 2002). On the other hand, we see ourselves in the (lonely) theoretical attitude (at our desks, as it were) as pragmatically distant, purely cognitively interested scientists who abstain from value judgments. In the theoretical attitude, we invoke the tradition of “interpretive sociology,” which was programmatically elaborated by Alfred Schutz with reference to Max Weber, which was refined by Thomas Luckmann, and which is now represented by Hans-Georg Soeffner, in particular (see Weber 1973; Schutz 1967; Luckmann 1983;

Soeffner 1982, 1996, 2014; and also Hitzler and Keller 1989). This means that *in the field* the researcher should, in our view, ideally (be able) to “become like . . .,” “the natives,” while in the theoretical attitude he should intentionally “play dumb,” as it were, *vis-à-vis all* (and especially his own) everyday certainties of the “thinking as;” of the “and so forth;” and of the “interchangeability of the standpoints” (see Schutz 1953) etc., and especially *vis-à-vis* their normative implications. That this implies a more or less frequent, more or less short-term, switching between the sub-universes of everyday life and scientific theory (see Schutz 1945) rather than a clear time sequence—that, in other words, it implies a “circular” rather than a “linear” epistemological process (see Spradley 1979, 1980)—should have become clear in the light of our previous procedural remarks (cf. also Pfadenhauer and Grenz in this issue).

For the life-world-analytically oriented ethnographer, this implies that he must engage with unexpected experiences; that he must be prepared to allow himself to be confused, to be shocked, to temporarily disregard his own moral values, to recognize and give up prejudices. In short: he must be maximally *willing* to understand the Other’s meaning in the way that it is meant, for in his intended and deliberate “professional schizophrenia,” in pointedly jumping (back and forth) between provinces of meaning, the basic structural dual nature of man, which Plessner calls his “*Doppelgängertum*” (Plessner 1985), comes into play methodologically. Hence, this “estrangement from one’s own culture” (Hirschauer and Amann 1997) serves mainly to recognize the relativity of all kinds of social construction, for this switching between the worldviews places the researcher in the analytically fruitful position of the “marginal man,” as propagated by Everett V. Stonequist (1961). Structurally, because of his dual position, and individually if he is capable of switching between the rigidly different frames of reference or relevance systems that are accessible to him qua participation both in the practices of the respective field and in the practices of his scientific community, this marginal man is capable of acquiring insights into the relativity of the respective relevances that are inaccessible to the “natives” of both worlds, who either do not know, do not perceive, or are not willing to acknowledge any alternatives (cf. also Park 1950; Schutz 1944; Berger 1978). However, as Douglas notes, not every social scientist has what it takes to be this kind of field researcher: “I suppose there may be people who are so completely committed to being professional sociologists that they can never escape the thought that they are sociologists. If so, they shouldn’t be field researchers” (Douglas 1976, 120).

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Notes

1. Apart from one tongue-in-cheek concession to the *zeitgeist* (Honer 1994), Anne Honer always used the masculine form in her works. Hence, there is no reason not to continue to do so in this article.
2. The use of the term “medium transcendencies” (see Schutz and Luckmann 1989) implies that the Other is a pragmatic “allegation,” as it were (see Luckmann 1983, 40–60); that he is merely a phenomenon—albeit a distinctly “resistant” one (Hitzler 2014)—of the respective Ego’s subjective consciousness. Therefore, in each concrete case, it must be clarified how (and on the basis of what worldview) something must be given to someone’s subjective consciousness in order for it to be able to constitute itself as an Other. For every person is capable, in principle, of interpreting something “on the outside”—that is, something that is present or visible to him—as an expression or a sign of something “on the inside”—that is, something that is absent or not visible to him (see Luckmann 1983, 61–91). And for this very reason, we are obliged to mutually (re)assure ourselves by means of communication, because only communication makes things that are not present appear present, and only via communication does Ego appear to apprehend as an alter ego, or as an Other, a certain kind of thing that appresents itself (see Soeffner 2010).

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