



## Empirical Phenomenology: A Qualitative Research Approach (The Cologne Seminars)

by Patrik Aspers

### Abstract

*This paper introduces the philosophical foundation and practical application of empirical phenomenology in social research. The approach of empirical phenomenology builds upon the phenomenology of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and the sociologist Alfred Schütz, but considers how their more philosophical and theoretical insights can be used in empirical research. It aims at being practically useful for anyone doing qualitative studies and concerned about safeguarding the perspective of those studied. The main idea of empirical phenomenology is that scientific explanation must be grounded in the first-order construction of the actors; that is, in their own meanings. These constructions are then related to the second-order constructions of the scientist. In this paper, empirical phenomenology is considered in the light of phenomenological philosophy. The paper includes an explication of the approach, which is summarized in seven steps through which the researcher is guided, and considers its implications for qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observation.*

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to introduce empirical phenomenology, an approach which is useful for research projects ranging in scope from small to large-scale.<sup>1</sup> A short definition of the focus of phenomenology is “that which appears”. Empirical phenomenology tries to study this empirically. This means that it follows neither the eidetic approach of Edmund Husserl nor the ontological approach of Martin Heidegger, although both are nevertheless important in relation to empirical research. Empirical

phenomenology proceeds from the assumption that a scientific explanation must be grounded in the meaning structure of those studied. This means that the actors’ perspective is central in the analysis. A further assumption is that the social world is socially constructed, an argument which is generally accepted in contemporary social science. Finally, empirical phenomenology acknowledges the central role of theory in research, as well as the role of unintended consequences. Hence, empirical phenomenology is not just storytelling from the actors’ perspective.

The aim of this paper is not primarily to position the approach in relation to others, but rather to introduce both its foundation and practice to the reader. To explain how to practise empirical phenomenology, I will begin with a brief background to its philosophical heritage. This includes a short presentation of the central ideas of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and

<sup>1</sup> The notion of “empirical phenomenology” has also been used in psychology. Although the outlook is quite similar, the idea of scientific explanation, the role of theory and the questions asked by social scientists distinguish the approach discussed in this paper, in addition to the fact that this approach is directed at social life.

Martin Heidegger, followed by a section on the person who effectively brought phenomenology to the social sciences, Alfred Schütz. This is followed by the presentation of empirical phenomenology, which builds on the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Schütz. Before concluding the paper, I discuss the consequences of empirical phenomenology for qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviews. The purpose of this is to make it easier for readers to grasp how the approach is intended to work in practice.

### Philosophical Phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger

The philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is the founding father of phenomenology, but others who have also used and substantially contributed to phenomenological ideas include Heidegger, Sartre, Schütz, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Berger and Luckmann, Ricoeur, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, Derrida, Giddens and Habermas. The different phenomenological routes they have taken suggest that it is futile to attempt to identify one single doctrine in phenomenology; rather, it is better to see it as a movement united by a common core.<sup>2</sup>

The core idea of phenomenology, in short, is that analysis does not start with the objective world 'out there', as is the case in the natural sciences and in much of the social sciences as well, but with 'mental directedness', or that which the mental is about, or directed to. Husserl did not speak of the mental directedness of real people, but rather suggested using phenomenological reduction as a means to secure a foundation of knowledge. Few of his followers, however, have endorsed this notion. Instead, thinkers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir and, of course, Alfred Schütz, have argued that one should start from real people but retain the idea of mental directedness.

An important idea that not only Husserl, but also Heidegger, implement is the general trait of the phenomenological approach to not start with a set of assumptions, but to gradually establish a foothold. This foothold represents a temporary secure vantage point rather than assuming that there is a world ready to be discovered. What this means is that it is a process that can only be undertaken given the

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of phenomenology, see for example Moran (2001), Farber (1943) and Spiegelberger (1982). For a good introduction and discussion of Husserl, see Zahavi (2003). See also the journal *Human Studies* for articles discussing the phenomenology of the social sciences.

assumption of something else, but this "something else" can, and should be, the subject of scrutiny at a later stage. This means that the methods of the study are also subject to scrutiny. It is an attempt to identify the first question, as Heidegger (1937-1938/1984, pp. 1-4) discusses. A consequence is that one may also question the assumptions of the sciences (Heidegger, 1927/2001, pp. 202-203), although not all of this can be done in a single study.

This zigzagging hints at a central phenomenological standpoint: that phenomenology is fundamentally a fore-science or "Urwissenschaft" as Heidegger calls it (Heidegger, 1992, p. 1). That is, it does not aim to be a science, but rather – as a philosophy – questions the ground of science, the taken-for-grantedness of the sciences.<sup>3</sup> The aim, of course, is to reach a better understanding of the conditions of science. The understanding that all sciences reach is fundamentally based on the practice and knowledge of the everyday lifeworld; this is the stepping stone for all formal knowledge and the basis of all interpretation (cf. Heidegger, 1927/2001).

I have used this step-by-step oriented approach to gain a foothold and to establish knowledge. It has thus been included in the empirical research process. It is a way of zigzagging the research process, starting with one thing or assumption, which then is questioned, and which then can be the basis for further steps in the research process. At a more general level, this zigzagging aims at understanding. Understanding is a central concept in the social sciences, and phenomenologists, most notably Heidegger and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, have clarified what this means. Understanding is intimately connected to meaning. Meaning is understood, and this is what we mean by understanding in processes of interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/1990).<sup>4</sup> The simple example of understanding is when ego understands alter. Understanding of something demands connecting it to something that is already known (Heidegger, 1927/ 2001, p. 200). What is implied is an holistic rather than atomistic approach; meaning is understood in context, and understanding can only emerge in a process. This process is characterized by movement, back and forth, or in a circle, over time. This so-called hermeneutical circle or "circle of understanding" implies that a part – for

<sup>3</sup> We shall remember here that Husserl's idea of phenomenology as a "rigorous science" is misleading (Heidegger, 1992, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup> See Heidegger (1988) on the genealogy of Hermeneutics. It was Schleiermacher who developed hermeneutics to an art of understanding: "Kunst des Verstehens" (Heidegger, 1988, p. 13).

example, a word – is understood in a process in relation to a whole, the sentence, or the text, and of course vice versa (Gadamer, 1959/1988). The reference to hermeneutics is here restricted to the notion of it as a method of understanding<sup>5</sup>

It is, to conclude this section, obvious that a social scientist cannot in every project question and analyze the foundation of research and science. There is much that social scientists can learn from phenomenological philosophers. Among the things that empirical researchers who want to practise phenomenology can learn from philosophical phenomenology are, firstly, how to think about research and, secondly, the conditions of understanding. Can the social scientist phenomenologist Alfred Schütz narrow the gap between philosophy and practical empirical research?

### Sociological Phenomenology of Schütz

Although Husserl gradually became more aware of the problems of applying phenomenology to social life, he never abandoned the idea that there is a kingdom of truths that is accessible to human knowledge, which was to be the foundation for the new science of phenomenology. While some phenomenological ideas have been integrated into mainstream social science, sometimes only the word “phenomenology” remains of the core of the doctrine, and it has been reduced to “something subjective”, a “thick description”, a “narrative”, or something that is “closer to how it is”. The Austrian sociologist Alfred Schütz (1899-1959) developed his own brand of phenomenology. In contrast to Husserl, Schütz argues that the researcher should start with the life-world, where the person acts within the natural attitude, which the actor takes for granted (Schütz, 1966/1975, pp. 5 & 51). Schütz is clear about his major break with phenomenological philosophy: “[A]s we proceed to our study of the social world, we abandon the strictly phenomenological method. . . . The object we shall be studying, therefore, is the human being who is looking at the world from within the natural attitude” (Schütz, 1932/1976, pp. 97-98; cf. pp. 43-44). The starting point of the social sciences has to be the ordinary social life of people (Schütz, 1932/1976, p. 141) – that is, the “*intentional conscious experiences directed toward the other self*” (Schütz, 1932/1976, p. 144). The scientist’s material is the mental content of people’s natural attitude (cf. Schütz, 1966/1975, pp. 116-132).

One central idea is that the researcher should, in order

<sup>5</sup> The genealogy of hermeneutics points to its connection to the understanding of texts, but I see it as more generally applicable.

to understand the person or persons she is studying, try to grasp what phenomenologists call “meaning structure” (*Sinnzusammenhang*). This notion refers to the web of meanings that are constituted by actors. Meanings, in other words, come in structures and attain meaning in relation to other meanings. This process of meaning constitution, at the level of the individual, and meaning construction, at the social level, can be studied empirically by the researcher.

Schütz’s distinction between first-order constructs of the people studied and second-order constructs of the researcher is of great importance to social scientists. By conducting empirical studies, the researcher aims at understanding actors’ meaning levels, their first-order constructs. Only on the basis of these first-order constructs can one develop second-order constructs, which can become parts of a theory. Schütz explains:

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within their social world. Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so-to-speak, constructs of the second degree, that is, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene. (Schütz, 1962, p. 59)

The researcher’s second-order constructs are based on the constructions of the actors in the field. In this way, the researcher connects the “common sense world” with the scientific world of theories.

Another issue that Schütz discusses, the role of language in the process of understanding the other, is highly relevant for the social scientist conducting empirical research. Understanding the other is a requirement for the empirical phenomenologist. It calls for verbal and/or physical communication, which are both means and obstacles to accessing the meaning structure of others.

But what does understanding mean in practice, and how does one reach it? Understanding a person, Schütz argues, is accomplished when one understands what the other means (Schütz, 1996, p. 127; 1932/1976; 1964, pp. 20-62). Hence, clarifying the notion of meaning is crucial in order to talk about understanding. Language is seen as the medium of both “objective” and “subjective” meaning; that is to say, language is the primary vehicle for actors expressing their mental attitudes. At the same time, however, it imposes a restriction, since language is socially, and not individually, constructed. In this

way, mental life is to some extent structured by language and other institutions (Schütz, 1982, pp. 128-131). In Schütz's own words, "objective meaning is the meaning of the sign as such, the kernel, so-to-speak; whereas subjective meaning is the fringe [horizon] or aura emanating from the subjective contact in the mind of the sign-user" (Schütz, 1932/1976, p. 126; see also 1982, pp. 140-145, 160-162). Schütz also connects a theory of interpretation of the performer (cf. Schütz, 1932/1976, pp. 126-132) to the theory of signs and meaning. This implies the view that meaning is not transmitted atom by atom; meaning is holistic, more like a web. Alter must interpret the meaning of ego, which is quite hard to achieve without distortion.<sup>6</sup> It would, however, be to do injustice to phenomenology if we reduced meaning to language. In fact, Heidegger has shown how the role of practice and the use of tools ("Zeuge") are crucial elements of understanding (Heidegger, 1927/2001).

The likelihood of two actors understanding each other will depend upon several factors. Understanding is more likely to occur if ego and alter attach the same meaning to words, if they both know the subject matter well, are engaged in the same activities, share the same habits of communication, and so on (cf. Schütz, 1932/1976, pp. 126-127). Another way of saying this is that the actors first grasp the objectified meaning of the (communally used) sign system, which is not made up just of words, and from this and the general knowledge of the situation, ego interprets the subjective meaning (Schütz, 1932/1976, p. 166). A combination of observation and communication facilitates the understanding of the other (Schütz, 1932/1976, pp. 172-176; 1982; cf. 1964, p. 55); only in a hermeneutical process can understanding be reached. By participating in face-to-face interaction, especially if two actors have prior knowledge of one another, they are more likely to get their meaning across than if they do not know each other or each other's provinces of meaning (Schütz, 1962, p. 220). Through this process of communication, experience and interpretation that ego and alter(s) are involved in, one reaches the meaning level of other actors and understands the way they construct ideal types, theories, codes, habits, words and other aspects of their daily life, or what Schütz calls first-order constructs. From this, it is thus possible to conclude that Schütz would have seen the combination of observation and interviewing as the best way to understand the other, although he does not deal with this issue explicitly. But how can we make this

<sup>6</sup> There are some clear connections with what scholars of hermeneutics like Paul Ricoeur (1981) talk about as understanding, as well as to its process.

approach applicable to empirical research? To my knowledge, no-one has systematically tried to apply Schütz's approach to the empirical domain.<sup>7</sup>

Phenomenology can be compared with both ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism (as a school that one can trace back to pragmatism; see Joas, 1987). Although ethnomethodology draws on Husserl's and Schütz's work, it uses only one aspect of it – the taken for granted aspect of daily life. Phenomenology is also more mentally oriented than the symbolic interactionist school, which focuses more on what happens *between* people. Furthermore, central tenets of phenomenology are the systematic reflexive approach of knowledge, the conditions for knowledge, and the ontology of man. It should be underlined, however, that there are nevertheless also many similarities between these three schools.

Phenomenology has taken three routes that are relevant to social science. The first is the one taken by Schütz and his followers, which is essentially non-empirical. The second is ethnomethodology, which is only remotely related to phenomenology, and the third and perhaps most well known is the integration of phenomenology into mainstream social science. Below I present what can be seen as a fourth route, empirical phenomenology, which is a development based on interpretations of the phenomenological literature discussed above.

### Towards Empirical Phenomenology

I will now try to make Schütz's approach more empirically applicable. Empirical phenomenology is distinguished from the other three routes in that it is both grounded in the philosophical tradition and takes into account core insights of the social sciences such as unintended consequences and theory. In this section I will describe how the social science researcher proceeds if employing the empirical phenomenological approach. If we are to understand the social world and meet the demands of phenomenology, we must produce explanations that are grounded in the subjective experiences of real people. At the same time, we must not simply deliver descriptions of states of minds; social science must understand why and how things happen, and this must refer to the way people understand and relate to these phenomena.

The starting point of empirical phenomenology is

<sup>7</sup> There is a large body of literature that draws on Schütz (e.g. Natanson, 1973), but few social scientists try to "translate" his ideas into an empirical phenomenological approach to be used in social science.

what counts as an explanation. The conditions of the explanation guide, or even determine, how the researcher must work, the kind of methods to employ, how to analyse the material, and how to present it. That the conditions of an explanation are a point of reference is true not only of empirical phenomenology, but of most, if not all, research approaches. The premise of empirical phenomenology is that an *explanation in the social sciences should be connected to the meaning structure of real people*. This is a condition for an explanation based on understanding. What does this mean?

The shortest answer is that the explanation, which is expressed by a theory – a set of interrelated concepts – must be grounded in the meaning structure of the actors studied. This means that the theory, made up of second-order constructs (including, for example, ideal types), must be able to communicate in two ways, and to explain this I refer back to Schütz's distinction between first- and second-order constructs. The first way in which a theory must communicate is that it must be understandable to other scientists; in addition to this, it must also communicate to the actors who have made the first-order constructs. The third relation is, of course, the connection between the first-order constructs and the second-order constructs. The point to focus on is that an explanation is much more than a thick story that represents what the actors think (that is, storytelling) or the attribution of meaning by the researcher to the actors (that is, objectivism).

### The Seven Steps of Empirical Phenomenology

How does one turn what I have discussed into practical use that can generate good research? The empirical phenomenological approach can be summarized in seven steps, and I will go through each of these in this paper.

1. Define the research question.
2. Conduct a preliminary study.
3. Choose a theory and use it as a scheme of reference.
4. Study first-order constructs (and bracket the theories).
5. Construct second-order constructs.
6. Check for unintended effects.
7. Relate the evidence to the scientific literature and the empirical field of study.

The fact that the research process can be analytically separated into seven steps reflects a pedagogical need. In reality, the process is likely to iterate, reflecting the zigzagging process for testing and establishing secure footholds for knowledge. For example, the researcher

will go back and forth between steps one and three more than once. None of the steps is unique to qualitative research, but together they safeguard the actor perspective without downplaying the role of theory, which is all too common in qualitative research.

I now turn to the first of the seven steps. Space does not allow me to give many examples of these steps, but the reader may consult other texts for this purpose (e.g. Aspens, 2001/2006).<sup>8</sup> It is the researcher who decides what problem is at hand (step one). The problem may emerge from his or her interests, or it can be more directly related to ongoing debates within a research community, the field of study or any other source. To find out what theory to use, the researcher must engage in the field; this decision cannot be made from the researcher's armchair. During what is called the preliminary ("vor") study (step two), the researcher attempts to discover if it is possible to address the question. The question itself may also change, as might the theory that is most suitable and the methods that can be used. To find this out, the researcher must interact with people in the field and read academic and non-academic texts in the field. She may also do some interviews and, preferably, participant observations. All this enables the researcher to gain an overview of the field and, based on this knowledge, to be in a much better position to make judgements about strategic research decisions than if she had not conducted a preliminary study. This is a condition for understanding the later material, which may be more the result of a focused process that is generated.

The point is not that the preliminary study solves all problems encountered in research, but rather that it is an efficient way to come to grips with a field. In a smaller study, such as an undergraduate thesis, the preliminary study may consist of a couple of visits to the field or a few test interviews. In a larger research project, it may mean a month or even more of "hanging out" with members of the field, and the extensive reading of texts. Informants, or people in the field with whom the researcher can have continued contact in order to gain more profound knowledge of the field, are a great advantage, and establishing relations with a few during the preliminary study may prove invaluable.

Step three, choosing a theory, is an integral part of the

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the field of qualitative research, see, for example, Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2005). The large number of articles, including many published in this journal, and books dealing with aspects of qualitative research cannot be discussed here.

early phase of the research process. Theories guide the researcher towards identifying which aspects of a topic it is relevant to study, as one cannot possibly study the first-order constructs of every topic. This means that the researcher uses theories as schemes of reference, which give focus to the study. For example, if the researcher is using labelling theory in a study of social deviance, she will study questions relevant to this theory (scheme).

But how can we decide which theory to use? The chosen theory must, of course, fit the empirical evidence and research question, and it must give an answer that satisfies the demand for a phenomenological explanation. Theory is thus a means in the process of understanding. A scientific conclusion is reached only when the researcher, and ultimately the reader of the researcher's report, understands the actor's perspective. In order to accomplish this, the researcher must find ways of studying the actors that enable her to understand them (step four). This implies reaching the level of actors' first-order constructs, where the researcher explicates the actors' meaning structure and the ideal types they use, but avoids reading in the theories. The focus is on the first-order constructs, not the second-order constructs. However, the researcher is not interested in all first-order constructs, but only those "covered" by the scheme of reference. The empirical material gathered is what Schütz describes as the first-order constructs. This means gathering information about what people mean when they use certain words, how these are related to each other in a meaning structure, what "theories" they are using, what "ideal types" they construct among themselves, and in what kind of practices they are involved. This information can be gathered by using many of the methods that fall within the broad category of qualitative methods in the social sciences.

In the research process, the researcher cannot just let her theory guide her into the details of the empirical field; the empirical material, so to speak, must be given the chance to "kick back". This means that the empirical evidence may reformulate the theory, alter it, or add dimensions to it. The researcher must, therefore, bracket the theories while being in the field. To be more specific, she lets the theory guide her to certain empirical domains and to address certain themes and ask certain questions, but she does not have a set of concepts that are used as boxes to be filled with empirical material.

Social science does not aim only at descriptions of how people feel, perceive and think about things, although this is central to the phenomenological approach. Most social scientists instead strive for

understanding and explanation, and these are gained only when first-order constructs are related to second-order constructs, that is, to theory. This means that the researcher produces second-order constructs in relation to the actor's first-order constructs (step five). The second-order constructs, as indicated, must communicate in two directions. On the one hand, they must comply with the demand of actors' understanding; in other words, they must be understandable to the actors within the field. On the other hand, they must be connected with existing scientific theory and be understandable within the scientific community. Both dimensions are important, but the connection to the first-order constructs of actors can never be omitted in a purely empirical phenomenological explanation, given the requirement that it be grounded in the understanding of the actors and the phenomena studied.

Second-order constructs enable the researcher to relate and evaluate the scheme of reference she chooses. The second-order constructs, or "accounts of accounts", can be theoretical notions of an existing theory. But, as already said, there must always be room for flexibility, and the second-order constructs may thus also be constructs produced and coined by the researcher. The relation between empirical material (first-order constructs, textual material and other forms of information) and the theoretical level, the second-order constructs, is dealt with extensively in the large body of literature on qualitative methods and analysis, and will not be discussed further here.

Step six concerns a key question in the social sciences, namely that of unintended consequences. In essence, unintended consequences are generally regarded as the effects of actions that have certain intended results as goals. Furthermore, even though countless unintended consequences may result from an action, only a few are relevant to the researcher. An unintended consequence must first be seen as a relevant "object" of an actor, either those in the field or the researcher, in order to become an interesting object for investigation. The attachment of meaning to unintended consequences is not a different process from the attachment of meaning in general. Thus, the issue of unintended consequences is only one instance of the general problem of explanation (cf. Elster, 1989). One difference is that a consequence which the actors see as uninteresting may be very interesting to the researcher, because actors and researchers have different horizons of interest. The other difference with unintended consequences is that it is often the researcher's task to establish the link(s) between actors' perspectives on the acts and the way in which these acts relate to the effect. In other words, actors execute intended and meaningful acts, and these have

both intended and unintended consequences. While the actors may see some of the consequences as connected to their acts, and the scientist may be able to connect others to their actions, still others will remain undetected, although they may, of course, be powerful and important. Thus, the actors themselves cannot foresee or even imagine the full consequences of their acts (cf. Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 237). By maintaining a scientific attitude, which in practice means to stick to her question and make use of second-order constructs, the researcher may be able to present a picture of the actors' life-world that connects their meaningful actions with both intended and unintended consequences.

The final step of the empirical phenomenological approach concerns the relationship between the empirical evidence that a phenomenological study produces and the existing body of theory and experience of actors in the field. To safeguard actors' perspective, it may be useful to allow people from the field to read a research report. One could never, however, demand that they agree with the conclusion. For example, if one studies criminal gangs, members may not like that one reveals certain things about them, nor may they agree with a conclusion that classifies them as a menace. What one can, nevertheless, demand is that they recognise themselves in the account that one as a researcher has given. The researcher, thus, must communicate both to the people in her scientific field and to those in the field of study; this can, in fact, be used as a criterion that must be met by the empirical phenomenologist.

The advancement made by empirical phenomenology over previous attempts to do phenomenological social science can be summarized in three points: firstly, it is empirical; secondly, it makes use of and integrates theory in empirical research; and, thirdly, it checks for unintended consequences. The iterative character of the process is meant to avoid being blindfolded by theories. At the same time, however, the approach acknowledges that every researcher uses a theory, regardless of whether it is implicit or made explicit. In the following section, I will discuss the practical implications of empirical phenomenology. How, for example, should one go about doing participant observation and interviews? This section will clarify the ethos of empirical phenomenology and guide the practice of researchers who wish to employ this approach.

### **Empirical Phenomenology in the Field**

Empirical phenomenology is characterised primarily by how the researcher approaches her field, but there are also practical implications, which nonetheless

may be applicable to other social scientific approaches as well. Remember the starting point of empirical phenomenology: explanation must account for actors' first-order constructs. This means that, while the methods employed by the researcher may vary, they must safeguard both the actors' perspective and the role of theory. Hence, the researcher cannot simply use methods of observation – they must be combined with informal conversations and interviews. In other words, empirical phenomenological approaches normally require verbal interaction with those studied in the field, for which interviews are most suitable (cf. Schütz, 1932/1976, p. 174), and practice may be of crucial importance. Therefore, the research benefits from observing the situation or the people studied, and, ideally, combining interviews with observation. This connection is clear in Schütz's thinking: from observation alone it is easy to make mistakes; understanding demands a combination of observation and questioning (Schütz, 1932/1976, pp. 167-176, 229). The idea is that the preliminary study guides the researcher to the most suitable methods given her field, theory and competence. Nonetheless, it is often wise to use several methods in the course of a study. For example, the first interactions in the field may be through observation, whether participant or not, and later the researcher can pose questions about the things that she has been exposed to, and knows or thinks she knows something about. To start asking questions before one really knows what people do in the field may often be awkward, and it is obvious that the researcher will leave out large domains due to her lack of experience in the field.

In fact, the question is not why one should combine methods, but rather why one should not. It is often useful to combine methods, or to use what is termed the "triangulation" approach. Below, I give a short presentation of how to utilise each method from the perspective of empirical phenomenology, with the goal of describing how these methods are oriented in a phenomenological direction and not to discuss them in their own right.

### **Using Participant Observation**

The traditional approach to participant observation and fieldwork, which originates from anthropological fieldwork, includes long-term presence and meticulous field notes that clearly separate the researcher's opinions and feelings from what is observed and said by the people studied. Interaction is a virtue, but, in cases when one cannot interact verbally, observation should be undertaken. This means that field notes should be objective and give a good account of the situation. They should ideally be so clear and transparent that other researchers can

read them and analyse the material. This means, in practice, that the physical surroundings and much of what goes on in the field is seen, interpreted and analysed by the researcher. Even though the material is often analysed in combination with interviews and other forms of evidence, this does not change the fact that observational material is collected and interpreted from the researcher's point of view.

The empirical phenomenologist sees much of this as a reasonable strategy, with one main difference: she is less inclined to rest with only her own objectivist accounts of what she has observed. The phenomenologist may therefore turn her own observations into research questions.

Thus, what she observes can be used as a basis for posing questions to those she observes about what is going on, what it means, if it is typical, and so on. The entire social setting, including the physical surroundings (for example, an office where the study is undertaken), may also be seen from the members' perspectives. Only through their accounts can the researcher find out what those she studies have naturalised and come to take for granted, and the meaning their surroundings have for them.

A fruitful strategy for accessing the perspective of actors is to use a video camera or other forms of visual recording techniques and media. To have an informal discussion or interview centred on the visual document, "photo elicitation", is highly recommended as a method. This not only facilitates discussion, but, in cases where people find it very difficult to express what they are doing verbally, visual tools may also help them to explain what is going on in their words.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, this does not mean that the researcher should avoid her own impressions, as these may be extremely useful as the basis for posing questions and normally give insight into how a newcomer to a field feels and what she perceives. It is nonetheless important to separate the first-order constructs of the actors in the field from the second-order constructs of the researcher. Furthermore, the everyday knowledge of the researcher is the foundation for all the interpreting that a human being, when acting in the role of a scientist, does. In other words, the understanding of the scientist is necessarily rooted in the understanding of her ordinary life in which she is one being among others.

<sup>9</sup> For more on photo elicitation, see e.g. Banks (2001) and Kretsedemas (1993); with regard to the use of video production and dissemination of results in research on children, see Brannen (2002).

## Using Interviews

Above I have described how participant observation may be used to safeguard the perspective of those studied. As already said, it implies that one must speak to people; the researcher cannot remain trapped in her own preconceptions about what people are doing, and cannot simply assume that she sees the same thing as those studied. I will now describe how one can conduct interviews and maintain an actor-centred perspective, which of course is a fairly common theme in the literature.

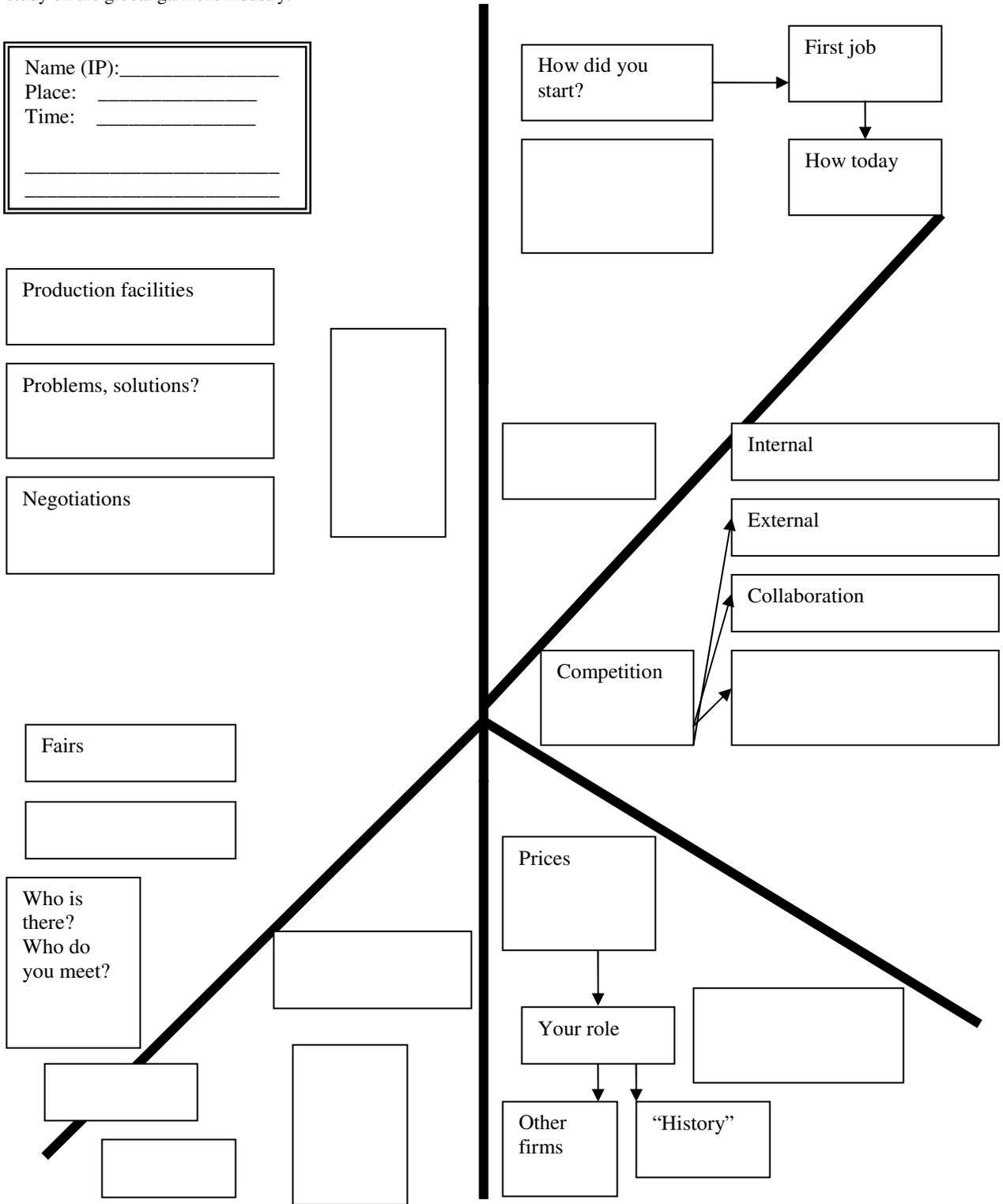
I will not discuss interviewing as such, nor its various forms such as focus groups (cf. Hydén & Bülow, 2003). I will instead describe one practical technique that the researcher can apply while doing interviews. This is based on an interview guide called the *A-Scheme* (Aspers, 2004), which is useful for non-structured interviews that aim at exploring the meaning structure of the interviewee. The *A-Scheme* was developed for empirical phenomenological research, although I hope the reader sees that it has wider applicability. This scheme helps the researcher to pose questions during the interview and to explore the meaning structure of actors starting from what they say, and not from the researcher's perspective.

Organising questions in a structured interview seldom poses problems for an experienced social scientist. However, the empirical phenomenologist wants to explore the social world in a less predetermined way, reflecting actors' meaning structures rather than her own. To do this, she is likely to use non-structured or semi-structured interviews. The themes discussed during non-structured interviews, which in the approach discussed here are essentially guided by the theory the researcher has chosen as a frame of reference, may be more or less vague, and change when the interview takes a new route. In some cases, the researcher does not even have any formulated questions, but rather a set of themes for discussion. An interview guide must be able to cope with this.

The scheme presented in Figure 1 on the following page makes it easier to keep control of the themes and concrete questions while simultaneously staying focused on the interviewee and what she says. When the researcher has a set of questions printed or jotted down in vertically ordered linear sequence, she will sometimes inadvertently "drive" the interview according to her line of questions or themes. If the researcher instead has the questions outlined graphically, she remains free to concentrate on interaction with the interviewee and subject matter.

Figure 1. The A-Scheme.

Note: Figure 1 illustrates the *A-Scheme*. The thick lines indicate different themes. A number of questions can be included within each theme and may be sequentially ordered or not (by using arrows as shown). The text in the boxes may be questions in the case of a more structured interview. Here, I have included some themes discussed in relation to the theoretical approach I am using in a study on the global garment industry.



(Patrik Aspers, 2004)

The *IPJP* is a joint project of the Humanities Faculty of the [University of Johannesburg](http://www.uj.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University's](http://www.ecu.edu.au) Faculty of Regional Professional Studies in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium without the express permission of the publishers.

Using the scheme in Figure 1 during the interview makes it easy to see the themes covered and those yet to be covered, and the researcher thereby never loses control over what needs further attention. This scheme allows for the inclusion of further themes and additional questions related to each of the themes. One may, for example, include new dimensions of the meaning structure of different themes as they are expanded during the interview. It is therefore suggested that one should, as shown in Figure 1, leave a few empty boxes within the “field” of each theme (marked by thick black lines), as well as leaving one or two fields empty for the inclusion of additional themes. This is especially important in non-structured interviews, in which themes not thought of by the researcher may emerge. Thus, when the researcher comes up with ideas of what to ask the interviewee and how to expand the analysis of the meaning structure but does not want to interfere at a particular point in the interview, she can note her ideas in one of the boxes left empty for this purpose. The researcher may then return to this specific theme later in the interview, when the discussion makes it more relevant.

As many of us have experienced, people seldom address the issues or themes of an interview in the order we “expect” them to. Thus, a single answer or story told by the interviewee may actually address several different themes or questions. It is, therefore, useful to draw lines (preferably using different colours) that indicate connections between the themes as they appear during the interview; for example, how one issue under the first theme leads the interviewee to talk about an issue you have placed within another theme, reflecting your preconceptions. Later in the interview, the lines can be turned into questions about these connections. The connections, presented as lines, may be indications that your themes are wrong or need revision. Thus, a skilled researcher’s work in creating ideas and analysing connections is facilitated by the schematic outline of the interview. These are, of course, only suggestions for how one can use the *A-Scheme*, which can be adapted to suit various purposes.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the philosophical foundation and seven steps of the empirical phenomenological approach and pointed to some of its more practical implications for social research. The main point of this approach is to ensure that the actors’ perspective comes through, and thus that no scientific explanation exists unless what is studied is related to the first-order constructs of those studied. Having said this, not all of the steps and techniques

discussed are unique to empirical phenomenology, and it is of course possible to make use of parts of this approach while leaving others out. The important idea is that the reader is able to see the philosophical roots and, if she accepts the assumptions of empirical phenomenology with regard to what constitutes a scientific explanation, can get practical tips on how to conduct empirical research.

It may perhaps appear as though empirical phenomenology is restricted to qualitative analysis. Although qualitative analysis must be the starting point for constructing ideal types, meaning structures, motives and other dimensions that are of interest to the researcher using the perspective to understand and explain social reality, it does not exclude the possibility of generalising the results by using quantitative methods. If it is possible to identify the meaning structure or other types of evidence produced by qualitative research in surveys, then one may proceed and do quantitative research.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, not possible to begin from quantitative research and then do empirical phenomenology. The reason is simple: quantitative data cannot, in practice, connect variables in the dataset to form a meaning structure. The meaning structure must be identified in relation to the practices of the actors.

All in all, much of what is taught in courses on qualitative methods, such as interview techniques, analysis, and training in computer packages for qualitative analysis, can be used by the empirical phenomenological researcher. Using these techniques in phenomenological research simply requires that you think through how they may be used in order to produce an explanation of the phenomenon you study.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Aspens (2001/2006) for an example of how this can be done, using ideal types constructed during fieldwork, which are quantified and tested using factor analysis of survey data.

## Acknowledgement

I am grateful for support by STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education), and for comments by Martin Bauer, Jan Bengtsson, Caroline Dahlberg and participants at the Methodology Institute seminar at the LSE, the Life-world seminar at Gothenburg University, and, finally, the participants in the two Cologne Seminars on Empirical Phenomenology at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (2007), which were important for the development of this text.

## About the Author



Patrik Aspers is a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, Germany, and Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and SCORE at Stockholm University. In addition to having published extensively in academic journals in the fields of economic sociology, fashion, sociological theory and qualitative research, he is the author of a number of books, including *Markets in Fashion: A Phenomenological Approach* (Stockholm: City University Press, 2001; 2nd revised edition London: Routledge, 2006) and the recently released *Orderly Fashion: The Sociology of Markets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

## References

- Aspers, P. (2004, November). *Empirical phenomenology: An approach for qualitative research*. Paper presented to the Methodology Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.
- Aspers, P. (2006). *Markets in fashion: A phenomenological approach* (2nd rev. ed.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 2001)
- Banks, M. (2001). *Visual methods in social research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brannen, J. (2002). The use of video in research dissemination: Children as experts on their own family lives. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 5(2), 173-180.
- Elster, J. (1989). *Nuts and bolts for the social sciences*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2005). *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Farber, M. (1943). *The foundation of phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the quest for a rigorous science of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1988). On the circle of understanding. In J. M. Connolly & T. Keutner (Eds.), *Hermeneutics versus science. Three German Views: Wolfgang Stegmüller, Hans Georg Gadamer, Ernst Konrad Specht* (pp. 68-78). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. (Original work published 1959)
- Gadamer, H. G. (1990). *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr. (Original work published 1960)

---

The *IPJP* is a joint project of the Humanities Faculty of the [University of Johannesburg](http://www.ujohannesburg.ac.za) in South Africa and [Edith Cowan University's](http://www.edithcowan.edu.au) Faculty of Regional Professional Studies in Australia. This document is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced in whole or in part via any medium without the express permission of the publishers.

- Heidegger, M. (1984). *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte "Probleme" der Logik. Gesamtausgabe, II Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944, Band 45*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann. (Original work published 1937-1938)
- Heidegger, M. (1988). *Ontologie: Hermeneutik der Faktizität. Gesamtausgabe, II Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919-1944, Band 63*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Heidegger, M. (1992). *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie. Gesamtausgabe, II Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1923-1944, Band 58*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Heidegger, M. (2001). *Sein und Zeit* (18th ed.). Tübingen, Germany: Max Niemeyer Verlag. (Original work published 1927)
- Husserl E. (1962). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology, Book I* (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). New York: Collier Books. (Original work published 1913)
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1954)
- Hydén, L. C., & Bülow P. H. (2003). Who's talking: Drawing conclusions from focus groups – some methodological considerations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6(1), 305-321.
- Joas, H. (1987). Symbolic interactionism. In A. Giddens & J. Turner (Eds.), *Social theory today* (pp. 82-115). Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
- Kretsedemas, P. (1993). Reading advertisements: Race vs ethnicity? *Visual Sociology*, 8(2), 40-47.
- Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- Natanson, M. (Ed.). (1973). *Phenomenology and the social sciences* (2 vols.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences: Essays on language* (J. B. Thompson, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schütz, A. (1962). *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality* (3rd ed.) (M. Natanson, Ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schütz, A. (1964). *Collected papers II: Studies in social theory* (A. Brodersen, Ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schütz, A. (1975). *Collected papers III: Studies in phenomenological philosophy* (I. Schutz, Ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff. (Original work published 1966)
- Schütz, A. (1976). *The phenomenology of the social world* (G. Walsh & F. Lehnert, Trans.). London: Heinemann Educational Books. (Original work published 1932)
- Schütz, A. (1982). *Life forms and meaning structure* (H. Wagner, Ed. & Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Schütz, A. (1996). *Collected papers IV* (H. Wagner & G. Psathas, Eds., in collaboration with F. Kersten). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1982). *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction* (Vols. 1 & 2) (3rd ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Zahavi, D. (2003). *Husserl's phenomenology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.