

SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Methods

Sub-entry

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VERSTEHEN

Verstehen is at the same time an everyday practice and a sociological research method. For the actor in the everyday, Verstehen is a routine activity that constantly occupies them as they pragmatically go about their lives. It therefore is existential for their being and acting in the social world. Sociologists use Verstehen as a social-scientific method to uncover the structures and functions of actors' knowledge and experience of the social world. As a sociological method, Verstehen fundamentally differs from Verstehen in the everyday because it relies on a body of specialist professional knowledge. The advancement of this method since the early 20th century has led to the emergence of a distinct methodological orientation that is often described as Verstehende sociology or interpretive sociology. This entry discusses the social-scientific method and its relationship to the everyday practice of Verstehen and explores symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches to Verstehen, including phenomenological lifeworld analysis and ethnomethodology.

Verstehen and the Social-Scientific Method

Verstehen as a sociological research method is concerned with the exploring the relationship between actor and situation they act in and experience. As a research method Verstehen emerged in contrast to the scientific and positivistic approach to understanding society that dominated the emerging new discipline of sociology between the late 19th and early 20th century. In these early days of the discipline, sociological forefathers such as Auguste Comte (1798-1857) argued that sociology and its methods should be modelled on the successful natural sciences and be designed to support societal progress. This view persisted into the early 1900s when in North America Lester Ward (1841-1913) developed a sociology based on scientific methods. At the same time, however, doubts arose with regard to the suitability of scientific methods for the study of society. In Germany Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) suggested that whilst the natural sciences were oriented to only the outer experience of the world, the human sciences had to take into account people's inner experience. Hence, the human sciences could not be reduced to the methodology of the natural sciences although they share some of the same research methods such as observation, description, and classification. Yet, he argues that the human sciences also use the method of Verstehen which implies a reliving of the subjects' experience of the world. Dilthey's work coincides with the emergence of sociology in Germany and continental Europe where Max Weber (1864-1920) became one of the founders of sociology as an academic discipline based on the understanding that its methods need to include both Verstehen and *Erklären* (explaining) (Martin, 2018).

At this point it is worthwhile to briefly talk about the term *Verstehen* and its transfer into the English language. The German word *Verstehen* means something like “understanding” or “comprehending”. In English-speaking sociology, however, it is common

to translate *Verstehen* with “Interpreting” and to talk about “interpretive sociology” and “interpretive methods” when referring to a sociology that is concerned with the *Verstehen* of human experience of the social world.

In the 1920s, Weber produced his famous definition of sociology in which he highlights the importance of *Verstehen* of social action for the possibility to causally explain its course and effects. The combination of *Verstehen* and Explaining, “explanatory *Verstehen*” is widely seen as the innovative contribution of Weber’s methodological proposition. It implies that arguments about causal relationships between social actions and their effects are meaningless if they are not underpinned by an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to the social actions being studied.

Weber’s methodology has been immensely influential in sociology. Interpretivist scholars refer to it as a shield against positivistic orientations while others have criticised Weber for failing to elaborate methods to take the viewpoint of concrete actors and make sense of their actions (Prus, 1994). This latter critique can be found in particular within two research traditions, symbolic interactionism as it developed by Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) and phenomenology-based ethnography that developed in light of Alfred Schütz’s (1899-1959) social phenomenology. The following sections discuss *Verstehen* in as far it is relevant for symbolic interactionism before turning to phenomenology-based ethnography.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism stands in the tradition of American pragmatism as well as in the tradition of the human sciences as developed by Dilthey in continental Europe. Although George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is often seen as the founder of this sociological perspective it was his student Herbert Blumer who coined the term *symbolic interactionism*

and developed it to a distinct perspective that challenged the contemporary dominance of the functionalist paradigm and positivistic methodologies.

Blumer (1969) developed symbolic interactionism based on his detailed analysis of Mead's social behaviourism as elaborated in his posthumously published books, in particular *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead, 1934). Mead's work is a critique of Watson's "behaviourism" that conceived people as passively responding to stimuli in the environment. For Mead, the relationship between actor and word, subject and object cannot be dissolved in the way that behaviourists suggest. In his view, the actor is in continuous interaction with the world around them. Hence, people's sense of Self emerges as they interact with the physical world and with other people.

Due to the focus on the Self and identity, symbolic interactionism is sometimes criticised as a social science that prioritises the subjective point of view and focuses on studies on the microlevel. Interactionist research, however, is intersubjective. It investigates social relationships and interchanges of different kinds including collective behaviour, competition, cooperation and conflict as well as matters like industrialisation, media and political processes.

Blumer (1969) argued that the principal method of interactionist research should be participant observation. As the researcher immerses themselves in the field they observe the action and talk with people allowing them to progressively experience situations like the participants. Thus they can "take the role of the other" by virtue of what Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929) called "sympathetic introspection" and acquire insider knowledge from the participants in the field. However, the purpose of the research goes beyond understanding people's lived-experience of world. Based on their studies the researcher develops generic concepts and understandings of social processes.

By using ethnographic methods such as participant observation coupled with methodological concepts like “role taking” and “sympathetic introspection,” symbolic interactionist research has advanced the operationalization of Verstehen for sociology. Related sociological approaches however have turned to phenomenology to further clarify Verstehen as a method for sociology.

Phenomenology and Sociology

The methodological question addressed by discussions about Verstehen is concerned with sociologists’ problem of how to understand actors’ orientation and sense making of the social world. Mead’s notion of “role taking” and Cooley’s “sympathetic introspection” as well as the subsequent developments by Blumer and other symbolic interactionists are important advances in the methodological conception of Verstehen. A different route for the methodological development of Verstehen in sociology has been taken by scholars drawing on phenomenology.

Phenomenology was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) to provide the sciences with a philosophical foundation that at its core has the analysis of the place of human beings in the world. Husserl coined the notion of “lifeworld” to capture actors’ orientation to and experience of the world in which they live and act. This grounding of the actor within the world provides a humane contrast to the scientific view promulgated by Comte, Ward and others whose version of a social science saw human beings as means to societal end without consideration of people’s lives. Subsequently, lifeworld has become a central term in the development of sociological approaches to Verstehen.

A key figure in the use of phenomenology in sociology is the Austrian philosopher Alfred Schütz (1899-1959) whose work was concerned with the development of a sociology

based on phenomenological principles. From his reading of Weber's work Schütz was aware of the weaknesses of the German sociologist's notion of Verstehen. At the same time, however he saw the possibility that Husserl's phenomenology could enrich the sociology of Verstehen. Throughout his œuvre, Schütz therefore worked towards bridging phenomenology's concern with "the subjective" and "cognitive" and sociology's interest in understanding how "the social" emerges from "the subjective". His work became the basis for the development of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1991) "social constructivism" and more recent developments like Hubert Knoblauch's (2016) "communicative constructivism" and phenomenology-based ethnography (vom Lehn & Hitzler, 2015).

Alfred Schütz's Social Phenomenology

Schütz was an Austrian philosopher who throughout his academic career worked toward the development of a sociology based on phenomenology. While living in Vienna he was interested in a wide range of social scientific disciplines and forged close links with important contemporary scholars such as Friedrich von Hayek, Eric Voegelin and Felix Kaufmann that he maintained also later when as a Jew he had to emigrate to the United States where he settled in New York and worked as an international lawyer in a bank while continuing to pursue his philosophical interests in the evenings (Barber, 2014).

With his strong interest in social scientific questions Schütz (1967) critically analysed Husserl's phenomenology of the lifeworld and explored how concepts like intersubjectivity, communication and knowledge could help overcome the shortcomings of Weber's approach to study social phenomena and to understand the actor's experience of the social world.

Schütz saw two interlinked problems with comprehending how an actor experiences a phenomenon: (1) how to understand the relationship between the observer and the observed; and (2) how as a sociologist to produce *adequate* descriptions of the actor's experience of the social world. In his work, he emphasised the difference in the actor's and the social scientist's perspectives to the social world. This difference in perspectives is grounded in the attitude that shapes the social scientist's and actor's approach and experience of the situation. The actor goes about their business pragmatically and pursues their project by acting and interacting in a social world inhabited by others with the same attitude. They make sense of the world based on their personal biographies and motives as well as as their interaction with others. The social scientist uses a different attitude when orienting to and observing the actor in the social world. Their attitude is theoretical and requires them to use a disinterested and detached orientation to the actor in order to make sense of their orientation to world.

The questions that arise from the distinction of the actor's and the social scientist's perspectives is how in social situations actors are able to create a social reality that they orient to in alignment with others ("intersubjectivity"), and how social scientists can understand how actors achieve intersubjectivity. These questions relate back to the foundations of sociology as a discipline and the problem of social order that has been posed by philosophers from Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and that was taken up by sociologists like Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) in his development of a general theory of action. Schütz, who had a lengthy exchange of letters with Parsons about the sociological approach to address the problem of social order, introduced the notion of "intersubjectivity" to conceive the possibility of social order (Grathoff, 1978). Schütz (1967) suggested that intersubjectivity is made up of two 'idealization'. First, there is the idealization of an interchangeability of standpoints and the assumption that if two actors would swap geographic positions at least in theory they would see the world in the same way. Second,

there is the assumption of a congruency of relevances that implies that when in the same situation actors' personal biographies and interests do not influence their orientation to the situation. Instead, people align their actions for the purposes at hand.

In Schütz's view, sociological analyses explore people's alignment of action and how they come to experience the world in the same way. The difficulty for sociologists is that their own perspective fundamentally differs from that of the actors. By suggesting that sociological descriptions should capture the actor's subjective experience Schütz had to find a way that allows for adequate sociological descriptions (i.e. descriptions that are relevant for the social-scientific community as well as recognisable by the actors).

In his solution of the problem Schütz differs from Weber who had introduced the concept of "idealtypes" as a means to produce sociological descriptions that allow historical and intercultural comparisons. Schütz explained his rejection of the concept of "idealtypes" as an answer to the question for adequate sociological descriptions by referring to the divergence of such abstract typologies from the concrete types that actors use to overcome the contingency of the world. Schütz therefore suggested to explore these concrete "types" that actors use when they make sense of complex and contingent social situations. These concrete types, Schütz argues, are not subjective and idiosyncratic but people acquire them through socialization and education and they share them through communication. It therefore is the task of sociologists to reveal the social structure of knowledge and produce adequate descriptions of the "structures of the life-world" (Schütz & Luckmann, 1985) that are logically consistent and that adequately capture the social world as experienced by actors.

The interpretations that sociologists produce therefore are constructs that are based on the actors' constructs. Schütz therefore describes them as "second-order constructs" that differ from the actors' "first-order constructs" because because the social-scientists approach

the data with a theoretical attitude and rely on specialist professional knowledge when they produce their interpretations. Despite the difference of social-scientific constructs from the actors' first-order constructs sociological descriptions have to be consistent with the ways in which the actors experience the social world. Thus, Schütz's answers to the questions about the relationship between the observer and the observed and the production of adequate descriptions require a shift from the social-scientific perspective to that of the actors without however abandoning the purpose of the social sciences to produce consistent and adequate sociological descriptions.

Unfortunately, Schütz passed away before he was able to complete his project aimed at the development of a sociology based on phenomenological principles. However, he provided the grounds for the emergence of methods and approaches that draw on phenomenology to further develop the notion of Verstehen within sociology. These approaches include amongst other phenomenological sociology (Psathas, 1973), existential sociology (Douglas & Johnson, 1978), phenomenological lifeworld analysis (Honer & Hitzler, 2015), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), and others. The following sections discuss two of these latter approaches.

Phenomenological Lifeworld Analysis

After Schütz's death Luckmann completed and published *The Structures of the Life-World* as the pinnacle of his teacher's work. Luckmann and his students used Schütz's works to develop novel sociological methods and approaches designed to capture the actor's perspective in the social world. The most prominent of these approaches is phenomenological life-world analysis that aims to uncover the perspective of the subject who lives, acts in and experiences a particular lifeworld. Its purpose is the production of formal descriptions that

capture the invariable basic structures of the constitution of meaning in the subjective consciousness of actors (Hitzler & Eberle, 2004). Although the analysis focuses on the actor's subjective experience it goes beyond autoethnography in that it begins with the researcher's own experience but then turns to other actors' experience of the social world.

It continues Schütz's project to explore the actor's subjective experience of the social world. The analysis is not introspective but aims to uncover the social structures of the lifeworld. For this purpose the researcher enters the field with an open mind and "brackets" any kinds of presuppositions. Data collection often begins with the researcher's experience. It involves the researcher in participating in the action while observing the situation. By virtue of participating in the situation the researcher becomes "existentially engaged" and thus able to experience the situation like the other participants. They acquire first-hand knowledge as well as the linguistic and habitual forms of actions of the people in the field, and learn to conduct the practices that underpin the situation. Because of the emphasis on participation and existential engagement the method of data collection is called "observant participation" (vom Lehn & Hitzler, 2015).

This method of data collection differs from participant observation in that it, first, places participation at its centre which facilitates the gathering of experiential data. Second, researchers obtain more than a working-knowledge used in the situation but they have the same experience of the situation as other participants. And third, the subjective experiential data are analysed with phenomenological methods. This form of data collection allows the researcher to collect experiential data that reflect concrete experiences of the social world. As the researcher participates in the situation they become progressively recognised as full members of the social world. Only when this is achieved and the researcher has acquired members' skills, knowledge, and competences do they conduct in-depth interviews with participants to further advance their understanding of the social world.

As is common practice in interpretive research, the collection of the experiential data is iteratively interwoven with the data analysis. The analysis is grounded in Schütz's notion of interpretation and Verstehen of the other. It recognises that social-scientific Verstehen differs from Verstehen in the everyday because it relies on specialist knowledge and because the actions it examines happened in the past. Phenomenological lifeworld analysis uses hermeneutic techniques developed for social-scientific purposes. Its studies of single cases progressively reveal general structures in social action.

As is common practice in interpretive research data collection and analysis are conducted iteratively. Initial data gathering is followed by some preliminary analysis, followed by more data collection and so forth. Anne Honer and Ronald Hitzler (2015) who promote phenomenological lifeworld analysis suggest to conduct the research in pairs and analyse data together, first, to avoid that due to the deep engagement in the field the researcher ignores their role as a social scientist and, second, to discuss interpretations of the data that can help to eliminate the influence of preconceptions on the analysis.

Phenomenological lifeworld analysis has been used to explore the social structures of small lifeworlds (Benita Luckmann)—for example, particular enclaves of practice, knowledge and experience. Examples for relevant research are the lifeworld of handymen, DJs, and blind people. Related research methods have emerged that maintain the phenomenological principles characterising lifeworld analysis but vary the forms of data collection and analysis. Examples for such methods are Margarethe Kusenbach's (2003) "street phenomenology" and Knoblauch's (2005) "focused ethnography" (cf. vom Lehn 2018)..

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology and the related developments of conversation analysis and video-based, multimodal analysis of interaction originate in Harold Garfinkel's (2006) critical examination of Parsons's theory of action and Schütz's phenomenology-based sociology. Garfinkel was dissatisfied with the solution to the "problem of social order" that both scholars arrived at through their analysis of Weber's work. He turned to Schütz's social phenomenology to find a way to address the question of social order as posed by Parsons but develop means to investigate it from the actor's point of view. Yet, Schütz who differentiates between "first-order constructs" of the actor and "second-order constructs" that the social-scientist produces, also calls for the need to create social-scientific descriptions that are dissociated from the actor's experience of the life-world. Garfinkel, therefore, considered Schütz as not radical enough in turning to the actor's perspective when exploring the social organization of the world (Heritage, 1984; vom Lehn, 2014).

With the development of ethnomethodology Garfinkel radicalized Schütz's sociology. The focus of ethnomethodology is on social practice and the processes through which "social facts" are practically constituted in order to reveal the processes through which social facts are produced from the actor's point of view. This radical shift in sociological perspective requires an entirely different concept of the relationship between "observer" (sociologist) and observed. It requires ethnomethodologists who investigate particular settings to become competent practitioners in order to be able to understand actors' first-order constructs and describe them in "uniquely adequate" ways. "Unique adequacy" necessitates ethnomethodologists to acquire the knowledge, skill and expertise of members in the field under study and become practically involved in the setting under investigation. Thus, ethnomethodologists become existentially engaged, observant participants who have often

undergone the same education and training that the actors have undergone and therefore are able to analyze and act in the settings as competently as the actors. Examples for such studies are the analysis of judicial work by Stacy Burns (2001) undertaken after she had trained as a lawyer, the analysis of mathematical reasoning by the trained mathematician Eric Livingston (1986) and the work on Tibetan philosophical debating practices by Kenneth Liberman (2007) who embedded himself fully in a monastery in Tibet.

Save for observant participation that is deployed to fulfill the strong version of unique adequacy, ethnomethodologists use a range of other methods to pursue their research interest. The best known of these methods is conversation analysis, originally developed by Harvey Sacks (1992) in the 1960s. Conversation analysts examine how actors themselves in specific circumstances analyze ongoing talk and thereupon are able to contribute to it. Within conversation analysis a strand of studies has emerged that is concerned with the organization of “institutional talk” (Drew & Heritage, 1992), that is, talk in news interviews, general practice, courts of law and in other institutions. In light of the sociological interest in materiality and the body ethnomethodological research also uses video-recordings to capture the moment-by-moment emergence of action and interaction and its orientation to the material and visual environment. Video-based research has explored the use of the body in the organisation of conversations (Goodwin, 1981), doctor-patient interaction (Heath, 1986), the use of video in surgery (Mondada, 2003), interaction dental training (Hindmarsh, 2010), driving instruction (Deppermann, 2015) and autonomous driving (Brown & Laurier, 2017), partner dance (Albert, 2015; Keevalik, 2015), and in many other settings. This research is based on the principles of ethnomethodology and it uses the methodological tools developed in conversation analysis in order to reveal how participants in interaction constitute moments of intersubjective alignment. Thus, ethnomethodological studies of interaction show how participants themselves make sense of each other’s orientation to the social world. They

dissolve the distinction of *Verstehen* as a social-scientific method and *Verstehen* as an everyday practice.

Concluding Thoughts

Since Dilthey's and Weber's original argument for the importance of *Verstehen* for the human sciences, a large number of methods and methodologies have emerged in the social sciences. This entry has discussed sociological approaches to *Verstehen* that begin with Dilthey's argument that the human sciences require different methods from the natural sciences and Weber's work towards the development of a sociology that situates *Verstehen* within a (social-)scientific methodology. Because Weber's notion of *Verstehen* was little elaborated sociologists have drawn on phenomenology to specify what *Verstehen* means in the social sciences. From these developments methods have emerged, including phenomenological lifeworld analysis and ethnomethodology. Despite their differences these approaches share the commitment to phenomenology and to the pursuit of understanding how others experience the social world. In light of these developments, *Verstehen* has become one of the cornerstones of sociological methods, and sociological research naturally includes an orientation to the methodological developments in *Verstehende* sociology.

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