

# Alfred Schutz's Life-World and Intersubjectivity

Gloria Maria Vargas

Geography Department, University of Brasilia, Brasilia, Brazil

Email: yoya@unb.br

**How to cite this paper:** Vargas, G. M. (2020). Alfred Schutz's Life-World and Intersubjectivity. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 417-425.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.812033>

**Received:** September 30, 2020

**Accepted:** December 27, 2020

**Published:** December 30, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

Alfred Schutz's view of life-world and intersubjectivity are presented. Both concepts were developed in the realm of a social science inspired by Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology. The life-world accounts for the pragmatic issues such as temporal and spatial structures. Intersubjectivity is the basis for living and sharing the understanding of the life-world with others. Both concepts must be acknowledged in order to understand the making and shaping of the social. Lastly, we argue that intersubjectivity is an interactional process that expresses the experiential tension between the individual-subjective and the social-objective, of the social world and an antidote against the objectification of social life.

## Keywords

Phenomenology, Phenomenological Social Sciences, Life-World, Intersubjectivity

---

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenological philosophy view has influenced the social sciences in paradoxical ways. At first, there was a difficulty in finding an adequate approach to this movement by social scientists, in part because of the lack of proper interpretation of phenomenology itself and also because it was seen in a depreciatory manner, as a metaphysics or even as a type of esoteric language very hard for an outsider to apprehend. This is understandable, given the real difficulties this philosophy posits. Nevertheless, some social scientists approached phenomenology accounting it as an opening window to understanding social processes. Alfred Schutz might be one of the most involved in this intent, particularly interested in Edmund Husserl's acknowledgement and development of it. The purpose of this paper is to present some ideas of Alfred Schutz's approach and understanding of phenomenology as a way to apply them in the social sciences. Again, I do not intend to reproduce his total take on that matter, only some of

what I consider the essential standpoints where his phenomenological social science emerges, especially the ideas of the lifeworld and of intersubjectivity.

A. Schutz was guided by Edmund Husserl's foundation of phenomenology, which considered that all the rigorous sciences known in his lifetime did not take into account our experiences of the world as part of the knowledge process. He considered that the mere existence of such a world was taken for granted and therefore, treated as a pre-given with no real inclusion in the explanations of how knowledge is produced. Husserl was convinced that the scientific approach should take this into consideration if it was to deal with the world, not as an object, but as a reality that should include our experience of it. So what Husserl developed was not only a philosophical view with its premises, but a methodology or technique that included the taken for granted aspects of the knowledge process.

As a philosophy, phenomenology emerges as a counterpoint to neo-positivism with its objectivist perspective that Husserl considered erodes and even eliminates the meaning and role of the subject in the knowledge-making process. Phenomenology, under his perspective, rescues the centrality of the being in philosophy and in Science. Historically, Husserl establishes a dialogue with the Viena Circle (1922-1936) that admits and promotes an excessive formalization of the language of Science, drifting apart from human experience and so becoming an overly abstract project. In his view, this formalization that operates with models and in mathematical language doesn't represent real phenomena and converts knowledge into an objectivist process that was being more and more absorbed by the sciences in the first half of the twentieth century. Husserl wanted Phenomenology to be a science of philosophy with the rigor of the former, for, in his view, philosophy was not just a worldview. However, his understanding of this rigor did not rely on abstraction but on the essentiality of experience in the making of knowledge.

One of the biggest challenges of Phenomenology is the attempt to center knowledge around the subject for it implies in dealing with the problem of consciousness: what is the role of consciousness in the production of knowledge? This is the reason why Husserl wanted to develop a Science or Philosophy of Consciousness in order to explain its role in the production of knowledge. He thought this could be used in any science or philosophy that would, therefore, gain background and density from exploring these relationships. This also explains why he developed the technical aspect of Phenomenology, the reductions or epoché. The reductions were developed as a method to strip the objects of knowledge of what is accessory, contingent, redundant or even empirical and to get to what was aprioristic, the main elements or what he called the essences of the objects of knowledge. When the object appears in its essence, it has been enlightened by consciousness. This introduces the subject in the knowledge making process by means of consciousness and by the relational engagement with the object in the bringing of its essence. Knowledge would be the product or entanglement of consciousness and the object in its pure state, without the contin-

gent and empirical aspects of reality.

## 2. Alfred Schutz's Contribution to Social Sciences

Alfred Schutz (1899-1950) was born in Vienna studied at the city's University Economics and Sociology and was very involved with the interpretative sociology of Max Weber. Weber, as one of the most distinguished social scientists of his time had a great influence in Schutz's work, particularly in the issues of subjectivity and social action. It was in these topics that Schutz began to pursue the application of Husserl's phenomenology. In his work, *The Phenomenology of Social World* (1967) he shows his understanding and his ambition to use it in the grasping of social phenomena. A year after the 1938 German invasion to Paris he went to America where he lectured at the Exile University in New York, which would become the New School for Social Research and established himself as an emigrant refugee scholar, as many others did in that period. He was a founding member of the International Phenomenological Society and editor of the *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research Journal*.

Schutz's main intellectual project was to include the phenomenological view in the social sciences in order to renovate the foundations of interpretive sociology by putting it on a phenomenological framework. With this in mind, he developed a wide base to examine social phenomena using Husserl's phenomenological method, which he studied, mastered and even reinterpreted. Husserl himself gave him credit for being such a deep and serious connoisseur of his phenomenology (Walsh, 1967: p. xvii).

Schutz agreed with Husserl that thought and experience are in profound relation to the world. For him, social phenomena such as economic and legal systems and institutions should be understood in their origin and development surroundings so that all social phenomena and interaction involved were not taken for granted. His phenomenological sociology came to be as a means to account for these purposes.

In this respect, he was interested in understanding how a human being becomes a social being; how language occurs and how symbols are used in communication; why do we get to understand others and their actions and others ours; how are comprehension and communication possible; how and why do we make sense of our actions and where and how does the motivation for making sense come from (Schutz, 1967). He related these questions with the structure of consciousness which, in his view, intervenes in organizing experience and, therefore, in organizing the social world.

These inquiries were furthered in Schutz's development of a philosophy of social life, where he builds the anatomy of human existence. His concern in understanding social phenomena as they originate and consolidate in social circumstances led him to consider their genesis as rooted in what he called life-world. This concept as well as intersubjectivity were at the center of his understanding of social life and as such will be developed in the next section.

### 3. Schutz's Life-World

Schutz's understanding of some aspects of Husserl's work, particularly his phenomenological method reductions, was obliquely overcome by assuming a more pragmatic approach where he concentrates on the mundane sphere of what he called life-world. Life-world in this context refers to the world of immediate experience common to all of us, not the private world of any individual. It is the "self-evident", "pre-scientific", and "taken-for-granted" world and our "fundamental and paramount reality". The world of daily life is the world dominated by "eminently practical" interests, the correlate of "wide-awakeness" (Schutz, 1945: p 534). It is the life on any person living amongst his peers, taking and sharing it as it is being lived.

Life-world is the nexus or connection between all people and is all that constitutes our social world. It is ordered without being homogenous and is not free of contradictions because it is clear only to a limited extent. It is arranged, recognized and validated, and therefore, familiar. The meaning of the everyday connections is depicted from an inventory of what Schutz (1943) called "stock of knowledge at hand", constituted of learnt, biographical and taken for granted typifications. Typifications are "passive associations operating in the natural attitude of the life-world and the awareness of the wide-awake person encountering others (and himself) in everyday life" (Schutz, 1943: p. 137). The stock of knowledge at hand accounts for the understanding and building of the life-world and supports deliberate organized meanings proper to the administration and implementation of day to day living. It offers an availability of senses for the understanding and enactment of the world among others. It is obviously comprehended, ordered and transmitted through language and there wise, contained in language.

For Schutz, in the life-world we are concerned with pragmatic issues such as temporal and spatial structures "that lead us to means and ends relations that lay out a cultural and biographical past toward an individual and inter-subjectively built future" (Schutz, 1967: p. 123).

As our direct experience is formed in the life-world, the past sediments in it, the present takes form in it, and the future is molded from it. Therefore, we cannot understand social interaction without the life-world.

For Schutz and for that manner for Husserl, positive sciences substituted the life-world for idealizations, theories, models, laws, and showed how profoundly knowledge had lost contact with experience. Life-world, as he understood it, was constituted by inter-subjectivity or "person to person social interaction, in our day to day experience as human beings with others connected by actions, influences, ideas, etc., in the course of understanding and being understood by others, in mutual attempts in making sense of the world and others" (Schutz, 1967: p. 125). The life-world is a cultural life because it is made of meanings, symbols that we constantly interpret and institute through our actions and hence, it is space where life views, habits, values, customs, institutions form and solidify.

Schutz writes about this from a first-person perspective, in the form of “I assume that all that makes sense to me makes sense to all those with whom I share the life-world. My actions make sense, and I suppose that others are interpreting them meaningfully as well, and I make sense of what others do too. In these reciprocal acts of giving and positing meaning to yourself and others, inter-subjective social life is built. It is also the social life of others.” (Schutz, 1967: p. 123). He considers that all this happens in a mundane sphere and makes sense with all things included in that life-world, natural, living beings, and meaningful products such as symbols, tools, language systems, works of art, etc. From things inherited and learned, from all sediments of tradition, of habit, and the previous constitution of meaning, which can be stored and reactivated or left behind, the store of experience of the life-world is built as a closed meaningful complex. This compound is a source selected from what is relevant, depending on the demands of the moments.

Schutz understood that the natural building of the life-world could be questioned scientifically by means of the reductions, the technical procedures of Husserl’s phenomenology. His insight was that this process could be displaced from the individual in the first person and relocated to a typology, following Max Weber’s ideal types. Therefore, it could lead to “a commonness”, those aspects that were shared in all individual experiences, that transcended the individual and built an inter-subjective social knowledge. The product of this reduction would be a scientific inference from the phenomenological point of view. In other words, the reduction process would lead us to the subjacent and shared structures of the different aspects of the life-world and from these structures to the individual and shared experiences that generate social phenomena, such as institutions, legal and economic systems, etc. In economics, for example, there is the ideal type, the *homo economicus*. It is an ideal type that can be considered the center of the life-world of economics and not an empirical subject. By the same token, in law, the subject of law is an idealized *homo* with characteristics and interactions that put it in the center of the life-world of the law.

The life-world was instrumental to Schutz’s comprehension and problem solving of the social world and hence, gave answers to his inquiries. Nevertheless, it needed to be complemented by inter-subjectivity in order to fulfill the first concentric circle of his social phenomenology and serve as a pillar to his inquiry into how social interaction organizes the self and the group.

#### **4. Schutz’s Inter-Subjectivity**

For Schutz, inter-subjectivity was at the genesis of the life-world, a fundamental part that gave it structure. As part of the experience assembled upon the life-world and being a shared and not private one, it is the basis on which all social relations are built.

Intersubjectivity is the basis for living together—with others—in specific dimensions of time and space and for sharing the understanding of the life-world

with them. Through intersubjectivity we refine the stock of knowledge by validating or adjusting it to subsequent experiences where the stock is only partially originated by personal experience. The biggest part comes from living in the life-world inter-subjectively, that is, through the assimilation of the experience with others. And the meanings of these experiences are common and shared with others.

In other words, inter-subjectivity permits the awareness of the life-world one shares in a given place and time, through the presence of others or what they leave behind, objects, ideas, symbols, representations, images. Hence there is a commonness of place, where others are either present in body or in sedimented actions that leave a trace of past presence. It is also “socially derived, handed down and accepted by me through others as a frame of reference, interpretation and orientation” (Schutz, 1962: p. 10). Subsequently it is a learning process, not solely a personal experience.

With this in mind, it is easy to incorporate the essential role of language in intersubjectivity as the medium used to divide-share the understanding of the life-world. It is through language that subjectivity is shared by means of the contained typifications used to comprehend and be in the life-world. With language the boundaries of space and time are defined as well as all acts and thoughts relevant to the life-world. It is, of course, the principal instrument used to giving meaning to the life-world. As Duranti (2010: p. 9) explains, intersubjectivity is a condition for communication, not a product or effect of it, as has been proposed by some constructivist frameworks. It is something that must be achieved through activities as the use of language and other communication resources. Even though language is the medium where the shared comprehension of the world is “transmitted” (Schutz, 1962: p. 10) and subjectivity is shared by language and the paramount vehicle of communication, it is a tool for non-conceptual meaning in Schutz’s view.

“Intersubjectivity is not a problem of constitution which can be solved in the transcendental sphere but is rather a datum of the life world” (Schutz, 1966: p. 82). For him, intersubjectivity or the “we” relationship is “ontologically intrinsic to human beings.” (Schutz, 1966: p. 82), it is constitutional of human thinking and living. He thus supports an intersubjective social ontology.

“The possibility of reflection on the self, discovery of the ego, capacity for performing any epochē”, as Schutz writes, “and the possibility of all communication and of establishing a communicative surrounding world as well, are founded on the primal experience of the we-relationship.” (Schutz, 1966: p. 82).

Inter-subjectivity is by no means equivalent to shared or mutual understanding of the world. It is more basic and foundational. It is pragmatic in the sense that it is grounded in the being of things or their thingness and inherent to the “wide-awakeness” of the everyday person, or the person whose intentional acts are dominated by “eminently practical” interests. It speaks to the potentiality of the person to develop (grow, mature, falsify, validate) the understanding of the “other”, life, and the common typifications within his stock of knowledge. Phys-

ical space, time and beings constitute a physical unity. Phenomenal space, time, and beings constitute a phenomenal unity. Space, time, and beings, in either perspective, are not disconnected variables. They constitute a unified totality.

This is the basic outline of Schutz's ideas and thoughts on life-world and intersubjectivity. Our purpose on the next section is to look at intersubjectivity as an interactional process.

## 5. Intersubjectivity as an Interactional (Reciprocal) Process

We propose to advance intersubjectivity understanding it as an interactional process. This means neither advocating for it in an individual-subject realm nor in a social-objective one per se. It could be seen as the development of an intermediate space of the two. A great deal of the different approaches and understanding about intersubjectivity between Husserl and Schutz are in relation to which realm they gave prominence to. For Schutz, Husserl lacked a social background that made him almost objectify the concept in favor of the individual. And we can argue that Schutz's view is insufficiently individualistic as to be able to determine what role the subject plays in the making of inter-subjectivity.

Our approach is to understand intersubjectivity as the simultaneous expression of both poles of experiential tension, the individual-subjective and the social-objective, that happen in the making of the social world. The separation of these poles implies in a derailment of their adequate understanding. We can consider intersubjectivity as what is experienced in the "in-betweenness" of the subject and the object(s). It can occupy the space where experience would neither be in the subject nor in the world of objects but in this intermediate realm. Experience would be a reality that is formed, not only by my presence, but by my presence and all those I encounter, the co-presence of me with others. So, in a way, it is a fallacy to imagine any pole of experience as an autonomous being, closed in itself, that establishes a mysterious contact in the occasion of an "experience". There is a participatory reality in experience that cannot be decomposed in its parts, the subject and object poles, as if they were autonomous entities. A pole is, by definition, the fixed point in a system of coordinates that serves as the origin. Neither of them can be so.

Inter-subjectivity would be a level of experience that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual subjectivities. It is not a whole that results from the sum of the parts because the interaction emerges as the inter-subjective encounter occurs, even if the poles do not lose their autonomy in the process. This is a constitutive property of inter-subjectiveness in the construction of the social domain.

Thus, the problem of experienced reality becomes the problem of a flux of participatory reality that brings about inter-subjectivity. It is the experience of the intermediate realm, where the participation of the experiential poles happens in their natural tension. Reality penetrates in every inter-subjective experience that occurs and representations and language are generated in the intermediate realm that makes human experiences emerge.

Inter-subjectivity as a category of intermediacy and its “in-betweenness” is an adequate solution for a difficult problem that is posed for ontology and epistemology that started with the division of the world in mind and matter, spirit and matter, subject and object, experience and reality, all with the assumption of a being, subject that is “in” reality, explores, interacts, understands, acts, transforms it.

In other words, inter-subjectivity opens a realm of social interaction and understanding that defies the separation visions and proposes a field of exploration where new comprehensions, categories, methodologies are needed and should be pursued. It is where encounters with the world are made sense of and used to consolidate a past and present and meet the future. When objectified, experience is literalized in a way that obscures it by inflexible formulations. Intersubjectivity, understood as this in-betweenness can constitute a true antidote against the objectification of social life and lead us closer to comprehending how it is structured, not in and of itself, but with the inclusion of the subject interactively. The subject, is not as an independent feature of reality but, as a concomitant participant and architect. We would then recognize intersubjectivity as a constitutional feature of human experience.

Other sociologists influenced by American pragmatism treat intersubjectivity more as a social issue or embodied in the social, where any knowledge of another always presupposes a knowledge of the fundamental categories of the world constituted through the social organization such that the other is always experienced as situated in the context of a group offering a “inner subjective meaning” while defining its boundaries. Nevertheless, for Schutz “reality is constituted not by the ontological structure of its objects, but by our experience of them and by the meanings we attach to them” (Schutz, 1945: p. 551). An in-betweenness is sensed in some of his approaches that was insufficiently explored in his writings.

Because intersubjectivity is incorporated in a social, cultural and material domain and therefore, it emerges from embodied interactions, we could accordingly consider culture as shared meanings developed through common experiences that can be categorized in different ways and are embedded in geographic sceneries. The shared meanings of culture arise through the intersubjectivity and emerge and evolve in activity milieus. The display of shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other results in a basic differentiation between the self and others as well as the capacity to contrast and estimate one’s own experiences with others.

## **6. Conclusion**

What Husserl and later Schutz in the social science rejected was the idea that the world is one in which there are things and relationships with qualities that science ought to represent with notions or concepts. For them, there was no point in identifying isolated objects in the world, the purpose being, on the con-



trary, to understand the field of our experiences within which some objects are selected against the background of their spatial and temporal surroundings (Schutz, 1967). There is an underlying constitutional process that involves consciousness that has to be addressed in order to understand how we make sense of the world, create our life-world, and all the social characters and institutions in it. Consequently, the knowledge process cannot be whole without considering the Is and Wes involved in its making and that of the life-world in which everything unfolds and develops.

Indeed, the social sciences have taken other roads of explanation, and that being the case, phenomenology in Husserl's view has been undermined and Schutz's work rather forgotten along the way. However, we have arrived at many paradoxes in knowledge that might persuade us to consider some of their propositions if we want to surpass such paradoxes. One thing is to have an experience, another to represent it with the tools that any language conveys. How does one lead to the other? There is a gap that life-world and intersubjectivity in part, fill. The direct experience of the life-world and the making of inter-subjectivity must be acknowledged in order to surpass abstract concepts and laws that don't deal with the making and shaping of the social.

Schutz never intended to deal with all domains of the social or even to overthrow other epistemologies, such as the neo-positivistic ones. But he did propose to get at the foundations, the essence of experience. His intention was not followed by many social science currents, but even so and for this reason, his place in this field is assured.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## References

- Duranti, A. (2010). Husserl, Intersubjectivity and Anthropology. *Anthropological Theory*, 10, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499610370517>
- Schutz, A. (1943). The Problem of Rationality in the Social World. *Economica*, 10, 130-140. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2549460>
- Schutz, A. (1945). On Multiple Realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 5, 533-576. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2102818>
- Schutz, A. (1962). Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action. In: M. Natanson (Ed.), *Collected Papers I. Phaenomenologica (Collection Publiée Sous le Patronage des Centres d'Archives-Husserl)*, Vol. 11 (p. 10). Springer, Berlin.
- Schutz, A. (1966). The Problem of Transcendental Intersubjectivity in Husserl. In A. Schutz (Ed.), *Collected Papers III: Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *Collected Papers* (2nd ed.). Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Walsh, G. (1967). Introduction. In: *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (p. xvii), Evanston: Northwest University Press.