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Interpretations of everyday life

Approximations to the analysis of lifeworld*

Interpretações da vida cotidiana
Aproximações à análise do mundo da vida

Hermílio Santos**

Abstract: This article analyzes some aspects of the contribution of the Alfred Schutz' phenomenological sociology to approach everyday life, discussing especially the constitution of lifeworld. These contributions are connected to the analysis of narratives on biography and on everyday life, which are turning to be relevant considering the increasing challenges with which individuals are confronted to in contemporary societies, also in "peripheral" societies, like the Brazilian. Schutz's phenomenological approach conceives to individuals a reasonable interpretative possibility. The permanent reconfiguration of similarities and differences to others operated by individuals is done on the lifeworld, in which works the systems of relevance and typification as the key to understand individual's action in everyday life.

Keywords: Everyday life; Lifeworld; Intersubjectivity; Narrative; Alfred Schutz

Resumo: Este artigo analisa alguns aspectos da contribuição da sociologia de Alfred Schutz para abordar a vida cotidiana, discutindo-se especialmente a constituição do mundo da vida. Essas contribuições estão vinculadas à análise de narrativas biográficas e da vida cotidiana, que se torna relevante considerando-se os crescentes desafios com os quais os indivíduos estão confrontados nas sociedades contemporâneas, inclusive em sociedades "periféricas", como a brasileira. A abordagem fenomenológica de Schutz atribui aos indivíduos uma possibilidade interpretativa razoável. A permanente reconfiguração de similaridades e diferenças em relação ao outro, operada pelos indivíduos, é dada no mundo da vida, onde funcionam os sistemas de relevância e tipificação como a chave para a compreensão da ação individual na vida cotidiana.

Palavras-chave: Vida cotidiana; Mundo da vida; Intersubjetividade; Narrativa; Alfred Schutz

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Individuals are in some way compelled to choose and define their lifestyle that synthesizes their place in the world, since lifestyle implies a whole of practices followed by individuals, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian necessities, but because it gives material forms to a particular narrative of self-identity (Giddens, 1993, p. 81). The tensions provoked by these exigencies around identities, as well as their impact on the perception of the other seem to act in some way as a relevant factor in the definition of individual's guide of action. However, our thesis here is that there are no pre-given positions assumed by individuals on this tension able to define their action. On the opposite, the comprehension of action must be based on individual's interpretation of their own experiences of everyday life, accessible through their narratives. The analysis of narratives on biography and on everyday life is turning to be relevant considering the increasing challenges with which individuals are confronted to in contemporary societies (Beck, 2000), also in "peripheral" societies, like the Brazilian. These challenges are not limited to material aspects, gave, for instance, by the uncertainties related to the insertion in the work-market, assuming more and more a symbolic dimension, expressed by exigencies for a every time more precocious definition of the contours that should assume their own identities, which must be reaffirmed in everyday life. This article analyzes some aspects of the contribution of the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz to approach this problem, based mostly on the discussion of the constitution of lifeworld.

The reception to Schutz by the Brazilian sociology is still very modest, contrary to what can be observed in the German, North-American and Japanese academic scenarios. In Germany the most important contemporary authors influenced by Schutz are Thomas Luckmann, Ilja Srubar, Joachim Renn, Jochen Dreher, besides Fritz Schütze. In the United States, the impact of the Schutz' approach is even more visible and systematic, especially through his former students at the New School for Social Research, Peter Berger and Helmut Wagner, but also Harold Garfinkel and more recently George Psathas, besides the authors which empirical researches are guided by Ethnometodolgy.¹ In Japan the most important author influenced by Schutz is Hisoshi Nasu.²

Interpretations of everyday life

We know, since Durkheim (1962) that collective representations, understood as "a system of classification and denotation, of allocation

¹ See, for instance Psathas (2004); on the approximation between Schutz and Ethnometodolgy, see Heritage (1999) and López (2008).

² See Nasu (2008); for a recent biography of Schutz, see Barber (2004).

of categories and names” (Moscovici, 2003, p. 62), are usually shared by members of a society, community or group. However, the capacity of social representations to be a common orientation for individuals’ action seem to be challenged, even in familial environment (Zaluar, 1997, p. 41). This is due, in part, to the fact that the construction and the representation of self are turning to be a relevant problem for individuals in contemporary societies (Giddens, 1993), strongly marked by a process of redefinition of tradition, in which individuals occupy a central role on the definition of their own identity, since we have to decide not just who we are, and how we act, but also how we appear to the world (Giddens, 1996, p. 97; see also Leccardi, 2005). According to Giddens, the inherited identities by a traditional status no more satisfied individuals, turning self an object of manipulation. According to Mead, the process in which the self emerge is a social process one, which involves the interaction of individuals of the community and the pre-existence of this community (Mead, 1972, p. 164). The community is characterized by the interaction of *ego* with *alter*, mutually oriented. This reciprocity is possible due to the previous conditions of existence of communication through a common system of symbols or common culture.

According to Mead (1972), *alter* is the organized group of attitudes of others that individuals assumes as their own. In this sense, alterity implies the perception and recognition of the other. This recognition does not imply, however, any *a priori* acceptance of the other. So, alterity is an indispensable moment in the interactive process, but does not guarantee that this process will develop in a symmetric way, that means that individuals engaged in this process do not benefit themselves equally from the results of this interaction. Alterity, that means, the relation of *I* with the *other* can provoke fear, segregation and exclusion (Jovchelovitch, 1998, p. 69) and it is not exclusively product of social construction, been a product of a double process of construction and social exclusion (Jodelet, 1998, p. 47).

In his study on interaction rituals, Goffman analyzed the work of face construction (Goffman, 1967). Face is defined as the values that someone claims for himself during the contact with others. So, face indicates an image of self delineated in terms of attributes socially accepted (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In this sense, the own face and the face of others constitute constructs of the same order, in the sense that they are rules of the group that determines the feeling and the acceptance of the involved faces. In the interactive process, important is the preservation of communication’ singularity of those engaged in this process. Here, singularity is understood as the possibility that each one involved in the interaction process holds to modify the contents of

the communication process, in the sense that it is possible to everyone the transmission of their own substance (Simmel, 1984, p. 44), what, according to Simmel, comprises the nature of interaction.³ An important issue here is the conditions of possibility to preserve the singularity of those engaged in interactive processes.

The current forms of interaction are possible due to the fact that they are oriented by the construction of alterity. Communities are possible since there are the perception of *I* and of the *other*, which means the perception of identity and diversity. However, such perception is not oriented necessarily towards the integration of plurality in interactive process. On the opposite, what stay behind the construction of communities is precisely the attempt of exclusion of the difference, since communities should not be violated by “outsiders”.⁴ Communities represent a moment reserved for the conviviality with the *same* and not with the distinct.

The establishment of a common life with others presupposes necessarily sharing meanings that sustains social relationships (Schutz, 1979, p. 80; see also Schutz, 1972, p. 202) or of a collective identity expressed through common values that are reaffirmed in communication environments, that is to say in interactive relations (Schutz, 1979, p. 160). This means that people of a specific community or group possess something socially significant in common, having in such element or elements the border marks, since subjective meaning that a group presents for their members consists in their knowledge of a common situation, and with it, a common systems of typification and relevance (Schutz, 1979, p. 82), in which recognizing similarities involves at the same time establishing differences (Jenkins, 2002, p. 80),⁵ which makes possible the existence of what Schutz calls “internal group” (Schutz, 1979, p. 80).

The *habitus* concept, as employed by Bourdieu (1980, 2000 and 2005) – that means, a system of socially constituted dispositions that generate and unify the whole of practices and ideologies of an agent group (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 191) – stay somehow close to the identified characteristics of members of an “internal group”, as on the formulation of Schutz⁶. The *habitus* of an agent is anchored on its past experiences and, besides of composing their thoughts and perceptions of present reality, defines agent’s practice in a regular and

³ Vandenberghe calls “methodological interactionism” the position of Simmel, who puts the individual in interaction on the center of society’ analysis (Vandenberghe, 1997, p. 156).

⁴ See for instance Elias and Scotson, 2000.

⁵ On the analysis of the “strange” carried out by Schutz, we can see very clearly the relevance of alterity on the establishment of individual action (see, for instance, Schutz, 2004a, p. 219; 2004b, p. 116; 1979, p. 85).

⁶ Bülow-Schramm and Gerlof (n.y.) see also approximations between both concepts.

constant manner (Crossley, 2001, p. 83), expressed through symbolic marks of distinction through the knowledge acquired, translated in lifestyles, as well as on political, moral and esthetic judgments (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 92; 2000, p. 61). In this sense, we could state that members of a specific internal group are connected to each other by a specific *habitus*; however, Bourdieu (2000, p. 92) asserts that *habitus* make possible the production of *all* thoughts, of *all* perceptions and also of *all* actions, what seems to restrict enormously the possibility of individual interpretation of their own *habitus*. On the one side, it seems to be possible to identify some proximity between the concept of *habitus* and of “internal group”; on the other side, it is clear that the role of interpreter played by individuals or agents is not emphasized with the same intensity in both approaches. Crossley (2001, p. 85), for instance, points out precisely this distinction between both approaches, affirming that phenomenology – as well as those schools called by him “social phenomenology” (ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism) – stresses excessively the agents interpretative horizon.⁷ It could also be objected to the phenomenological approach that it does not consider the constraints played by the “social structure” on the definition of individual action. It must be remembered, however, that the important point here is to stress just the possibility open to individuals to interpret their reality, including as well an interpretation of the structural constraints over their actions.

Another influent approach seems equally close to that offered by the Schutz’s phenomenological sociology, given especially by the role played by language on the social construction of reality: the discourse theory of Foucault. According to Foucault (1992, p. 11), in any society the discourse is built in a process in which are configured the struggle for power. It is in this sense that interdiction is the most explicit and well-known proceeding to avoid that power positions became exchangeable, that means, the sedimentation of positions is consolidated at the discourse level – since it is object of control –, given that speech should not implicate the subversion of power positions. So, discourse becomes a constitutive element at social construction of reality (Völter, 2003, p. 39). On the one side, it seems to be a certain proximity between Foucault’s discourse theory and the emphasis given by Schutz on the individual interpretative process of lifeworld; on the other side, the Foucault’s approach seems to indicate that individual stay somehow captured by an interpretation conditioned by exclusion processes operated in any society (Foucault, 1992, p. 11), to which individuals would be submitted inexorably.

⁷ The same way, Throop and Murphy (2002) scrutinize the critics formulated by Bourdieu on Schutz’s phenomenology.

Schutz's phenomenological approach conceives to individuals a reasonable interpretative possibility. The permanent reconfiguration of similarities and differences to others operated by individuals is done on the lifeworld, conceived as the pre-existing intersubjective sphere (Schutz, 1979, p.72), assumed as given through a "natural attitude" (Schutz, 2003, p. 182), in which the individual recognize the objective things of life, as laws and norms that work as direction for action, as well as the conditions for action (for instance, the intentions of others and their own). In the natural attitude in everyday life it is suspended not the belief on the existence of things around; on the opposite, what is suspended is precisely the doubt in relation to the existence of these things (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 27), since all past experiences are present as if they were arranged as knowledge or conscience of what can be expect to occur (López, 2008, p. 242). However, everything that is considered as given (*taken for granted*) in situations of everyday life are surrounded by uncertainties (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 9). So, natural attitude is simultaneous with the interpretation carry out by individuals, based mostly on the stock of knowledge on hand, to be precise on their own past experiences and from others with which he/she are in contact with, directly or indirectly (for instance, parents, teachers, teachers of their teachers, etc.), that works as a "reference code" (Schutz, 1979, p. 72) for individual guide of action. This way, this knowledge system – as a result of the consolidation of subjective experiences (biography) (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 123) – assumes for those that recognize themselves as internal members of a group or community, "an aspect of coherence, clarity and consistency enough for all to have a reasonable *chance* to understand and to be understood" (Schutz, 1979, p. 81), when individuals in interaction access their own "stock of knowledge on hand" for interpreting the cultural community to which they belong to. There is here an important distinction to be made, between *knowledge on hand* (*Wissen vorhanden* in German) and *knowledge at hand* (*Wissen zuhanden* in German). To say that something is *at hand* means that this knowledge is not just accessible, but also effectively used in a specific situation and in an objective way. On the opposite, the knowledge *on hand* is available to the individual even if he/she does not use it in a direct and objective way or even without the conscience of having this knowledge. This kind of knowledge can be accessible to the social scientist through individual narratives, since it is strongly connected to their own biography, what means necessarily to consider in the analysis the subjectivity of one in relation to the subjectivity of others, which entail the analysis of an intersubjective dialogue.

This intersubjectivity is constructed through the relation of the *I* with the *we*, and implies a common experience (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 68; Capalbo, 2000, p. 293). In this sense, what for Durkheim (1962) is a strong constrain for individuals' action – the role played by collective representations – for Schutz is a reference that individuals can dispose and follow. However, it occurs because the relation between *I* and *we* is made object of their interpretation, since they are provided with the cognitive capacity for that, developed since childhood (Schutz, 2003, p. 339; see also Cicourel, 2007, p. 175). Here, individuals are guided by a “natural attitude” in relation to the world, that means, implies a belief in things of the everyday life. However, in phenomenological terms – differently to the religious faith – “belief in” implies in making the everyday situations an object of inspection and interrogation (Natanson, 1998, p. 7). In the analysis provided by Schutz it is conceived a status of actor to individuals that interpret things with which they are confronted to (people, ideas, events, etc.), with the aim of assuming a position in the world, and, in so doing, to establish their guide of action.

This issue of individuals' interpretative attributes in everyday life is the most important aspect of the phenomenological sociology project Schutz' in what concerns the attempt of fusion of both most important fundaments over which his interpretation is established, p. the Husserl's phenomenology and Weber's sociology of action. On the one side, Weber points out that individuals, in action, ascribe subjective meaning, considering the present, the past and the most probable future behavior of those with which he/she interacts, at the same time that he/she is considered by others (Weber, 2003, p. 13-16) – what makes clear that individuals, for Weber, are interpreters *par excellence*. It should also be considered that, according to Husserl, the reality is put under brackets (Wagner, 1979, p. 8), in the sense that the interpretative activity implies that everything around an individual is put in suspension to receive the agreement of his subjective meaning attribution.⁸

This synthesis intended by Schutz cannot be understood as an attempt of juxtaposition of interpretations. On the contrary, it means a combination of Weber and Husserl based on a critical appropriation made by Schutz, which received some critics, for instance by Giddens (1978, p. 24-34) and by Campbell (1996, p. 33); the last one exclusively on what refers to Schutz's interpretation of Weber. In an article published originally in 1981, Kenneth R. Muse sustains that some authors (for instance, George Psathas and Helmut R. Wagner) identify in the methodological formulation of Weber some “phenomenological” aspects

⁸ For a brief and important comparison of the phenomenological approaches of lifeworld in Weber and Schutz, see John R. Hall (1991).

(for instance, on the doctrine of *Verstehen*). However, according to Muse, Weber did not recognize these elements as been “phenomenological”. On the other side, the argument of Muse is that it is possible to identify strong evidences of the impact of Husserl’s work on Weber. This influence can be found where, according to him, we are not expecting: on the doctrine of the ideal type (see Muse, 1991). Schutz’s phenomenological sociology shows yet a third important foundation, the theory of economic action formulated by his former professor, Ludwig von Mises, one of the most important representatives of the “Vienna Economic School”. Important here for Schutz is his theory of value, in which von Mises accentuates the subjective perspective on the valorization of goods (see for instance Endreß and Renn, 2004, p.18-20 and 25-36).

The individual interpretative work implies, on the phenomenological sociology Alfred Schutz’s, in having on their disposal a system of typification and relevance, as part of what is transmitted to members of the internal group by the education (Schutz, 1979, p. 119). These systems fulfill the following functions: a) to determine which events should be treated as typically equals (so, similar problems will be handled the same way); b) to transform unique individual actions of unique human beings in typical functions of typical social roles, which guarantees that individuals act in accordance to the played social role, and c) the systems of relevance and typification work also as interpretation code and at the same time as an orientation code for members of the internal group, creating a common discourse universe, even if there are no certitude that will be so. Social interaction depends on these systems, when the typification code is standardized and the relevance system is institutionalized. These common systems of relevance and typification originate the individual typification and individual structure of relevance, basic instruments for individual interpretation (Schutz, 2004b; on Schutz’s significance of “relevance”, see also Langsdorf, 1980 and Nasu, 2008).

Narratives and interpretation

Individuals own also the language (especially the vocabulary and syntax), besides the marks and indications, to the orientation and interpretation of everyday life. Marks work as a “subjective warning” through which individuals recover relevant elements experienced in the past for the interpretation of present events. Indications constitute orientation elements in such a way that helps individuals to transcend the world at hand, making connections between the elements that are at hand with those elements that are outside it (Schutz,

1979, p. 101), since these allow individuals to identify facts, objects and events that maintain some degree of interrelation, making easier the individual performance in future contexts, even if the specific knowledge of a future situation is vague.

The narrative approach, despite being very influent in the European sociology, especially in German context, mostly based on the formulation of Fritz Schütze (for instance, Schütze, 1983 and 2003; Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2002; Riemann, 2003; Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal *et al.*, 2006; Völter, 2003; Weller, 2005a and 2005b; Bohnsack, 2007 and 2008; Nohl, 2008), its reception by the Brazilian sociology is still very modest. The biographical narrative offers a very useful access for the analysis not only of the narrator's life, but especially for the analysis of connections between individuals and their group or community (Carvalho, 2003, p. 293), considering, however, that any narrative is an interpretation from the point of a determined biographical situation (Schutz, 1979, p. 73), since biography is a description of processes and experiences lived by the person, that means, a written or oral presentation of a history of life (Völter, 2003, p. 33). In this sense, biography implies a "subjective interpretation of the own life's trajectory" (Born, 2001, p. 245), making the analysis dependent of the communicative activities of whom narrates, since the informant "should *tells* his life's history; *describes* situations of life, and *argue* on meaningful and common problems in his/hers life" (Carvalho, 2003, p. 294). It means that it is an investigative undertaking that puts in relieves the informant – since his interpretation on the lifeworld is what should be analyzed –, as well as the researcher, whose role is simultaneously to exercise the activity of interpreter and partner of a conversation. Another important source for the analysis can be the images produced by the interviewed. Although the interest for the interpretation of images in the Brazilian sociology is still marginal, it is a very spread source for analysis⁹ (see, for instance, Bauer and Gaskell, 2002; Rose, 2002; Hockey and Collinson, 2006; Faccioli, 2007; La Rocca, 2007), that are currently applied in the biographic narrative research (for instance, Bohnsack, 2007). The analysis of imagetic narratives is relevant because social reality is not only represented through images, but also produced by them, since "an image have the quality of directing the action" (Bohnsack, 2007, p. 289), that means, the visualization corresponds to the definition of a reality, to the visualization of a meaning and to the production of a worlds' view (Faccioli, 2007, p. 12). This visualization,

⁹ See, for instance, the articles published on the Journal *Visual Studies*, published by the International Visual Sociology Association – IVSA.

however, operates above all at the subjective domain (Bohnsack, 2007, p. 289), what means that that is not connected exclusively to the production of visual images, although it is a way to make explicit subjective interpretations, while it make it easily reportable.

Individuals, whose narratives could be the object of analysis, have their own system of relevance. Here, language (vocabulary and syntax) permits an important access to the their interpretations of identity and alterity (Schutz, 1979, p. 96; Giddens, 1993, p. 43; Berger and Luckmann, 2002, p. 56; Hall, 1997, p. 19; Lopes de Oliveira, 2006, p. 430), since “everyday life is above all the life with language” (Berger and Luckmann, 2002, p. 57). Another relevant source of analysis are the “marks” (Schutz, 1979, p. 99), that work as “subjective warnings” able to offer access to the interpretation of identity and alterity, “registered”, for instance, in cloths, tattoos, decoration of rooms, dressing styles, verbal expressions, among many other meaningful elements. For the analysis of interpretation of identity it is also important to be aware to the tensions that characterize the gender relationships, expressed for instance by terms as “war”, “battle” and “terror” (Beck, 2000, p. 161). In this sense, during the narrative interviews it must be explored the gender relationships, if marked by a perception of “battle” among them or, on the opposite, by a consolidated perception of subordination and “domestication”, of the kind of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 2000), or by other kinds of perception, for instance by the attraction for a visible characteristics of a “masculinity ethos” (Zaluar, 1997, p. 45). Of course this issue is not a trivial element for the individual interpretation of lifeworld, for their configuration of identity, as well as for the comprehension of their place in the lifeworld, if one wants to investigate the subjective mechanisms of meaning construction on the lifeworld, trying to analyze the ways how individuals make them visible and reportable.

The individual narratives are informed by the situation in which the narrator find him/herself; however, this interpretation or definition of situation is, at the same time, determined in biographic terms, since the definition of situation is “the sedimentation of all previous experiences” (Schutz, 1979, p. 73). In this sense, the individual is assumed as a subject with past (Lahire, 2004, p. 21), gaining importance here the present analysis of individual’s preterit experiences in the way those interpret them.

The investigative undertaking proposed by Schutz should not be understood as the aim of “voice giving” to the object of investigation, while, following the tradition of the comprehensive sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*) of Weber, the analysis of the phenomenological sociology implies

the exploration of common sense knowledge. This means to interpret the interpretation of individuals, since this affects the *be-in-the-world*, which means, our capacity to ascribe meaning (Staudigl, 2007, p. 235). In this sense, it implies assuming what Schutz calls “first-level constructs”, that means, those involved in common sense experience of everyday life as object of the sociological analysis, i.e., the second level constructs, “built according to the proceeding rules valid for all empirical sciences” that constitute “typical objective constructs, idealized and, as such, of a different kind from those developed on the first level, that of the common sense thought ...” (Schutz, 1979, p. 271).

Concluding remarks

We discussed here the everyday life as starting point to understand the guide of action followed by individuals, based on the contributions provided by Alfred Schutz. The most important aspect of this contribution is probably to offer accurate elements to understand the structure of the interpretative process conducted by individuals in everyday life. To know that is an essential step to build an approximation to the logic of action conducted by individuals in their everyday life. This could conduct to a misuse of the Schutzinian approach, assumed by some as a proposal to produce a kind of identification between the common sense knowledge and that of the social scientist. Although common sense provides inputs for the sociological analysis, it can not be understood as a subordination of the second to the first kind of knowledge. Far from that, this analytical proceeding must be taken as a way to offer a closer and more accurate understanding of action in everyday life. And this is only possible if, first, we approach the constitution of individual’s meaning construction, and, second, it is assumed that individuals’ action take place through a simultaneous process of “natural attitude” concerning the things in the world, and of interpretation of this same world. In this sense, this article had shown that the key to understand this process is to clarify the systems of relevance and typification that give the necessary support to individuals’ action in everyday life.

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