

EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE: ALFRED SCHUTZ SHOULD BE THERE

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Abstract

In a conversation with Professor James March on his papers on experiential knowledge, we pointed out that his bibliographical references do not mention the works of Alfred Schutz. Jim March immediately answered “Yes, Alfred Schutz should be there”.

Inspired by the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl and the interpretative sociology of Max Weber, Alfred Schutz (1899 - 1959) worked on the foundations of sociology from the point of view of personal experience, life stories and the content of our consciousness. Husserl's method was based on the phenomenology of *eidetic* intuition, which tries to overcome the classical difficulties about the formation and definition of concepts, and on *the epoche* of natural attitude, related to the critical suspension of beliefs in philosophy and the suspension of doubts in common sense situations. Schutz focussed on the characteristics of the mental constructs, on the justification of interpretative method in social sciences and on the horizons of our life worlds. He did not explicitly work on the concept of learning, but his studies on our mental constructs, experience, knowledge at hand and purposes at hand involve a radical theory of experiential learning, in which all kinds of learning are experiential.

The aim of the paper is to make explicit some implications of Schutz's works on learning, or, in other words, to unveil his theory of experiential learning. Pointing out their similarities and differences, it will compare the works of Schutz with the works of James March, which we take as an example of the approaches based on conceptual frames, mathematical models and empirical data, and which focus on management learning. It will also emphasize the problems created in experiential learning by the idea that giving meanings to objects, events and intentional actions is a form of producing knowledge.

Key words: experiential knowledge and learning; phenomenology; decision making; action;

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, professor James March was granted the title Doctor *Honoris Causa* of the University Ramon Llull at ESADE. After the ceremony, in a conversation with him on experiential knowledge and learning, we pointed out that his biographical references do not mention Alfred Schutz. Jim March immediately précised “Yes, Alfred Schutz should be there”. That anecdote prompted the present iquiry on the relationships between the words of those two researchers, which seem so distant.

We began our research focussing on ideas of Alfred Schutz on the foundations of social sciences, in which he combines two lines of thought: the first is the phenomenology of Edmond Husserl, who tried to ground philosophy and science on the experience and the content of the consciousness of each person. The second is the sociology of Max Weber, who claimed that, for understanding social action, it is necessary to interpret the meanings that actors give to it. We looked at Schutz’s paper “*Common-sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action*” (1962) from the point of view of experiential knowledge and learning, even if he does not use those concepts. That kind of reading makes clear that Schutz’s theories are among the most important contributions to experiential learning.

In the next step, we considered the ideas of James March on experiential knowledge and learning, which are developed in his books *Decisions and Organizations* (1988), *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (1994), and *The Pursuit of Organizational Intelligence* (1999), and in his concepts of exploitation and exploration of knowledge. We found that, even if he uses statistical methods and econometric models, his theories present important aspects related to the meanings of the actors and to phenomenology. Moreover, the basic works of Schutz on the foundations of social sciences and the research of March on management can be considered as complementary. That claim allows us to emphasize the complementary of some approaches in social sciences and in management sciences.

SHUTZ’S FONDATIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

PRECEDENTS

Husserl’s Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) criticised the foundations of philosophy and science and proposed to base them on the experience of each person and on the content of his consciousness. So he was not interested on what is the nature of things but on how we think on them. He introduced the notion of *eidetic* intuition in the following way: when we perceive an object, for instance a triangle drawn in a blackboard, we see it as an object that is unique and, at the same time, we capture the general concept of triangleness. That theory was his solution of the classical problem of the generation of concepts. He also introduced the method that he called *epoche*: in philosophy and in science, we have to put in brackets (or suspend our judgement) our knowledge, and do not accept it till we have a rigorous prove of it. In that aspect, his philosophy presents many similarities with the Cartesian approach. However Schutz avoids Descartes' concept of methodological doubt, because it involves a kind of scepticism, and he points out that in common life situations, we take for granted that our knowledge is true and we do not judge it, if there is not a reason for doing so. His book *The Crises of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* was published in 1954 and had an influence on social sciences. We have to emphasize that, beyond that introduction, phenomenology is a very difficult philosophical movement. From it, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) introduced existentialism, as a system that focuses on the meaning of life.

Max Weber's Sociology

Max Weber (1864-1920) emphasized the importance of meanings in social action. In his book *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he argued that the raise of capitalism was a consequence of a certain religious mentality. On the methodology of social sciences, he claimed that empathy (the capacity of putting ourselves in the skin of other people) is necessary for understanding the others. For understanding intentional actions we have to interpret the meanings of the actors.

ON THE PAPER "COMMON-SENSE AND SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN ACTION"

Mental Constructs and Types

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) maintained many academic relationships with Edmond Husserl and worked on the philosophical foundations of Weber's sociology from a phenomenological point of view, which emphasized the content of our consciousness. The paper that we are commenting has a special relevance on the methodology of social sciences. It begins with the following quotation "Neither common sense nor science can proceed without departing from the strict consideration of what is actual in experience. The totality of things that we think and that we do along our life story constitute our personal experience. It includes the things that we directly experience and the experience of receiving the experience of other people, such as parents, teachers and fellows, when we talk and interact with them. We can look at experience as the flow of what is going through our consciousness. Experience is changing at each instant.

Schutz, following Husserl, focuses on the objects of our consciousness and not on the nature of the external objects related to them. He emphasizes that the mental objects or mental constructs are very complex, even if they seem very simple. Perception, for instance, is not a mere representation of what is up there but it involves imagination. When we see a book we only receive visual inputs of some parts of its surface but our imagination provides the other parts and even the texture of its material. Perception involves the operations of recognizing objects to which we are familiar, and the operations of proposing a conjecture, which can be corroborated or falsified (what we took for a book can be a cigar case). So concrete facts of common sense perception are not so concrete as it seems. They involve highly complicated abstractions and we have to take account of that situation, otherwise we would misplace the notion of concreteness.

In the individual common sense, we consider that the world is given to our experience and our interpretation and that all interpretations are based on the stock of previous experiences. Previous experiences constitute our "knowledge hand" which functions as a scheme of reference. We also consider that the world is formed by more or less circumscribed objects, such as mountains, trees, dogs (not by atoms and forces, as in physics). When, for instance, we see a dog of a kind that we have never seen before, we recognize that it is an exemplar of a type of objects, and we attribute to it a more or less determined set of characteristics. It is not clear what characteristics belong to the abstract type or to the individual dog. In the natural attitude of daily life, our biographically determined situation evolves at each moment. It opens to us the possibilities of the future, which constitute the "purpose at hand". The purpose at hand

establishes the relevancies of the objects and their characteristics. So at each moment we are interested in some objects and in some characteristics. So at each moment we are interested in some objects and in some characteristics of them. In that way the characteristics and common sense definitions of concepts evolve along the time.

Knowledge at hand and purposes at hand are important notions for understanding the concept of intentional action, of which Schutz offers a phenomenological study. He uses the term "action" referring to human conduct lead by a preconceived project of the actor, and the term "act" meaning the physical or mental process in which the actor enacts the project. So an action has three main components: the motives (and purposes), the project and the act. The project is a kind of mental rehearsal of the act, it is a mental anticipation of our future conduct. Projects can be considered as conjectures that will be tested by the actual acts, which can succeed or fail in achieving our purposes.

Complex actions involve many subactions, whose motives, projects and acts are subordinated to the main action. Even innovative activities involve many subactions that we have performed before. However, the concept of repeated actions requires some comments. Schutz points out that, from a common sense point of view, we think that we can do again the actions that we have successfully performed, but he emphasizes that, from an analytical point of view, we do not repeat the same action. What we actually do is to engage in a new similar action. His argument is based on the following points: we initiate the first action under a set of conditions, with a personal experience and knowledge at hand. Our purpose is to transform an initial state of affairs in a final state, and, in the performance, our experience and knowledge at hand are incremented. When we initiate the second action, the conditions, experience and knowledge are different. It is clear that we learn to perform some kinds of activities "repeating" them many times and we improve our abilities in each of them. From that point of view, repeating an action means to perform new actions under similar conditions, experience and knowledge, whose differences are not relevant for us. That remark is also important in natural sciences, based on repeated experiments, which, in fact, are new experiments produced under similar circumstances.

The phenomenological study of action can be largely developed focusing on the mental process that it involves. Among many other aspects of the motive, purpose, mental project and act, it could insist on how people consider their possible choices and make decisions. However Alfred Schutz did not worked on them, because he was interested

in some basic aspects of the methodology of social sciences and he pointed out, without using that term, the double hermeneutics of social research: in common life situations, to understand the meaning of the actions of people, it is necessary to interpret the meanings of their actors. In social sciences, to build theories about the behaviour of people, it is necessary to introduce scientific interpretations. His main claim was that, to understand an intentional action, the observation of its physical act is not sufficient and we need some knowledge of the motive, purpose, project and meanings of its actors. But the motive and mental project cannot be directly observed, and they have to be interpreted. So social sciences, even if they use statistical methods and mathematics models, have the right, and some times the obligation, of interpreting the meanings of the actors.

CONCEPTUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN SCHUTZ AND MARCH ON EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

On experimental knowledge and learning. The phenomenological approach by Alfred Schutz considers that all kinds of knowledge, learning and motives come out from experience, from the constant flow of our consciousness. In that sense, all forms of knowledge and learning are experiential. However his distinction of our direct experience in doing things and our experience of capturing other people's experience in our interactions with them, allows us to think of experiential knowledge and learning in the sense of March. March is interested on the experiential knowledge and learning related to our individual, collective and organizational activities.

On decisions. March introduces statistical methods and mathematical models in his research. However, it also takes in account the meanings of the actors and what they think. In that sense, March is close to Schutz and his phenomenological approach. We can appreciate that point in his book *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (1994). The classical approach to decision making was based in the economic rational principle of maximizing utilities, cost or benefits, which is successfully applied to production and logistics. March took the emergent approach based on how managers get in terms with the pressure of changing circumstances and adapt to them in a way that they do not make decisions but decisions happen.

On Exploitation and Exploration of Knowledge. March's study of the learning strategies of exploitation and exploration of knowledge in organizations constitutes an

important contribution. He points out the positive and negative aspects of two extreme policies and how companies can combine them. In the first, the company possesses a competitive knowledge and exploits it without looking for other possibilities. We can relate it with the concept of the repeated action. In the second, the organization explores new knowledge but does not exploit its possible applications. If we compare that research work with the reflections of Schutz on the concept of action, we can emphasize that they are complementary. Alfred Schutz was looking for the philosophical foundations of social sciences and focussed on the notion of intentional action, and James March studies how managers make decisions and what strategies they follow. In certain way we can say that his research develops, without a direct influence, many general ideas proposed by Alfred Schutz.

CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual affinities between the ideas of Alfred Schutz on the foundations of social sciences and the studies of James March on how managers make decisions are complementary. That point of view shows us that the phenomenological studies of Alfred Schutz offer important notions that are basic for understanding experiential knowledge and learning and that they can be developed in many subjects of management research.

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