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Understanding a Presented Problem from a Phenomenological Perspective

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FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Social work and other helping professions utilize knowledge generated by social sciences to understand human behavior and human problems. Social sciences follow positivistic and humanistic philosophies. The former claims that methodologies applicable to natural sciences should be applicable to social sciences. The latter believes that positivistic methods are reductionist and social sciences should develop their own methodology because they deal with a unique subject matter--human beings. Phenomenology, a branch of humanistic thinking, has been offered as a perspective to understand the presented problem by the client. Several cases are utilized to highlight the role of a professional in understanding the presented problem following a phenomenological perspective.

The helping professions like social work, professional psychology, psychiatry, and many others utilize knowledge generated by the social sciences to understand human behavior and human problems. Such an understanding becomes helpful in finding solutions to these human problems. However, the social sciences follow philosophies which

affect their methodologies in generating the knowledge as well as its accuracy. Two such philosophies are positivism and humanism. The former claims that methodologies applicable to natural sciences such as physics should also be applicable to social sciences. Contrasted to the above, humanists believe that such methods distort the knowledge and ·are reductionist in nature. They contend that social sciences should develop their own methodology because of the uniqueness of its subject matter--human beings. Because of the uniqueness of human beings a knowledge perspective based on phenomenology, a branch of humanistic thinking, has been offered as a perspective to understand the problem presented by the client.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology focuses on the shared world of meanings through which social action is generated and interpreted.[1] It assumes that a phenomenon by itself has no inherent meaning. The phenomenon is constituted by the interpretive work of members of a society.[2] Phenomenologists seek to understand problems of meanings in everyday life, that is, common sense meaning of the interacting individuals in any situation. Schutz[3] described these common sense meanings as "first order of typifications." All situations have meanings, and the purpose of the social scientist is to bring out these meanings clearly and relate them to other meanings and meaning systems. The phenomenological view as expressed by Schutz and Natanson makes a distinction between natural science and social science. Men are not only objects existing in the natural world to be observed by the scientist, but they are creators of the world, a cultural world of their own. In creating this world

they interpret their own activities.[4] According to Natanson, the task of the "social scientist is the reconstruction of the way in which men in daily life interpret their own world."[5]

Two concepts derived from phenomenological perspectives, viz. 1) the context or the situation in which the problem emerged and 2) the meaning ascribed by the individual who experienced it, can be used to understand the presented problem. These two concepts are described in detail in the following pages.

Situation

W. I. Thomas pointed out that we depend largely upon our definition of the situation, which depends upon our organized perspective--that is, an ordered view of our world--what is taken for granted about the attributes or various objects, events, and human nature.[6]

> ". . . the organization of experience depends in part upon what is anticipated and what is taken for granted. Judgments rest upon perspectives, and people with different outlooks define identical situations differently, responding selectively to the environment. Thus a prostitute and a social worker walking through a slum area notice different things."[7]

Most of the situations encountered by people in a given society are defined and structured by them in the same way. Through previous interaction they acquire common understandings or definitions of situations of how to act in this or that situation. This process enables them to act alike.[8]

Berger and Luckman[9] contend that since all human knowledge is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, therefore sociology must seek to understand the process by which the taken for granted "reality" by man/woman in the street has been arrived at; that is, sociology should be concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality regardless óf ultimate validity or invalidity by whatever criteria. It is incumbent upon the philosopher to examine the ontological and epistemological status of the concepts. Sociologists cannot supply the answer to the question of what is valid. The sociologist/social scientist should ask the question of how the reality is different from situation to situation and how such a reality is constructed.

Meaning

The concept of meaning refers to the distinctive character of human interaction in which human beings interpret or define each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions.

This human interaction and interpretation of each other's actions is explained in Mead's[10] distinction between two features of human self: the socially and objectively defined and determined 'me' and the undetermined, active, transcendent 'I.' For Mead and also for Piaget,[11] the person is a social product, but unless this product achieves a degree of rational autonomy from all influences and determinations including social ones, it is not a person. It must be

able to represent to itself society's reaction to its actions. A person must be able to take the position of the other in order to successfully talk, play or interact with others at all. But this 'me,' this sense of generalized other, this awareness of society and of oneself in society's terms is one pole of the human equation. The other is the ability to generate an action which knowingly conforms to or which knowingly deviates from social expectations and rules.

Following the phenomenological perspective, the presented problem and the ongoing encounter between the client and the social worker has to be understood with reference to both context and meaning. The social worker may provide insights into the problem based on his/her knowledge, experience and thinking, but such suggestions have to be verified and agreed upon by the client without any pressure. That is, in the ongoing process of communication with the individual client the professional has to understand how the client defines his/her problem and how she/he arrived at that definition, that is, the presented problem has to be understood in relation to the context of the situation and what it means to the client.

The professional may raise questions and give information without making judgments, thus, the two are involved in negotiating to arrive at a common understanding of the problem. The professional may give additional information for clarification and understanding, but the final judgment rests with the client most of the time. It is possible that the client may lack comprehension because of a disability such as mental retardation, but then the professional has to make the extra effort to negotiate at a level the individual can comprehend.

Otherwise the professional treats the client
as dependent or as an individual who cannot
make decisions for himself, which violates
the ethical values of the professional. The
following cases illustrate how clients make
judgments based on their view of reality of
the situation. The judgments of the clients
may look to be justified if viewed from their
situation. The cases cited also highlight
the role of the social worker.

Professional as a Negotiator: An Asian
Indian female freshman at college is referred
to the social worker. We will call her B.
Parents complained that she has been
converted to Christianity against her will by
a zealous religious organization on campus.
The first few interviews with her revealed
that she was converted but there was no undue
pressure. She had become attached to a young
man who was instrumental in her conversion,
along with his associates who demonstrated an
enormous amount of caring and love for her,
which could be called a social pressure. The
young woman had been confused and was under
tremendous pressure within the family. One
of the older sisters had selected a young man
for herself out of her religious faith, which
created a great conflict. The sister in the
middle had pursued a young man in their own
religion but found him frustrating and
unacceptable. This middle sister also was
considered the most beautiful of all the
daughters and generated a feeling of
inadequacy and helplessness among both the
other sisters. The feeling of inadequacy was
generated as a result of remarks by relatives
and friends of the family who openly compared
the three sisters and passed judgments. The
young men also were attracted to her. In
addition, B considered herself to be an
independent type who could say things as she
saw them in the family, which could be
regarded as provocative; but the parents

ignored these remarks on the pretext that she was a child, as she was the youngest in the family. However, suddenly the family was faced with a new reality. The girl had gone beyond her limit as perceived by the parents. To B conversion to Christianity was nothing but an extension of a behavior that she was accustomed to, even though the context was different and she had taken a drastic step on her own. In fact, she was not sure of her new identity as a Christian, which really did not change anything except that she did not do well in college. To the parents she had: 1) violated the expected code of behavior by her religious conversion as well as by the declaration that she loves the man (a white man who was from a different faith and race); 2) she had been less than responsible in her studies, (the parents, who were professionals, wanted her to become a professional too); 3) she had wasted their hard earned money; and 4) she had demonstrated that she could not handle freedom because she was so easily influenced by her peers.

She did not disagree that she was a disappointment to her parents, but maintained that her priorities were different than those of her parents. She wanted to achieve independence even if she had to quit college, which in fact she did, and moved back to live with her parents. In fact, she wanted to work and then go to college so that she was no longer a burden to her parents. She did have some confusion about life and its purpose in general but wanted some clarity without being a dependent.

Later on she broke off with the Christian group when she learned that her boyfriend was being influenced by the pastor. However, she then tried to see if her

boyfriend, who was also confused, would also break away from the church.

She completed a short term course to become a bank teller. She was willing to support the parents who had been laid off by the time her relationship became known to them. Later she moved out of the parent's home and, as the parents moved out of town, she again established the relationship with the young man, married him, enrolled in the college and completed the degree.

The brief description above reveals the dynamic nature of interaction that was going on, as well as the constant effort of the young woman to achieve her goal to keep up the friendship with her boyfriend and be acceptable to her parents. The parents' view could be understood from their expectation. Both views are rational from each others' thinking, and calling one view rational or more rational than the other would mean taking a side.

Following the phenomenological perspective, the professional played the role of a negotiator between the parents and the daughter. The professional did not impose his interpretations and make judgments about the situation. He educated all the persons involved in terms of each others' expectations and provided support and understanding.

The education was critical for the parents because of the cultural background (Asian Indian) of the family. Even though the parents would allow the daughter to select her own partner under pressure, they would have preferred a man of Asian Indian origin. The young woman thought that by attaining the age of 18 she could exercise

her right to being independent because she found herself in a situation which demanded (if she wanted to remain with the man she loved) a decision that was different from the expectation of her parents.

Professional as Educator: A male child was brought by his stepmother to the social workers. She complained that the boy had a serious behavior disorder requiring institutionalization. The workers' examination revealed that the stepmother, who had married the father, had previously tried to place the boy with other agencies and failed. These agencies did not find the boy's behavior to be so problematic as to require institutionalization. This case was presented to the staff meeting of social workers who diagnosed him from psychopath to neurotic. The problem might have been (as acknowledged by the social worker) that the stepmother did not like the boy and wanted to get rid of him. By making a case for his behavior disorder she could achieve her goal. Once the problem is understood in this manner it shows that the mother is very rational. In order to achieve her goal she resorted to a game plan in which she would be able to institutionalize the child without offending the father, her husband, and could make the state pay.

This case presents a dilemma. The woman believed that the child did have a behavior disorder and she could not manage him. We cannot say she is lying. She might be experiencing a false sense of reality which could be called deception. But such a judgment assumes that the agency's judgment about the boy was absolutely accurate, which may not be so. Let us assume she was lying and appear to accept the deception. The consequences are: 1) not accepting the deception will mean she is doing something

which is considered to be socially
undesirable and also she will lose her
husband because he would not abandon the boy;
2) even if she accepted the judgment of what
might have gone through her mind, the social
worker had a limited choice within the social
and cultural values of our society, (that is,
the social worker cannot allow her to place
the child) therefore, she would not get
anything out of this choice.

The social worker might have confronted
the client after she had developed rapport
with the mother. The mother may still
disagree with the assumed motivation.
Additionally the father could be brought into
the picture to learn his understanding and
his role in the situation. In any event the
social worker finally will be asked to make
judgment whether or not to commit society's
resources, which might work to the detriment
of the boy. Thus she can refuse the
placement but she has to make sure that her
judgment was made based on information
collected from all parties, including the
agency's role as an institution, of society
and make sure that the parents understand it.
Phenomenological perspective therefore does
not always solve a dilemma that a
professional is likely to face. What it can
do however, is to sensitize the professional
toward a) giving complete attention to the
understanding of the problem by the client;
b) providing facts and alternatives which
might reeducate the client; and c) becoming
aware of when she has assumed the role of
protecting the society as she did in denying
the placement. This assumed role should be
shared with the client.

The individuals affect each others'
actions and these actions are contextual and
they are comprised of meaning; yet the
knowledge about an individual's meanings and

judgment of his behavior is glossed over.[12] Such a glossing over takes place because the judgment of the professional dealing with the situation is considered to be more authentic than the individual who is experiencing the problem. This point has been adequately demonstrated in one of the several studies by Burkholdt and Gubrium.[13]

In one of their studies of emotionally disturbed children, they reported an interesting episode. In a classroom Mrs. M gives the assignment. N finished early and announced it. Mrs. M praised him. W sitting next to N did not like this and calls him a bastard but Mrs. M did not hear it. W kept on teasing N until he kicked W which was noticed by Mrs. M. Mrs. M scolded N. N tried to explain to her but she did not allow him, which made him more angry and abusive. Consequently, N was dragged into the hall by Mrs. M to put him in an isolated room. N, sobbing, complained and tried to free himself from Mrs. M's tight grip and bumped into her. Mrs. M put N into an isolated room for the reason "out of control and hitting staff."

The above case is illustrative of the exercise of Mrs. M's professional authority and judgement which did not help improve the situation. Rather it became detrimental to the boy. If the professional had allowed N to explain his reasons for kicking W the whole event might present a different situation. Allowing N to define the situation as perceived and experienced by him would have been guided by phenomenological perspective.

Professional as a service provider: In another study of the staffings, Gubrium, et al[14] found that even though care plans are guided by the problems in need of care, the approaches to the care, and the care goals;

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staffers were concerned mainly with the problems of management of clients. If there were no problems of management, then the guidelines referred to above were brought up. Staffers engaged in considerable discussion about their own interpretations of the problem. They, in fact, ended up producing their own deliberated and discussed account of the problem without any reference to the individual patient's subjective world. In addition, since service agencies had been funded by the government, the tasks of judgment about the presenting problem, and the approaches, the goals were derived from the standard forms developed by the funding agency. This happens very often when mental health agencies have to fit the client's problem within the categories of D.S.M. III for the funding agency.

The study of staffings reveals that professionals who serve clients within an organization are expected to deal with competing interests. On one hand the professionals are socialized by their respective professions to serve the client. On the other hand they are socialized by the organizations they work in to help maintain the organization as a priority which has been called bureaucratization by Blair, Hall, Youldrus, Angel, and others.[15] Whenever the two interests are in competition, the professional has to make the decision to balance the two or give priority to one over the other. In the examples cited by Gubrium, the organization's interests have been given higher priority. Phenomenological perspective will require professionals to understand and analyze the content and meanings of the client who is experiencing the problem, which therefore might enhance the concern of service to client, however it will not guarantee that the added information insulates the professional from

bureaucratization. The phenomenological
approach is also more client centered and is
compatible with the claim of the principle of
non-judgement by the profession of social
work. Elucidating client centered thinking
Barret-Lennard wrote:

> "...that human beings act on and
> respond to reality as they
> individually experience and
> perceive it to be, that man is
> continually relating to his
> phenomenal field or environment, of
> which part of the core is his own
> self perceived identity."[16]

Professional as a symbol of authority.
Another important issue is the use of
authority by the professional. In many of
the above examples the problems were defined
by the professional, who had authority
without reference to the context in which the
problem arose, and to the meanings and
judgments of the individuals who were
experiencing them. The professionals were
making judgments based on their background
assumptions and theoretical preferences among
disciplines or other concerns. It, in fact,
looked like a judicial process by which
various judges in power deliver verdicts
based on their understanding. We as
professionals may not want to place ourselves
in this role; however, we end up playing into
this role despite our best intentions.

What then can be done? The best
solution is to bring the context of the
situation and the meanings of the subject
into the understanding of the problem. This
will help us to understand the problem as
perceived by the individual who experiences
it. Such an understanding of the problem
also opens the way to discuss the possible
solutions with the individual client as

he/she sees it. These solutions have to be thought and worked out with the individual client. This approach will prevent the professional from imposing his background assumptions and judgments on the client. This will also result in keeping charge of the client's problem as well as solutions with himself/herself.

Some instances however might produce a dilemma, particularly in the areas of behaviors which are clearly defined as deviant in the society, or behaviors that are harmful to individuals themselves, but they refuse to acknowledge or change themselves. The former may be exemplified by an individual who makes his living by stealing and does not want to change. The latter will include problems such as smoking, alcoholism, and drug addiction. In such cases the professional can educate them about the consequences of their behavior and finally leave the choices with them. Imposition of the professional's judgment will amount to carrying the social control functions. It may be argued that if the educational advice is not followed then the problem will not be resolved. However, the exercise of social control by the professional does not guarantee the change in behavior anyway. It might, in fact, produce resentment.

Other areas of confusion and dilemma may be when the behavior is not clearly defined as deviant. It is exemplified by a premarital sexual relation and an out-of-wedlock pregnancy or an act of abortion. Here the professional again can understand and follow the problem within the context of the situation as understood by the individuals and its solutions thereof. He/she can make alternative suggestions and explore implications of each. The final decision should lie with the individual. The

individual then will be making a decision
with full understanding of its consequences.
If the decision happens to go against the
mores accepted by the society, then society
might impose controls, and the individual is
aware of such controls in advance as a result
of counseling. Thus the individual would
have full responsibility as well as would
have the right to make the decisions.   ʻ

The discussion of cases highlighted the
clients' view of their situation and the role
of professionals (social workers in some
instances) in those situations following the
phenomenological perspective. The roles
discussed are not exhaustive. The captions
have been identified to capture and describe
the on going process relevant to each
situation. As is evident from the
discussions, the phenomenological perspective
emphasizes understanding of the presented
problem as viewed by the client. The
professional and the client negotiate to
arrive at a common understanding of the
situation and the meaning both can agree on.

The knowledge of theories and experience
is used by the professional to provide
insight to the client and it is done in a
manner that the client has full freedom to
accept or reject those insights as relevant
to his/her situation. Theoretical knowledge
is used as a heuristic device in
understanding the problem. The professional
presents his/her insights in a language which
is commonly understood by the client,
recognizing fully that language can be very
intimidating for the client. Thus the
process an individual utilizes to understand
his/her problem, and make sense of it, is
also utilized by the professional. The
professional in fact becomes a party who
wants to understand this process that only
the client has access to. This process

allows the client to fully participate in understanding his/her problem and also be educated about it without losing control of the situation and be responsible and responsive to his/her situation. This also allows the professional to become knowledgeable about the process individual clients utilize to make sense to themselves about their situation and their response to it. The former fits into the professional value of the individual's right of self determination and the latter provides a theoretical frame of understanding individual problems.

It can thus be concluded that a phenomenological perspective provides to the professionals a philosophical and theoretical frame which allows recognition of the individual's rights and responsibility and is useful to understand his/her problems and its solutions in a manner which might prove to be more effective in the long run.

FOOTNOTES

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