



An Introduction to Social Psychology

Phenomenological Definitions

Ontology:

Phenomenological psychologists see the person without any essence or fixed core, but rather as something that comes into being through their actions in the world. This is always in an embodied way in relation to others. For without our bodies we cannot perceive the world. And without others we remain nothing. Human existence is therefore more verb-like, with us actively reaching out into the world creating meaning, rather than being fixed in a way that can be passively described, like other objects in the sciences. These ideas follow the work of existentialist philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre and Merlo Ponti, who talk of the person as 'dasein', the there of being.

Methodology:

Phenomenological methodology is qualitative, looking at people's perceptions of the world and developing our understanding of these as analysts. This results in a focus on experience and the things in their appearing. We do not seek to delve into the psyche or reduce people to information processing mechanisms, because for us the psyche is always something turned out on the world, and so only accessible through an examination of experience. With this, we recognise the ambiguity of the lived world. We do not seek to pin down and fix variables, but instead, aim to recognise and reflect this complexity in our choice of methods.

Methods:

The focus on experience of the heart of phenomenological methodology results in a need to collect data of people's lived experiences. This may be through first person accounts, interviews or other literally sources.

These data are then used as the basis of a phenomenological analysis, which involves the analyst initially attempting to set aside their prejudgements about the topic and approaching the account as if for the first time. Later, the role of the analyst is recognised more reflexively through the reflections on their influence on the findings. The data are then systematically examined for themes, which highlight the nature of the lived experience being recounted in as much rich detail as possible.

Unit of analysis :

The unit of analysis is the detailed description of people's perceptions of their experience.

This represents a move away from the individual in isolation, as the phenomenological subject is embodied, living in relation to other embodied subjects and the wider world. We do not believe it is possible to disentangle the subject from these relationships, for this relational quality is at the heart of what it means to be human.

As such, our focus is on the meaning of the life world in all its complexity. The phenomenological psychologist elicits description of the life world from participants, and then seeks to explicate these further, producing rich and vivid descriptions of experience.