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978-0-521-27409-8 - Sociology, Ethnomethodology, and Experience: A Phenomenological Critique

Mary F. Rogers

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Sociology, ethnomethodology, and experience

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# Sociology, ethnomethodology, and experience

**A phenomenological critique**

**Mary F. Rogers**

*The University of West Florida*

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*to*

Donald Vincent Rogers

*and*

Genevieve Maire Rogers

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## Preface

In my case to know the world has always been accompanied by the desire to alter it. . . . I have always denied that the things which the world presents to us are stable and final reality.

Nicolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*

A friend of mine with staunch ideals and sharp talents accepts failure as a given; he aims for progress. That spirit underlies my effort to show the potential fruitfulness of phenomenological sociology. Whatever progress I make here will assuredly deepen my own phenomenological beginnings, virtually issue an intellectual invitation to my colleagues, and probably tax my sense of intellectual responsibility.

I write as a phenomenological beginner. Phenomenology has won my commitment as a sociological theorist. Yet it is not, of course, without its shortcomings. Certainly, for example, solipsism lurks as a continuous danger for all philosophers, including phenomenologists. Yet rigorous adherence to phenomenological method short-circuits the problem of solipsism. Certainly, too, phenomenologists debate among themselves and criticize one another's methods, data, and analyses. Yet virtually all phenomenologists assign primacy to human consciousness. To that extent they consistently concern themselves, in one fashion or other, with meaning, experience, constitution, the self, and essentially related matters. The progress I aim for involves implicitly showing that phenomenology is no solipsistic enterprise and explicitly showing that phenomenologists are a community of scholars who have in common some central concerns and some challenging tasks. The space at hand precludes overtly criticizing phenomenology or airing the disagreements among phenomenologists. My intellectual responsibility – indeed, my progress – does demand, however, that I be honest about my intellectual position and that I be painstakingly methodical in defending it.

I also write as a sociologist. I am unqualified to augment the exegetical and critical literature on Husserl's work and am uninterested here in phe-



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nomenological literary criticism, psychology, and aesthetics. My broad purpose is to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological advantages phenomenological sociology holds. Thus I offer a selective exposition of phenomenology that leaves aside major portions of Husserl's work, such as transcendental logic and the theory of numbers. To date, no social scientist has offered an introductory exposition of phenomenology. I want to fill that gap with a detailed mapping of the phenomenological literature relevant to social scientists.

The possibilities that move me concern recovery and discovery. A phenomenological sociology might help us recover the spirit of our predecessors who refused narrow interpretations of social reality. At the same time it might revitalize our sense of discovery concerning social life and the human experiences that shape and are shaped by varieties of togetherness. A phenomenological stance heightens possibilities for actual methodological and theoretical advances. Phenomenological sociology means, above all, open-ended sociology, that is, sociology so rigorously self-conscious that it invites methodological and theoretical pluralism. Briefly put, phenomenology offers sociologists opportunities for widening and deepening "sociological consciousness,"<sup>1</sup> a level of consciousness our naivetés, both professional and nonprofessional, seek.

To date, phenomenological sociology has developed as a variety of "interpretive sociology." If I in fact make progress here, I will show that all sociology is interpretive and that phenomenological sociology lifts that insight out of the taken-for-granted sphere. By labeling one sociological approach "interpretive," we sociologists imply that other approaches somehow advance themselves without benefit of interpretive activities. Here our language snares us. The phenomenological approach to language, which I favor over ethnomethodological and structuralist approaches, alone shows how phenomenology stands to benefit sociologists. Phenomenologists treat language foremostly in relation to experience rather than in terms of speech, conversations, and texts. In the process they remind us that words can entrap as well as free us.

My intellectual and psychological indebtedness is far-flung. To my parents I owe more than words permit me to acknowledge. Their constant love and continuous confidence have advanced my spirit and given me the determination to persevere.

To Maurice Natanson I owe a turning point in my intellectual life. His encouragement and criticism have helped me burst some long-standing intellectual limits. Most of all, though, his careful scholarship, splendid writing,

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and dedicated teaching have provided me with boundless inspiration. Although William Julius Wilson played a less direct role in stimulating this work, his influence on my intellectual habits and self-confidence has made a crucial difference. To my colleagues Dallas A. Blanchard and Ramon A. Oldenburg I am grateful for unfailing support and encouragement. I bear the same indebtedness to Lucius F. Ellsworth, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at The University of West Florida.

I am grateful, too, to Bodil Gilliam and Hope Loper at the John C. Pace Library of The University of West Florida. Linda Longworth, Claire Hoewt, and Nancy Moore typed sections of the first draft of the manuscript. Their careful work facilitated my progress. To Charlie Mae Steen, however, I am most indebted for excellent typing and, besides that, for strong support whenever I became discouraged. To my students, too, I am indebted. In my Contemporary Sociological Theory course they bore up well as I labored over the matters of phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology. Paula Brush, Gilbert Schultz, and Sandy Wilkinson merit special mention.

Martha L. Rogers also merits a special thanks. She lived with the radical fluctuations of mood that accompanied my writing. Not once did she complain, and many times she outdid herself with words of encouragement and deeds of kindness.

I am also deeply indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Endowment provided me the opportunity to study with Professor Natanson at Yale University in 1977 in an NEH Summer Seminar. In addition, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded me a Summer Research Grant in 1979 that enabled me to complete the first draft of this study. To the people at the National Endowment for the Humanities I owe opportunities to enhance my teaching as well as advance my scholarship.

Finally, I owe a great deal to my husband Mandrake. We married when my work on this manuscript was nearing an end. Thus his support during that final stage was, in a sense, blind. Mandrake's help was a leap of faith. Coupled with his extravagant love, that faith helped me complete this project.

I remain, in the final analysis, the sole person responsible for whatever shortcomings mark this study. Were it not, though, for the encouragement of people too numerous to name, no manuscript would have appeared. Without shirking my responsibilities, I reiterate my thanks to them with the hope that I can give others what has been given me.