

Psychology and Natural Science

The Relation Between the Natural Scientific
Attitude, the Theoretical Attitude and the
Life-World in Ethnomethodology and
Phenomenology

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

In this thesis I will revisit debates concerning the use of natural scientific methods in the discipline of psychology. I take the position that natural scientific methods are inappropriate for investigating human experience. My central aim is to unravel the dilemma embedded in psychological practice. Psychologists specifically investigate people but, by using methods based on natural science, they are forced to admit that meaningful human experience is either irrelevant or inaccessible to their investigations of human behaviour.

Initially, I take up ethnomethodologically informed discursive psychology (EM-informed DP) as an alternative to, and a viable replacement of, the natural scientific methods in the discipline of psychology. EM-informed DP proceeds from Harold Garfinkel's appropriation of Edmund Husserl's critique that natural scientific investigations have lost their life-world foundation. Garfinkel reads Husserl as issuing a practical instruction to go out and investigate lived practices, without any specialised theoretical framework. In doing so, one area that we can investigate, according to Garfinkel, is the lived practices of natural scientists and how they collaboratively produce their research findings. Hence, I proceed by empirically describing how clinical psychologists, as trained natural scientists, interpret people's everyday experience in and through their actual practices.

Following three investigations of clinical psychological interactions, based on three different interpretations of Garfinkel's ethnomethodological (EM) program, I demonstrate that, despite claims to the contrary, EM in fact presupposes the same ground as natural science. EM-informed researchers mistakenly conflate the natural scientific attitude with the theoretical attitude and, hence, seek to eliminate both in their attempts to clarify the lived practices of natural scientists or everyday people. By contrast, for phenomenologists, the theoretical attitude and the natural scientific attitude are distinct, but interrelated, attitudes that we can take towards the life-world. According to phenomenologists, the life-world is the starting point of any investigation, including all psychological investigations. However, if we forget that our investigations are theoretical, we perpetuate the same problem associated with the natural scientific method; leading us to replace the meaningful human world in which we live, the life-

world, with the sterile Objective world constructed by the natural scientific observer. As I will suggest, within the discipline of psychology, the substitution of one empirical method for another still leaves us without the world we live in. The challenge in psychology is to reinstate the importance of the theoretical attitude and the life-world.

Through a series of unsuccessful attempts to replace natural scientific methods with an alternative empirical method in the discipline of psychology, I propose that the problem with the natural scientific method is much larger than I originally presupposed. The natural scientific interpretation of human experience is the sedimented interpretation of the life-world in our current historical situation. We cannot simply replace the natural scientific method because, currently, there is no viable alternative. Instead, in order to reinstate the importance of meaningful lived experience, we need to understand the natural scientific attitude in terms of its historical development and grounding assumptions, by engaging with the life-world through the theoretical attitude.

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