



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 4  
Issue 1 *September*

Article 7

---

September 1976

## Phenomenological Social Science and Holistic Social Policy

Thomas D. Watts  
*University of Texas, Arlington*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Policy Commons, and the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Watts, Thomas D. (1976) "Phenomenological Social Science and Holistic Social Policy," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



PHENOMENOLOGICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE AND  
HOLISTIC SOCIAL POLICY

Thomas D. Watts  
Graduate School of Social Work  
The University of Texas at Arlington

ABSTRACT

The reliability of positivistic social science knowledge poses seminal problems for social policy. Needed is more sound phenomenological and qualitative research within the conspectus of the twin theoretical movements of ethnomethodology and the Frankfurt School, towards the goal of a more holistic social science knowledge base as well as a more holistic social policy.

The idea of a comprehensive social policy rests on an epistemological base. If we accept the definition given social policy by Martin Rein, that social policy is the "planning for social externalities, redistribution, and the equitable distribution of social benefits, especially social services" with its subject matter being "not the social services alone, but the social purposes and consequences of agricultural, economic, manpower, fiscal, physical development, and social welfare policies,"<sup>1</sup> then we can say that "social policy" and "social science" go hand in hand. Without knowledge social policy could not be formulated, not much less be expressed.

By knowledge I imply an obviously larger purvey than social science knowledge. Philosophy, for example, is of considerable import to social policy formulation, yet it is not a social science per se. So are numerous other sciences, such as the natural and physical sciences. Yet the knowledge core that feeds into social policy comes largely from the social sciences, which purport to explain social phenomena, and which are at the same time heavily influenced by philosophy (for example, the current influence of phenomenology on the social sciences).

This essay considers the problem of the reliability of social science knowledge for social policy. It is the thesis of this essay that the reliability of social science knowledge poses a seminal problem for social policy formulation. The twin theoretical movements of ethnomethodology and the Frankfurt School have informed and guided my thinking in this area, and are stated here somewhat explicitly since a correlative thesis of the essay and of much social science thinking today is that the era of "value free" social science is over. Following Alvin Gouldner, values and ideology play inestimable roles throughout the epistemological mosaic of any science.

The reliability of social science research and knowledge has been increasingly called into question. Alvin Gouldner, in his seminal work, The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology (1970), is really addressing himself to the crisis of positivism in the social sciences. It is held here that the key issue in the reliability or nonreliability of social science for social policy rests in the positivistic tenets and positivistic influences that have been the inherited tradition of Western social science. "From the time of Comte on, the reigning philosophical foundation of Western social

science has been that of its founder, namely, positivism. The very name 'positivism' denotes Comte's emphasis on the 'positive sciences', that is, on exhaustively tested and 'objectivized' data rather than on purely speculative neologisms."<sup>2</sup>

The essential principles of positivistic social science have culminated in the following scientific conceptions, as so well stated by the Frankfurt School adherent Trent Shroyer:

- (1) That knowledge is inherently neutral;
- (2) That there is a unitary scientific method;
- (3) That the standard of certainty and exactness in the physical sciences is the only explanatory model for scientific knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Positivism harbors the notion that the research methodologies and instrumentations of the natural and physical sciences can be employed accurately and efficiently in examining the complexities and intricacies of social or human phenomena. The positivistic world-view is enthralled with the idea of complete quantification of all social phenomena, with categorization, reification, numeration. The "separate reality" of Castenada does not exist outside a scientific mind-set and empirical framework that makes up scientific discourse. The positivistic scientist has replaced the medieval priest, say some, as the supreme and ultimate arbiter and authority on the shape and make-up of the universe.

Positivistic social science is more inclined to "reify" official statistics or findings. The positivist is not so concerned with the shaping of "official statistics" as he is with the statistics themselves. The reliance on "factual" or statistical

data is so great that the actor himself and how he came to be a "statistic," or how other actors are, for some reason, not "statistics" seem to the positivist as questions to be irrelevant at best, and at worst "non-scientific" as they do not contain empirical referents or measureable, recordable data. This "scientific method which is undergoing questioning," assays Henry Maas, "is one which tries too hard to objectify and fractionate for analysis the human condition under study and often, prematurely, to quantify its components or 'variables.'"<sup>4</sup>

Social policy must "rely" on social science knowledge and research. A social policy based on erroneous and misleading "official statistics" will finalize itself as an erroneously conceived and implemented social policy. Like a virus, the positivistic "official statistics" or "final results" of a study remain around to haunt each and every tenet of the most "comprehensive" of social policies. Wittgenstein once remarked that the frame of his entire universe was the language he spoke. The frame of the social policy universe is the social science information and knowledge base upon which it rests and from which it draws its ideas, and very sustenance. Whether a social policy on delinquency based on Cloward's "opportunity theory" will be an effective one will be based to a great extent on the accuracy of the theory itself. Even further, it will be effective if the research and statistics upon which opportunity theory is based were valid in themselves and whether and how Cloward took that into account in the formulation of his theory.

Two emerging and enervative theoretical movements in social science which together enunciate the most telling critiques of

positivism are Ethnomethodology and the Frankfurt School. Positivism poses such intricate dilemmas for social science and for social policy that an investigation of these two movements would appear fruitful.

Ethnomethodology is a major movement in sociological thought, part of a larger school often referred to as "phenomenological sociology." This year's annual meeting of the American Sociological Association will harbor an entire section devoted to the area, and the spate of journal articles and books influenced by the movement grows steadily in volume. In the mind of this movement, "positivistic science has ignored the world of everyday life, a world composed of intersubjectivity, intentionalities, and varying conscious levels... the methods of the natural sciences are not adequate models for the study of the social phenomena of everyday life."<sup>5</sup> It is a movement that springs from Husserl, the philosophical founder of phenomenology. Husserl founded what is often referred to as a "philosophy of the subjective," a philosophy that took on the alleged "objectivism" of science and asked whether intentionalities and consciousness were really ingredients in our understanding of social scenes. Ethnomethodology states that even reality itself is socially constructed. The classic explanative for this stance is contained in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (1966). For Harold Garfinkel, the founder of the "California School of Sociology" (as Ethnomethodology is often referred to, largely because so many of its adherents are in California universities, and because it appears to fit into a "hip" sociological blend), the social world is held together not by an exalted and elaborate Parsonsian value and morality structure, but by a complex, intricate, collective structure of

so-called "tacit understandings" (what men know and know others know) concerning the most ordinary and seemingly trivial of daily affairs).

Ethnomethodology wishes to "go inside" the actor, to understand social reality from the point of view of the person living that social reality. Ethnomethodology, despite the term, is more theory than method. It is a "phenomenology of the social world" (to coin the title of the famous book by Alfred Schutz) employing a method it calls "documentary interpretation." Here the ethnomethodological researcher takes the actions of the actors as an expression, a "document" of an underlying pattern, takes as problematic all of the actor's behavior (and his own as researcher), pays constant heed to how concepts are linked to observations and makes public and observable all of his own documentary activities.

In this regard, ethnomethodology maintains that the social order, with all its social symbols and variegated meanings, exists precariously and has no existence at all independent of the actor's accounting and describing practices. No more earth rattling departure from traditional positivist dogmatism in this respect could have been uttered. For in ethnomethodological research (which is not opposed to sophisticated measurement devices, but only feels that they are often misleading, and pitifully inadequate for explaining social phenomena) there is the attempt to uncover and detect the hidden background expectancies, the "norms-in-use", the "etceteras" of the variegated social world. It goes further than symbolic interactionism, in attempting to unravel the background expectancies, the "etceteras" (that Garfinkel refers to so often) that compose the intricate mosaic of the social world.

What relevance or impact can Ethnomethodology have for the social science that social policy could employ, and indeed for social policy itself? Perhaps the most comprehensive ethnomethodological research study is Aaron Cicourel's compelling four-year study, The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice (1968). The impact that studies of this kind can have on social policy is significant, especially because of the signal role played by the actors in the study. In this study (which employed audiovisual equipment and other means in a seemingly exhausting series of "documentary interpretations") the activities of all the actors in the juvenile justice scenario are parlayed: police, parents, judge, probation officer, community. The conclusions of the study (done in two San Francisco Bay area counties) are that descriptions of juveniles and their crimes by police, probation officers and other court officials are selectively put together so that they will "fit" both the social machinery of juvenile justice and the theoretical frames of reference of the participants in that machinery. Cicourel calls into question most ordinary positivist assumptions used to process information (that will be positivistic information, of course) in social science. He goes through lengthy interview protocols statement by statement, demonstrating that the researcher must use the same common-sense rules of interpretation laymen do in order to make sense of what people say.

This is research that takes labelling theory out into the social arena, that in fact goes considerably beyond it. The value for social policy lies in the "whole" of the picture spoken of earlier. All of the actors are taken into the scene and documented and interpreted. Cicourel, a sociologist at Berkeley at the time, even became friends with several of the police and over a

few beers at a nearby bar learned a great deal about police attitudes on juveniles away from the formal work scene. Delinquency is seen as a socially produced fact. Criminal statistics are creatures of the day-to-day activities of law enforcement and are fit subjects for investigation themselves. This is not research that tells social policy exactly "what to do" (nor is any other kind of social research) but it does provide knowledge that is more "whole" than "partial" (again to coin Sartre), a whole and comprehensive knowledge of a radical empiricist composition that is so sorely needed in social policy formulation today. Research that can be of value to social policy must go beyond positivist or structural-functionalist edifices and must, as Husserl said, to to the thing itself. The thing itself must be approached from the point of view of "the thing itself." If social work can be divided into clinical and community practice areas, then it could be said that Ethnomethodology proffers a critique of positivism that is a trifle more oriented to the former, while the Frankfurt School thrusts its positivist critique more in the direction of the latter.

The Frankfurt School, often referred to as "Critical Theory," lists as some of its more outstanding exponents Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, Leo Lowenthal, Erich Fromm, T. W. Adorno and Albrecht Wellmer. The Frankfurt School proffers a neo-Marxist, antipositivist and psychologically-influenced marriage of the insights of Marx and Freud, Marxism and Existentialism. In the eyes of the Frankfurt School there is a "hidden positivism" in Marx. The basic historical result of the ambiguity in Marx's theory was a mechanistic understanding of historical materialism. This theoretical misconception was translated into practice in two different

ways: (1) in the West, the evolutionist views of communist parties, and (2) in the East, it led to Lenin's technocratic conception.<sup>7</sup> The Frankfurtians are interested in a genuinely radical alternative to the mechanistic and positivistic elements in Marx. For Marx technology was neutral, for the Frankfurtians technology has become ideology. Contemporary science and technology have become new forms of power and privilege. The positivism that science and technology harbor as its professed philosophy of science separates the subject and the object of knowledge and takes the statements of science as an observational given. "Knowledge" is thus conceived as a neutral picturing of fact.

Older Marxists spoke often of "false consciousness." The exponents of Critical Theory affirm that the scientific image of science is the fundamental false consciousness of our epoch. Whereas Marx saw "production" in a 19th century fashion, the Frankfurt School sees science and technology as constituting the decisive force of production today. Hence, Herbert Marcuse sees the university as the most important institutional locus of this new force of production. The working class are not a vehicle of radical change because class conflict is no more than latent today.

Probably the most profound spokesman for the movement today has been Jurgen Habermas. Habermas has argued his case in two seminal books, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971) and Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970). For Habermas, the revolutions of the East have failed, the stabilization of capitalism in the West is now an established reality (relatively speaking), and revolution is impossible in either system. Self-reflection or

critical reflection, themes that are antithetic to positivistic empirical dogmatizing, in the mind of Habermas, is absent or nearly so in the social science communities and societies of both East and West. As Gouldner has brought home so well in The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology, Structural-Functionalist and Marxist social scientists attend international conferences together, and resemble each other in a rather striking way.

Melvyn A. Hill states that: "For Habermas, the development of technical knowledge becomes the base of society, rather than Marx's economics...science...replaces the means of production, as the base of the dialectic of history. And consequently Habermas turns to a critique of the philosophy of science, of positivism, in order to pursue his unravelling of ideology in the development of modern knowledge and society... The basis of positivism...is the disavowal of reflection. The result of this has been the conviction that we no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science."<sup>8</sup> Whenever positivism totally permeates a scientific establishment, it functions as a kind of societal a priori that uncritically permits the extension of an exploitative instrumental rationalization. That is, it contributes to the generation of decision-making whose "rationality" is instrumental effectiveness and efficiency.

The rivers, streams and environment of both the USSR and the US are equally polluted. In the USSR, the all-powerful state gears itself to "effectiveness" and "efficiency" (even if people get in the way), while in the US capitalist industry occupies a similar bailiwick. In the USSR individuals are "tracked" from the earliest years to a blue-collar pursuit, or the rare and privileged few to a university. Examinations are rigidly applied and adhered

to as a sort of secular god speaking his consummate will on earth. Numerical test results are "reified" into "Reality." In the US the situation is only slightly better. No one can define what "failure" is, certainly not in life, even less so in the school-room. Yet it is built into the entire educational system as a reified social construct, as a positivistic absolutism with no recourse (some avenues out of this have been provided by William Glasser in his Schools Without Failure and also in the concept of "mastery learning").

Positivism in either country is more likely to elevate such terms as "Fail," "Schizophrenic," "Delinquent," etc., reifying and absolutizing them. One can easily see that a social policy based on such frighteningly structured absolutisms will be a social policy that is absolutistic and positivistic to its very core. Critical Theory teaches social science and social policy to "be critical." Without criticism and self-reflection, without intense philosophizing on the very language employed in social science discourse, on the social statistics employed and trumpeted as "findings" and "results" or "reality" in social science, social policy anchors itself on the quicksand of preconceived notions and ill-acquired data masking as "facts."

The Frankfurt School also proffers a revived and humanistic socialism for our time, a critical theory of society that attempts to unmask repressive forces and oppressive institutions. These oppressive institutions employ knowledge in their daily activities. Peter Drucker has referred to a "knowledge society." The Frankfurt School would agree with this estimation and would ask, as Jurgen Habermas has stated so eloquently: "If we imagine the

philosophical discussion of the modern period reconstructed as a judicial hearing, it would be deciding a single question: How is reliable knowledge possible?"

Social policy must perforce heighten its interest in that fundamental Habermas question. I maintain that reasonably reliable knowledge is possible in social policy formulation, but that that knowledge can only be made possible after some major misconceptions are swept away concerning what social reality is, how it is constructed and maintained, and the repressive role that positivistic social science or social policy can play.

Perhaps no better example of the destructive effects of positivistic social science on social policy can be found than in ghetto schools. The famous Coleman Report of 1966 was a classic example of positivistic research imposed on, and looked at from, the "outside in." The feelings of black youth and parents never saw the light of day in the weave of that rather sizeable research effort.

A single qualitative research study on the feelings of black youth toward the grade of "F" in their school lives may come much closer to illuminating our minds about educational policy than ten more quantitative studies on the grading systems of the public school system. The reification of the concept of "failure" that is the hallmark of the public school system can only initially be "got at" through the attitudes and feelings of the chief actor in the drama (the youth recipient of a poor or failing grade).

Donald Schon has called for an existential knowing and learning process whereby knowledge is garnered from the "inside out," through such means as the case history, the narrative, and of course through interaction itself.<sup>9</sup> If knowledge is to be gained from the inside out, from the particular point of view of black youth in a ghetto high school, then such qualitative methodologies as participant observation, in-depth interviews with selected samples, and the like must be employed. An ethnomethodological study of high school dropouts on the scale of Aaron Cicourel's major ethnomethodological study of "delinquents" in two probation departments would be of immense benefit to educational policy-makers.

The need for sound qualitative and phenomenological research for educational policy-making (or for any other area of policy formulation) does not diminish the importance or usefulness of quantitative research. Jean Paul Sartre once remarked that social problems are whole, not partial, and must be treated as such. The knowledge that is necessary for social policy and planning must include both qualitative and quantitative elements in order that it might take on a composition that is "whole" rather than "partial." Quantitative and qualitative research can co-exist in a harmonious relationship that is attuned to knowledge-building in all its dimensions. The social science knowledge that has been utilized in social policy formulation in the past has been "partial" in that it has had an almost totally quantitative composition, with information gathered primarily from looking "outside in" rather than "inside out." Donald Schon has warned that social welfare policy can ill afford to depend on just one kind of knowing of the traditional positivist variety.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, the social science that feeds into social policy must be enervative and liberating. As Marx was liberating in the century that followed him, so Husserl and Phenomenology can be in the next. If social science researching can combine the two, then assuredly we have before us a knowledge base that social policy can employ fruitfully and meaningfully. For if the social science that social policy relies on can be critical and emancipatory, then we could surmise that the social policy forthcoming will have that much greater opportunity of being truly critical, emancipatory and liberative, for the benefit of all.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Rein, Social Policy, (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 4-5.
2. Thomas D. Watts, "Towards an Alternative Knowledge Base in Social Work Education: The Crisis of Positivism in the Social Sciences and Social Work," paper delivered at the Authors Forum, Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Atlanta, Georgia, March, 1974.
3. Trent Shroyer, "Toward a Critical Theory for Advanced Industrial Society," Recent Sociology No. 2, Hans Peter Drietz, ed., (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 210.
4. Henry S. Maas, "Social Work, Knowledge and Social Responsibility," Journal of Education for Social Work, 4 (Spring, 1968), p. 44.
5. Thomas D. Watts, "Ethnomethodology: A Consideration of Theory and Research," Cornell Journal of Social Relations, 9 (Spring, 1974), p. 100.

6. Lindsey Churchill, "Ethnomethodology and Measurement," Social Forces, 50 (December, 1971), p. 183.
7. Volker Eisele, "Theory and Praxis: The View from Frankfurt," Berkeley Journal of Sociology XVI, 1971-72, pp. 94-105.
8. Melvyn Alan Hill, "Jurgen Habermas: A Social Science of the Mind," Philosophy of the Social Sciences 2 (September, 1972), pp. 249-250.
9. Donald A. Schon, Beyond the Stable State (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 232.
10. Ibid, pp. 201-37.