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PHENOMENOLOGY OF CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE
THINKING WITHIN STUDENTS OF SOCIAL
SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES ON UNIVERSITY OF
ZAGREB

Završni rad

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**Phenomenology of critical-reflective thinking within
students of social science and humanities on University of
Zagreb**

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Content

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Historical context of Croatia.....	5
3. Critical-reflective thinking	6
3.1. Presuppositions	7
3.2. The prompt.....	8
3.3. Critical-reflective thinking <i>ad infinitum</i>	9
4. Practical use and value of critical-reflective thinking.....	10
4.1. Why is critical-reflective thinking necessary?	10
4.2. Negative connotation of critical-reflective thinking.....	12
5. Phenomenology.....	12
5.1. Everyday life	13
6. Conclusion	15
7. Literature	15
8. Abstract	16

1. Introduction

„Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing“

Plato, *Statesman* (Arendt, 1987; p. 1)

The phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking and in particular - critical thinking of young students in the Republic of Croatia can be observed from various perspectives. Due to this multilayered phenomenon, a complex conceptualization of the research process is required. In addition to mentioned above, main goal of this paper is to theoretically elaborate on the subject so that empirical research, which is to be conducted in the future, rests on strong and elaborated epistemological foundations, also it is needed to concretize multilayered problem of the phenomenon which is to be observed. In this way, the theoretical elaboration will strengthen the foundations that derive methodological knowledge about phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking.

Critical-reflective thinking is considered as an important aspect of human lives. Its consideration in life of an individual leads to cognition and personal freedom. Throughout out this paper particular phenomenon will be defined and analyzed followed by an explanation on practical use and negative connotation it has in contemporary world.

Also, an explanation on why certain population, students of the social sciences and humanities at the University of Zagreb, are targeted for discovering phenomenology of mentioned phenomenon and why that population could give more detailed explanation to the phenomenon compared to populations of other characteristics.

2. Historical context of Croatia

The Republic of Croatia found itself in a transition field in the early 1990s. This characteristic is highlighted because during this transition period: the transition from a totalitarian system and planned economy to a society that cultivates democratic and capitalist characteristics, younger populations and their way of living is affected. After a turbulent period marked by wars, an ethnically homogeneous state was established, turning to traditional values. (Ilišin and Radin, 2007; p. 14).

In their research, Ilišin and Radin (2007; p. 15) noted that young people in Croatia generally carry these characteristics:

„the understanding of conflict and democratic rules (especially the role of the opposition) was weakened, the emphasis on crime in conversion and privatization as problems, as well as the perception of social and religious inequalities, social activism and political participation were also weakened”

Young people are directly and indirectly affected by this transition and the consequences it has left on Croatian society. After a concise description of the period which young people had to go through, forming themselves and their values. Specific historical background would bring less tragic consequences if tendency to think critically-reflective on that situation given at that time, was supported enough.

In research they conducted, Ilišin and Radin (2007) consider youth as a resource as well as a problem. They point out that young people are characterized by taking on permanent roles in society, starting from professional, family, public and generally taking responsibility in the social decision-making process. Young people have the potential that should be activated in a timely manner. Those who are capable of critical approach to problems are the first step in achieving social goals.

But are young people in the Republic of Croatia competent and aware of how to approach social issues? The next chapter will explain in more detail the concept of critical thinking as necessary for access to social reality and self awareness. Phenomenological analysis should interpret and understand attitude of young people in the Republic of Croatia to this phenomenon.

3. Critical-reflective thinking

Thinking is an important activity of human life. It differs us from other creatures inhabiting planet Earth, followed up with the potential to self-reflect. This feature was discussed since humans became aware of it and its importance.

“Although most agree that it is a mental activity and an important part of human life, disagreement has reigned about whether thinking is a process of examining something or merely perceiving it, an active or passive occurrence, a categorical description of all mental faculties or one mental faculty among others, and whether there are many types of thinking or just one.” (Wielgus, 2015; p. 1).

This paper concentrates on one particular type of thinking which is critical-reflective¹, its goal is to describe and understand that phenomenon through experiences, meaning and everyday use of particular population of students through a phenomenological point of view. This attempt can be opposed to discussing this phenomenon from the view of naturalistic, general characterization, although general characterization improves phenomenological cognition and for this reason this paper concentrates on theoretical general doctrine as a *first step* towards knowledge based on study of consciousness.

Margot D. Wielgus (2015; p. 9-11) defines phenomenon of “critical-reflective thinking” as a type of thinking in which individuals are invited by prompting events to consider their presuppositions, by that she refers to notions individuals have taken as true without prior consideration. She claims that virtue of thinking can be chosen and intentionally carried out while other ways of thinking simply befall a person. If an individual critically considers something, which he has been taking as true until that consideration, without prior reflection is what makes a concept of critical-reflective thinking.

¹ Critical-reflective thinking is refers to as a *phenomenon* in extension.

3.1. Presuppositions

Experiences are forming an individual and each individual experiences different variety of circumstances throughout their life. Different observations and challenges in life define individual as *that specific individual with those specific experiences*, which then defines groups and culture in general. Consequently, we unknowingly adopt different presuppositions about ourselves, others and life. We form different meaning according to the same object. Also, we experience same situation in different ways and as a result we lead different lives.

Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger's students, refers to presuppositions as "prejudices". He explains that everyone has prejudices due to their historical and social situation within a tradition:

"Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live."
(Gadamer, 2004; p. 278)

Presuppositions can be adopted personally or by a community of people and they frame the world we live in. Our daily life, and the way we function in it, is formed by our presuppositions. It is a common thing not to be aware of one's presuppositions and never to critically-reflect on them. (Wielgus; 2015; p. 65-67).

Therefore, certain set of presupposition defines certain decision making throughout life. All mentioned above, leads to a conclusion that people are influenced by their presuppositions and they wouldn't perceive world, other people nor their relation to both, in the same way if their presuppositions were different. Presuppositions form opinions, judgments and values which help an individual to make his way through the world. Through critical-reflective thinking, grounded presuppositions are questioned and possibly destroyed. Presuppositions are forming people and their character but also the way they appertain to their surroundings.

Presumptions are confuted when the thinker is prompted to reflect something that has, up until then, never been questioned. Presupposition becomes open to questioning its validity and that process composes critical-reflective thinking.

3.2. The prompt

Two moments appear in critical-reflective thinking: prompt and critical moment. This chapter is devoted to presentation and explanation of prompt, describing what is meant by that term and what is the result of its occurrence.

Prompt happens to people on daily basis, it occurs when someone is invited to think or rethink their presumptions. It is occurrence rather than a thing, empty of content² and it occurs in concrete circumstances and may issue from variety of sources. Example of sources prompt comes from are: a person, an idea, a feeling, an experience, a thing. It can be viewed as an invitation, but without a necessary causal relationship to the critical encounter with a presupposition

In conclusion, prompt is subjective and different people are prompted by different things which analogs to the fact that different individuals approach and experience same things in a different way. In order to critically analyze presuppositions, the person must be in some way receptive and open to its invitation to think. Humans are curious species and they usually inform themselves by reading, listening, talking hoping that one idea will catch us and draw us away in thinking. Prompt cannot be intentionally realized, it happens by chance but its influence on individual is not happening by chance. (Wielgus, 2015; p. 28-38).

“Humans can open themselves to prompts by cultivating openness and receptivity (...) but also putting ourselves in the right circumstances to hear and respond to prompts.” (Wielgus, 2015; p. 38).

Openness mentioned above refers to accepting the possibility that some believes we hold to be true turn out to be otherwise. Main purpose of the prompt is, therefore, invitation to critically reflect. Person affected by prompt, responds to it by either accepting or rejecting its invitations. Acceptance of the prompt as an invitation moves into the critical moment, and rejecting the prompt does not. (Wielgus, 2015; p. 42)

Critical moment won't be further discussed in this paper, it is important to point out the difference of it happening or not. If it didn't occur due to the invitation of the prompt, individual is not engaged in critical-reflective thinking.

² „ 1. Neither (a) the prompt itself nor (b) its source is necessarily the object of reflection.

2. The prompt does not provide a specific message that becomes the content of thought“ (Wielgus, 2015;38)

3.3. Critical-reflective thinking *ad infinitum*

“Kant wrote: “I do not approve of the rule that if the use of pure reason has proved something, the result should no longer be subject to doubt, as though it were a solid axiom”; and “I do not share the opinion (...) that one should not doubt once one has convinced oneself of something. In pure philosophy this is impossible. Our mind has a natural aversion to it.” (Arendt, 1978; p. 88).

Thinking does not aspire to an ultimate goal; it has never finished its work because it can never be completed. Although, an individual can experience fundamental changes through a process of critical-reflective thinking, one does not always translate that knowledge into experience. Added to that, change one experienced can also be forgotten or thwarted by other, opposing habits. That leads to difficulty in justifying value of critical-reflective thinking and impact to a life of an individual (Wielgus, 2015; p. 94-95).

“Arendt, too, motivates this concern too when she asks, “How can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of so resultless an enterprise [as thinking]?” Though critical-reflective thinking is not completely resultless, Aarendt’s question points out that thinking is sometimes quite remote from practical life and action.” (Wielgus, 2015; p. 95)

Critical-reflective thinking, even though it is never ending and might not always result in practical change, is valuable and needed in human life. Point is that by recognizing presuppositions people are led to recognize themselves and by that can become more aware of the way they lead their lives. Critical-reflective thinking encourages deeper understanding and it opens new possibilities for life of individual and social groups in general.

“Living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are of the world, and this precisely because they are subjects and objects-perceiving and being perceived-at the same time.” (Arendt, 1987; p. 20)

4. Practical use and value of critical-reflective thinking

"The recipe for perpetual ignorance is: be satisfied with your opinions and content with your knowledge." -Elbert Hubbard (Vaughn, 2008; p. 3)

As mentioned above, critical reflective thinking benefits us in terms of personal freedom as we consider beliefs that we, until then, took as granted. Hegel argues his thesis that self-consciousness has a strong relation with human existence. If humans were not reflective and critical thinking creatures they would be similar to animals.

"As Hegel had already shown and Yorck continues to hold, this structure of being alive has its correlative in the nature of self-consciousness. Its being consists in its ability to make everything the object of its knowledge, and yet in everything that it knows, it knows itself. Thus as knowledge it differentiates itself from itself and, at the same time, as self-consciousness, it folds back on and returns to itself." (Gadamer, 2004; p. 244)

Benefits of developing critical-reflective habits are openness to new perspectives, better understanding to others and ourselves. Since our thinking forms actions we take, our thinking should be high quality so our doing (actions have influence either on others or ourselves) would be high quality too. Equally important, critical-reflective thinking complements both our emotions and our creativity and allows us to think *outside the box* (Vaughn, 2008; p. 8)

4.1. Why is critical-reflective thinking necessary?

"In large measure, our lives are defined by our actions and choices, and our actions and choices are guided by our thinking-so our thinking had better be good. Almost every day we are hit by a blizzard of assertions, opinions, arguments, and pronouncements from all directions. They all implore us to believe, to agree, to accept, to follow, to submit. If we care whether our choices are right and our beliefs true, if we want to rise above blind acceptance and arbitrary choices, we must use the tools provided by critical thinking." (Vaughn, 2008; p. 8)

As already said by Vaughn (2008; p. 7) we passively accept beliefs that were brought to us and that means that they are not really ours. Only way to forming one's own beliefs is

through critical-reflective thinking and that opens a way to personal freedom. Personal freedom assures that an individual is in charge of its life and decisions he makes. Believes only belong to a certain person it that person critically examines them for herself to assure that they are supported by good and valid reasons. Although, each person critically thinks, at the same time problem is not *do people think that way* but *how well do they use* this important type of thinking.

Alfred Schutz (1973; p. 254) through understanding of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* comes to a conclusion that: "*Critical reason gains power analytically over dogmatic inhibition*", also he firms that higher level of reflection is a step forward in the progress toward the autonomy of the individual. Acceptance of dogmatism leads to false society where norms and laws are turned to secure interest of dominant people. To avoid that kind of false society and individuals subjects to that society, we need to use critical-reflective thinking to comprehend what is right for us and not what somebody thought us to be right for us. (Schutz, 1973; p. 257)

"The solitary Ego can assume either point of view. On the one hand, I can look upon the world presenting itself to me as one that is completed, constituted, and to be taken for granted. When I do this, I leave out of my awareness the intentional operations of my consciousness within which their meanings have already been constituted (...) On the other hand, I can turn my glance toward the intentional operations of my consciousness which originally conferred the meanings. Then I no longer have before me a complete and constituted world but one which only now is being constituted and which is ever being constituted anew in the stream of my enduring Ego: not a world of being, but a world that is at every moment one of becoming and passing away—or better, an emerging world." (Schutz, 1967; p. 36)

To conclude, critical-reflective thinking although brings us outside of our comfort zone is necessary to live life purposely with ability to build other beneficial views and to reach self awareness.

4.2. Negative connotation of critical-reflective thinking

Nowadays, this phenomenon can be seen as negative due to misunderstanding of the term and its use and importance. People perceive it as cynical way to prove they are right. Added to that, it is perceived as a negative enterprise designed to attack someone else's thinking, emotionally cold and excessively critical point of view. Main concern of this paper is connected to this degrading perspective to critical-reflective thinking, which is through this paper explained and presented as one of the most needed processes in leading one's life freely and purposely. (Vaughn 2008; p. 7)

Fear of thinking by logical rules and independently without authority is wide spread throughout the whole population. As a result, people are subject to manipulation (for instance: World War II.). Society cannot function, in a long term view, if it consists of individuals who are not able to critically reflect on laws and norms which were externally levied to them.

5. Phenomenology

Introduction to qualitative research and phenomenological point of view, in comparison to quantitative access method to the already mentioned phenomenon, will be adduced in this chapter.

Phenomenology, as one of the courses that emanates from doctrine on reflexive sociology, appears as a contradiction to the formalizing-reductionist approach that remains closed to the realization of new facts. Focus on form and strict operationalization is stressed in an effort to bring sociology closer to the natural sciences and empirically verifiable general principles, therefore it is not suitable for this research on the given phenomenon.

Critical thinking as a phenomenon that emerges in society and which is useful and necessary in order for society to function purposefully needs to be viewed through the role of an individual. For relevant cognition, it is necessary to explore how an individual (in this context, a student of social sciences and humanities) adds meaning to particular phenomenon, also awareness and use of it followed by their experience with that particular phenomenon. Such cognition may not be accessible from the normative structure of society, but requires a descriptive analysis of individuals. The guiding thought throughout this theoretical review is therefore an interaction of individual consciousness at the social level. A phenomenological

approach avoids reducing sociology to system science or action science. (Pavić, 1994; p. 279-281).

"In its research, sociology must turn to concrete life again, break free of explicit and rigid models of the theoretical operationalization of real content and introduce a much liberal situational framework" (Pavić, 1994; 282).

Željko Pavić (1994.) asserts in his work *"Phenomenology and Sociology: An Introduction to Reflective Sociology"* the path to liberation of sociology, from "sociologizing that has forgotten the world", in the study of everyday life. Ordinary life considers the broadest horizon of human experience and everyday experience, to be the starting point of sociological research.

"By exploring everyday sociology as a phenomenological hermeneutics of social phenomena, it can shed light on the depth structure, primordial structure of this experience and the meaning based on it social life in general (Weber)" (Pavić, 1994; p. 282).

5.1. Everyday life

The understanding of everyday life comes with different interpretations. This paper will highlight the phenomenological approach within Schutz sociology of everyday life.

Alfred Schutz is the founder of phenomenological sociology and the initiator of "symbolic interactionism" and "ethno methodology". Schutz asserts that the process of meaning making is essential for everyday life and that everyday practice takes place as a process of typologizing. In other words:

"everyday life is legitimized by 'extra-ordinary meaning' " by the theological core (Husserl) that underlies it, and which alone makes that daily action meaningless."(Pavic, 1994; p. 283).

This exploration could unravel personal reflection on individuals own experience of thinking and the significance of what one gives to thinking in one's life

German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) carried out the concept of Phenomenology. For Husserl, the main aim to epistemological cognition was through study of consciousness, which differs from study of nature as it was set as a critique of naturalism and psychologism.

“Husserl calls this phenomenological concept of the world “life-world”—i.e., the world in which we are immersed in the natural attitude that never becomes an object as such for us, but that represents the pregiven basis of all experience. This world horizon is a presupposition of all science as well and is, therefore, more fundamental. As a horizon phenomenon “world” is essentially related to subjectivity, and this relation means also that it “exists in transiency.”The life-world exists in a constant movement of relative validity.” (Gadamer, 2004; p. 239)

Conducting qualitative research on phenomenon of critical-thinking would reveal how individuals observe, practice and value this type of thinking in everyday situations they go through. According to information gathered during the interviews we might be able to conclude on objective scale which does not exclude subjective view, as opposition to that-understanding subjectivity improves objective inference.

“What Husserl means, however, is that we cannot conceive subjectivity as the opposite of objectivity, because this concept of subjectivity would itself be conceived in objective terms. Instead, his transcendental phenomenology seeks to be “correlation research” (Gadamer, 2004; p. 241)

Objective evaluation of individuals and society is possible only if people are regarded as *types* and that does not lead to understanding of human beings as they truly are. Alfred Schutz in his analysis relates human action to rest of human experience, to meaning and to time-consciousness

“The naivete of talk about ‘objectivity’ which completely ignores experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements, the naivete of the scientist concerned with nature, with the world in general, who is blind to the fact that all the truths that he acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in his formulas is his own life construct that has grown within him, is, of course, no longer possible, when life comes on the scene,” writes Husserl with regard to Hume.” (Gadamer, 2004; p. 241)

Individual experiences such as ideas, impressions, sensations, meaning, etc. in order to provide empirical basis for our knowledge to understand human behavior in social structures should be intersubjectively valid, which in this sense means objectivity. (McCarthy, 1985; p. 42-43)

6. Conclusion

My main concern formulated by information gathered and presented above, is that critical-reflective thinking is not asserted enough during education of an individual. It is not represented in the light of importance as deliberated above. As a result- repercussions of not developing and not cultivating this specified type of thinking are unknown to many people at this moment of time. Through a process of education both- formal and informal, through family and other social impacts, an individual should be encouraged to critically-reflect on his or hers environment.

As humans, social animals (*zoon politikon*) we try to comprehend the truth as much as we can. Review on the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking demonstrates how it benefits personal growth and liberation which leads to living life purposely with moral acts and helping others in the community- it all happens when we discharge our presuppositions and critically reflect on our surrounding. Therefore, the goal of an empirical study on this multilayered phenomenon should be conducted for understanding how, why and how often for example, students of social sciences and humanities, use and encounter this phenomenon. Results should raise awareness of consequences made by neglecting critical-reflective systematic evaluation in everyday life.

7. Literature

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8. Abstract

This paper contributes to the theoretical elaboration of a phenomenological approach to phenomenon of critical reflective thinking and will provide a fundamental starting point for its empirical research. A thorough theoretical elaboration of this topic, separating concepts it consists of and highlighting the theoretical perspectives that encompass these concepts, will make gaining knowledge about the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking more scientifically relevant.

This paper presents the notion of phenomenology as an appropriate starting point for exploring the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking in a targeted group of students. It starts with the assumption that the phenomenological approach is appropriate to explore the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking in qualitative and academically valid way. This assumption in the paper will be argued and elaborated with respect to other sociological courses. The phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking will be observed and highlighted as beneficial and necessary to an individual as it is to the whole society.