Elements of Max Weber's comprehensive sociology: categorical application for research in education*[1]

Edmilson Menezes[2]
ORCID: 0000-0001-7173-6208
Nilma Margarida de Castro Crusoé[3]
ORCID: 0000-0002-0610-8237

Abstract

This article is an introduction to the problem of meaning with the aim of announcing its application in research in education. That is a theoretical-conceptual research, whose theoretical basis of analysis focuses on Max Weber, but organically refers to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz. Based on Husserl, the various aspects, in which meaning occurs are perceived: as a semantic meaning, as a structural or eidetic meaning, as a grounding or logical meaning and as a motivational meaning. In Weber's comprehensive sociology, the meaning of motivation stands out, which is manifested through the subject's concrete actions, and understanding is an understanding of the meaning of action. Schutz retains from Husserl the meaning as prior to action, as a product of consciousness, and from Weber, the meaning of action motivation, which means, in terms of categorical application, in the notion of meaning, in educational research, the possibility of: a) apprehension of educational process as a production of meaning, which means apprehending that in its subjective dimension; b) reflection on the role of subject and object in the research relationship; and c) enhancement of research on the educational process, from the perspective of understanding. It is expected that the results can expand the range of methodological expressions in research in education that are anchored in the phenomenological-interpretative perspective.

Keywords

Phenomenology – Notion of meaning – Research in education – Comprehensive sociology.

Prologue

Research in education involves different paradigms and, among them, the phenomenological-interpretative paradigm that, when concerned with "what, in reality, makes sense and how it makes sense for the investigated subjects" (AMADO, 2017, p. 41, author's emphasis) , allows studying the educational process as a social action endowed with meaning. The need to understand, scientifically, what makes sense and how the educational process makes sense for the subjects, allows us to allocate that type of investigation in a scientific plan whose questions.

> [...] they are in search of better knowledge (based on empirical study – experimentation, observation, inquiry – carried out according to 'truth regimes' and scientific criteria accepted by scientific community) of subjects involved in the educational process (of subject to be educated and of who educates) and a description, explanation and understanding of practices and circumstances (the closest and the most remote) in which such practices occur [...]. (AMADO, 2017, p. 24).

It is considered, in the outlines of this article, to think of a method that allows the interpretation of the educational process as a significant social action, built in and through the relationship with the other. Thus, it is initially proposed an introduction to the problem of meaning in order to clarify that, when bringing it up as an analytical category, it is necessary to present the referent concept. Then, the notion of meaning referring to the concept of motivation in Weber is developed, as the meaning of motivation is an expressive possibility of categorical application, via sociological phenomenology. The theoretical basis of analysis focuses on Max Weber, but organically refers to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz.

Phenomenology and the question of meaning: preliminary aspects

It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is only relatively recently the problem of meaning has been investigated as an isolated question. Before, the usual thing was to confuse being and meaning and to consider that the mention of one necessarily implied a reference to the other[4]. Thus, for classical metaphysics, what was considered to be being was in turn what had meaning, in such a way that being and its meaning would almost amount to the same thing.

The phenomenological investigation of meaning allowed, on the other hand, not only to put the identification in parentheses, but even to consider the different significance of the term meaning as relatively separate. In the expression "phenomenology", the word phenomenon does not mean at all (as in Plato and Kant) the simple appearance that is opposed to the truth of being or of the "noumenon". For Husserl (1950), the phenomenon

---

4- We follow, for this historical-conceptual approach, the synthesis presented in the entry "sentido" of the philosophical dictionary by José Ferrater Mora (1982).

is rather an apparition than an appearance, it is a manifestation full of meaning and all philosophy consists in elucidating this meaning. Above all, that is a reaction to Kant and Hegel. Husserl's starting point is a critique of empiricist psychologism, like the humean. In Hume's case, the reduction of causality to a psychological mechanism is to deny causality as truth; it is to usurp all true meaning of causality, it is to disqualify that from its origins. Now, Husserl does not want a science that disqualifies its object: phenomenology intends to replace a philosophy of explanation by origin with an elucidation of meaning. In that direction, phenomenology proposes an eidetic reduction: the essence of bravery, for example, is not reduced to the memory I have of hero, to this psychological, anecdotal content, just as the essence of triangle is not reduced to the approximate figure drawn in a blackboard. However, through drawing I aim at the triangle, through the hero's story, I set myself up for a value, bravery. To psychological reduction that disqualifies essences by their origin, Husserl then opposes the eidetic reduction that apprehends essence in its truth.

Husserl's philosophy is, in fact, also opposed to absolute realism. Absolute realism, in other words, the attitude that consists of taking only objects into account and ignoring the thinking subject, for Husserl, is a naive, pre-philosophical attitude. It is precisely the banal and dangerous illusion, the current prejudice that he denounces under the name of "natural attitude". Natural consciousness, which is not philosophically educated, only knows objects. We have objects around us and we tend to forget that objects only exist for the thinking subject, a subject initially dissimulated precisely because he himself is not an object, but the one in front of which objects exist. The primary function of all philosophy is to correct this forgetfulness, to reveal to itself the constituent consciousness for which and through which objects exist. It is through methodical and universal doubt that Descartes strives to distance us from the thought object – always doubtful – in order to reveal to us the thinking subject, the very act of doubting, whose existence is indubitable. This moment of cogitate is also present in the Husserlian itinerary but Husserl replaces Cartesian doubt with a more subtle, more nuanced attitude, which is the simple "put into bracketing" of the world, the epoché, in Greek. The philosopher limits himself to suspending the general thesis of the existence of the world and putting it out of the loop, although he does not radically deny the existence of the external world.

Consequently, putting all substantial existence in parentheses is precisely a phenomenological reduction, because my experience there is properly "reduced" to what is given, to what appears, to what is authentically manifested. Now, what is this that is provided truly? Nothing less than the world, because I don't just apprehend myself as "I, thinker", I apprehend myself as thinking something. Indeed, all consciousness, according to Husserlian phenomenology, is consciousness of something. All consciousness aims at an object and it is this propensity that he calls "intentionality". Husserl notes that all consciousness aims at an object, it being understood that this object is nothing other than an object for consciousness, an object related to the intentional propensity of consciousness. Finally, Husserl poses a major problem that Descartes and Kant had ignored in their theories of knowledge. It's someone else's problem. Just as all consciousness is consciousness of something, in the same way our consciousness recognizes the existence

of another consciousness, in an original experience of coexistence. The other is not only the one I see, but the one who sees me and is also the transcendental source of a world that is given to him.

Based on Husserl's Phenomenology, someone cannot, without further ado, confuse meaning with significance of a term or a proposition. If we want, sense can also be analyzed under the aspect of meaning, but provided that this includes not only the relationship, but also the coordination of sign with object. A phenomenology of meaning was elaborated, according to which it occurs in several aspects: as a semantic meaning, as a structural or eidetic meaning, as a grounding or logical meaning and as a meaning of motivation (MORA, 1982). In such a way that, when if we speak of meaning, it will be necessary to know which of the mentioned concepts it refers to and which relationship is established between one and the other and between each one and all the others. The lack of meaning or counter-meaning is also manifested in different ways in each of senses. The characteristic of this investigation is, therefore, the determination of different meanings in which sense can be given, including meaning itself as one of its forms. Other investigations, on the other hand, refer rather to the moment of unification of meaning, whether from a metaphysical, psychological or scientific point of view. Some consider, for example, meaning as a peculiar direction which, in turn, constitutes one of essential dimensions of the world of spirit in its two forms: subjective and objective.

Weber and the notion of meaning

With Max Weber, sociology incorporated a reflection, even if somewhat dispersed, on the problem of meaning. The development of human activity and human manifestations of all kinds is open to interpretation. The social agent associates to his action a subjective sense. Meaning is constitutive of action, that is, this action only gains intelligibility as such on account of its complete dependence on that meaning. All action has, therefore, a reflexivity. Action structured from a meaning becomes the object of investigation of sociology.

In the opening of Economy and Society, Weber (1971, p. 18) proposes:

> Sociology must be understood (and it is in this sense that we take this term of the most diverse meanings) as a science whose objective is to understand social action through interpretation, and then to causally explain the development and effects of this activity. By action, we must understand human conduct (consisting of an internal or external doing, omitting or allowing) whenever the subject or subjects of the action attribute a meaning to it. Social action, therefore, is an action in which the meaning fostered by the subject or subjects is related to the conduct of others, orienting itself accordingly.

Unlike the purely naturalistic explanation, the specific objective of understanding is always to capture the meaning of an activity or of a relationship: human activity is guided by a meaning, which is about understanding in order to make it intelligible. In this sense, sociology is concerned with meaning, subjectively aimed at by men or by a group of men in the course of a concrete and real activity. It seeks to understand the meaning by

which they practically guide their activity. A study of practices of Roman surveyors and Florentine bankers should understand, without trying to correct, the possible mistakes they have made in what we know of arithmetic and trigonometry. To understand, therefore, it can be said, is to capture the evidence of meaning of an attitude (FREUND, 1970).

Verstehen, a German word, which means to understand, imposed itself on the methodology of the social sciences through Dilthey. Understanding was, for Dilthey, a particular way of gaining knowledge of mental objects and, in general, of all history. Interpretation of vital experience can go through two paths: exterior, that is, objectification of the content of the experience that eliminates its subjective categories, and interior which occurs precisely through the exposition of those subjective aspects of the experience, which are, by nature, expressive categories. The first is the entry into the realm of natural sciences, the second that of the sciences of spirit (*Geisteswissenschaften*). That interpretation of categories of experience as expressive categories is what constitutes, for Dilthey, understanding, defined as understanding of expressions, since in the understanding of experience, the one who understands and the thing that is understood belong to the same vital context. The triad vital experience, expression and understanding actually marks the process of self-interpretation of life. Nevertheless, Dilthey calls this life, which interprets itself, spirit (*Geist*) and sciences of the spirit or human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), the sciences that methodologically investigate this process.

> If we apprehend the set of all contributions of understanding, faced with the subjectivity of experience, the objectification of life arises. Along with experience, the perception of the objectivity of life, its externalization and works into which life and spirit have been introduced, constitute the outer realm of spirit. (DILTHEY, 1970, p. 177).[5]

Understanding stems from human empathy through which the investigator can reconstruct the meaning of human activity in such a way that it is impossible for this task to be performed in the study of external phenomena - matter of physical sciences.

Weber incorporated elements of Diltherian understanding in his approach to sociology. In doing so, he made that interpretive mode an important part of the interest and method of his work. It is used at the beginning of the process of apprehension of social as a criterion for selection of problems, which, in turn, leads to the study of motivation of the author's scope, that is, of meaning. Weber distinguishes between the understanding of meaning and the understanding of cause, thus being able to judge the validity of an explanation in terms of its causal adjustment at the level of meaning (BAAR, 1971). Understanding, at the level of meaning, generates hypotheses in a particular disciplined way. When we inquire, through certain propositions, about the desired results of a given action, we are in a position to understand a particular case of behavior, that is, to unravel why this behavior and not some other behavior was carried out at this time and in this place. Forms of action, which in the eyes of the observer appear to share the same or similar characteristics, they may be based on a variety of motives on the part of the individual

---

5- On Dilthey and the formation of sciences of spirit, see: Schnädelbach (1983).

subject. Situations of that type, which seem to share some not-so-relevant characteristics, they must be interpreted quite differently, even if this leads to a conflicting analysis. In fact, every interpretation tends towards the evidence. But a significant interpretation, if it is evident, cannot yet, as such, claim to be a valid interpretation from the causal point of view, remaining only a particularly plausible hypothesis. In that way, what appears to be conscious motivation for the individual involved, can only serve to hide the deeper motives and repressions that really are at the root of their action, thus invalidating even the most subjectively sincere testimonies.

> The task that concerns sociology, then, is to discover the deeper meaning of such motivation and to understand it correctly, even if this motivation has not participated in the conscious action of the individual: it therefore becomes a case limit of meaning interpretation. (WEBER, 1971, p. 27).

Understanding, therefore, means apprehending the meaning, or the intended significant set, through interpretation. The privileged field in which the observer acts through understanding will be culture.

According to Weber, as soon as we become aware of the way life presents itself, we see that it manifests itself, internally and externally, under a diversity of events that appear and disappear successively and simultaneously. And the absolute infinity of that diversity subsists, without any attenuation of its intensive character, even when we concentrate our total attention on a single object and as soon as we try to describe this singularity exhaustively, in all its individual components, and even more, when we try to capture it in what is causally determined.

> Thus, all reflective knowledge of infinite reality achieved by the finite human spirit is based on the tacit premise that only a limited fragment of this reality can constitute the object of scientific understanding at a time, and that it alone will be 'essential' in the sense of 'worthy of being known'. (WEBER, 1989, p. 88).

For that purpose, the existence of clear concepts and the knowledge of hypothetical laws as heuristic means would be very useful. However, even with that function, there is a neuralgic point that demonstrates the limit of its reach, with which we are led to the decisive peculiarity of the procedure in sciences of culture, that is, "in disciplines that aspire to know the phenomena of life according to their cultural significance" (WEBER, 1989, p. 88, author's emphasis). The meaning of configuration of a cultural phenomenon and the cause of this meaning cannot, however, be deduced from any system of law concepts, nor can they be justified or explained by it, because they presuppose the nexus of cultural phenomena as ideas of value.

Therefore, the idea of culture is a concept of value. Empirical reality is culture for us insofar as we relate it to conceptions of value. It encompasses those, and only those, components of reality that, through this relationship, become meaningful to us.

> A tiny part of the individual reality that we observe in each case is enhanced   by the action of our interest conditioned by these ideas of value. Only it has meaning for us, precisely, because it reveals relationships made important, thanks to its attachment to ideas of value. It is only for this reason, and insofar as this occurs, that we are interested in knowing its individual characteristic. (WEBER, 1989, p. 92).

However, it is necessary to pay attention to the following element: what for us is of significance cannot be deduced from a study without presuppositions of what is empirically given. It is the proof of this meaning that constitutes the premise for something to become an object of analysis. The significant, by itself, does not coincide with any law as such, and this, the less so the more general the validity of that law is. (WEBER, 1989). This is because meaning, which comprises a fragment of reality, is not found evidently in the relationships it shares with as many other elements as possible. The relationship between reality and ideas of value that give it a meaning, as well as the underlining and ordering of elements of the real, enhanced by this relationship from the point of view of cultural meaning, constitute completely different perspectives from the analysis of reality, carried out to know its *laws* and to order it according to general concepts. Both modalities of thinking that organize the real do not maintain any necessary logical relationship between them.

> The cultural significance of a phenomenon – for example, the currency trade – may consist in the fact that it manifests itself as a mass phenomenon, one of the fundamental elements of contemporary civilization. But, furthermore, the historical fact of playing this role is what must be understood from the point of view of its cultural significance, and causally explained from the perspective of its historical origin. (WEBER, 1989, p. 93).

Weber, when considering monetary trade as a relevant cultural phenomenon, considers that the analysis of the essence of exchange and technique of commercial circulation organize a preliminary task, although important and cogent. However, we have not resolved the issue of how historically exchange came to reach the importance it has today, nor the issue of the cultural significance of monetary economy. Those two dimensions are highlighted, as they provoke interest in the discretion of the circulation technique and in the science that deals with it. What really matters, in other words, is the task of analyzing the cultural significance of the historical fact of organism and institutionalization of exchange.

In a 1920 letter to Liefmann, Weber (apud COHN, 1989, p. 25) says:

> [...] if I am now a sociologist then it is essentially to put an end to this thing of working with collective concepts. In other words, sociology can only be implemented taking as a starting point the action of the individual or of a greater or lesser number of individuals, therefore in a strictly individualistic way in terms of method.

The object of sociological analysis cannot be defined as society, social group or any other concept with collective reference. Yet it is clear that sociology deals with collective phenomena, the existence of which Weber would not have thought to deny. What he maintains is that the starting point of sociological analysis can only be given by the action of individuals and that it is "individualist" in terms of method. The ultimate basis of all knowledge, as well as the ultimate effect of all action, is in the individual. The other categories are mental structures, reference points, research hypotheses, useful, it is true, in many cases, legitimate abstractions that, however, can never replace the individual basis of any social process. This is entirely consistent with the position he always maintained that, in study of social phenomena, one cannot assume the already given existence of social structures endowed with an intrinsic meaning; that is to say, in sociological terms, of a meaning independent of the one that individuals give to their actions. By proposing this path as the only valid one for sociology, and by being willing to systematically explain the foundations of sociological analysis thus conceived, Weber has faced a formidable task. It is because, in absence of shortcuts offered by the direct reference to collective entities, he needs to build gradually a coherent and internally consistent scheme that allows the sociologist to safely operate with concepts, such as the State, without attributing any substantive reality to this entity, outside the concrete actions of the relevant individuals (COHN, 1989).

In this way, the significant relativity between a behavior and that of another is essential for comprehensive sociology, leaving no other foundation for it than the individual.

> [...] 'understanding', as the aim of this study, is also the reason why comprehensive sociology (as we understand it) considers the isolated individual and his activity as a basic unit, I would say his 'atom' – if I may permitted to use, in passing, this imprudent comparison. The task, to which other ways of looking at things are proposed, may well cause the individual to be, eventually, treated as a complex of psychic, chemical or other processes. From the point of view of sociology, however, everything that falls below the threshold of behavior related to 'objects' (exterior or interior), susceptible of being interpreted significantly, is only taken into account on the same level as the events of nature, ' foreign to meaning', that is, as a condition or subjective object of the relativity of this behavior. For the same reason, the individual forms the upper limit of that way of seeing, as he is the only bearer of significant behavior. (WEBER, 1965, p. 344-345).

It is not only the particular nature of language, but also that of our thinking that makes the concepts through which we understand an activity appear to be in the form of a durable reality, a objectified structure or a personified structure, having an existence, therefore, autonomous. Concepts such as Association, State, School, etc, they designate, in a general way, representative categories of determined forms of human cooperation. The task that is methodologically imposed on sociology consists of reducing those categories to an understandable activity, which is to say, without any exception, to the activity of individuals who participate in it. The individual is the understandable agent of a meaningfully oriented activity. According to Freund (1970), every appeal to a meaning presupposes a conscience, and this is individual. Weber does not even consider

the hypothesis of a collective conscience, because it seems to him to be nothing more than pure supposition, if one wants to accept the point of view in which he puts himself. In fact, the evaluation of the means in terms of the ends, the choice of that end, the prediction of consequences, the decision and, finally, the determination of execution, after all, everything that intervenes in the course of a significant relativity belongs to the will of individual. That constitutes a unity in itself and, in the absence of this basic unity, sociology risks getting lost in incoherence and confusion. Significant individuality is, after all, the postulate without which comprehensive sociology, in search of the meaning of social activity, would itself be meaningless. Undoubtedly, it is nothing more than a perspective, a specific point of view on infinite reality, but as such it must submit to the law of its point of view, under penalty of being just a digression with scientific pretension. Thus, collective concepts only become sociologically intelligible from the significant relationships that individual behavior entails. There are certainly an infinity of other possible points of view, each of them giving rise to a different and autonomous science, but once the point of view is chosen, it is imperative to submit to its conditions.

In that way, we want to say Weber is interested in the form of individual action not in its concrete characteristics, but in its "type", and also that he uses models of individual action to reconstruct social relations and social groups. It should also be noted that, despite having reference in the philosophy of consciousness, methodological individualism is neither a psychology nor a philosophy of consciousness. Insofar as it gives rise to a rational understanding, it excludes the possibility of understanding oneself only through empathy, or of considering introspection (the return on oneself of a conscience – or the Cogitate method) as something good for understanding rationality. It is necessary to say, on the contrary, that the presupposed subject model is a model as "exteriority", that is, a model constructed from the action of a subject, and not from their states of consciousness.

It would not be too much to say that comprehensive sociology is a sociology of meaning[6], since human activity is a behavior to which the agent or agents communicate a subjective meaning, that is, an action oriented significantly, being mediated by a certain state of consciousness, and which requires a notion of meaning to become intelligible. Weber is, according to Cohn (1989), more concerned with emphasizing that the meaning he refers to is the one subjectively intended by the agent – and not any objectively correct meaning of action or some meaning metaphysically defined as true –, than with defining the concept.

> […] the notion of meaning here means either (a) the meaning subjectively aimed at in reality, α) by an agent in a historically determined case, β) on average or approximately by agents of a determined mass of cases; or (b) this same meaning subjectively aimed at in a pure type conceptually established by the agent or agents conceived as types. It is not, therefore, a question of any objectively 'just' meaning, nor of a 'true' meaning conceived metaphysically. (WEBER, 1971, p. 19).

6- Expression borrowed from Berten (2011).

Weber understands this delimitation makes it possible to differentiate empirical sciences of action (sociology and history) and what he calls dogmatic sciences (jurisprudence, logic, ethics and aesthetics), whose purpose is to determine the fair and valid meaning of objects of their study. In fact, these are opposed to those precisely because of the metaphysical substrate that underlies them. A science of action is linked to the lived world, in order to scrutinize it to extract from it the understanding and the best position to move in it. Cases a (α and β) are linked to empirical and real facts, while case b expresses a reasonable theoretical reconstruction, an ideal type.

Weber constructs "rational models" of activities, which are ideal types. It is a methodological resource to provide the scientist with orientation within the inexhaustible variety of phenomena observable in social life. The concept of ideal type proposes to form the judgment of imputation. It is not a hypothesis, but seeks to guide the elaboration of hypotheses. It is not an exhibition of real either, but it proposes to provide the exhibition with uniform means of expression. The logical principles served to form, for example, the idea of "urban economy" of the Middle Ages – in the way of a genetic concept. In this specific case, the concept of "urban economy" is formed not through the establishment of an average of economic principles that effectively existed in all the villages examined, but precisely through the construction of an ideal type. We obtain an ideal type by unilaterally accentuating one or several points of view, linking together a multitude of isolated, diffuse and discrete phenomena, which are offered in greater or lesser number, or even completely lacking, and which are ordered according to the points of view unilaterally accentuated, with the aim of forming a homogeneous framework of thought (WEBER, 1965). The emphasis falls on certain features of reality until they are conceived in their purest and most logical formula, which is never presented in the same way in observed or observable active situations:

> [...] historical work will have the task of determining, in each particular case, how much reality approaches or departs from this ideal framework, to what extent it is necessary, for example, to attribute, at the conceptual level, the quality of 'urban economy' to the conditions economy in a given city. Applied with prudence, the concept fulfills the specific functions expected of it, for the benefit of investigation and clarity. (WEBER, 1965, p. 181).

For this very reason, those types need to be built in the researcher's thinking, existing on the level of ideas about the phenomena and not in phenomena themselves. Thus conceived, this concept of ideal type corresponds to the methodological assumption that social reality can be known only when those traits that intensely interest the researcher are methodically exaggerated in order to then clearly formulate relevant questions about the relationships between the observed phenomena. (COHN, 1989). It is as if we were to elevate, or rather, to enlarge a figure as much as possible to see its detail better. It is important to emphasize that the frames of thoughts, from the methodological point of view seen as purely logical frames, must be separated from the notion of the model's ought to be. In fact, only constructions of nexus are proposed that are sufficiently justified under the prism of our imagination, therefore, objectively possible, and that seem adequate to

our nomological knowledge, through which we seek to dominate reality through reflection and understanding. The ideal type thus has the meaning of a purely rational limiting concept, against which reality is measured in order to clarify the empirical content of some of its important elements, and with which it is compared. In that use, the ideal type is, in particular, a thought experiment to apprehend historical individuals or their various elements in genetic concepts. Through such a classification, we can analyze a complex of characteristics and understand it with reference to certain important cultural meanings. We have noted that, in this sense, the interpretation of the idea of meaning is connected to the formal plan, to the intentionality linked to the action.

Undoubtedly, individual and meaning assume the fundamental methodological axis of Weberian sociology. The meaning of action emanates from its purpose what matters is that meaning that manifests itself in concrete actions and that involves a motive sustained by the agent as the basis of his action. But, nowhere in Weber's work will one find a definition of meaning, as, incidentally, is also the case with the concept of understanding. At this point, Weber's reasoning seems to be circular: "meaning is what is understood and understanding is capturing meaning", proposes Cohn (1989, p. 27). From the agent's point of view, the motive is the ground of the action; for the sociologist, whose task is to understand this action, the reconstruction of the motive is fundamental, because, from his perspective, it figures as the cause of the action. When one speaks of meaning in its most important sense for analysis, one is not considering the genesis of the action, but rather what it points to, the objective pursued in it; in short, to its end. This suggests that meaning has a lot to do with the way in which the action process is connected, taking the effective action endowed with meaning as a means to reach an end, precisely the one subjectively aimed at by the agent.

> Every artificial object, for example, 'a machine', is susceptible of being interpreted and understood from the meaning that human activity (therefore, the directions it takes can be the most diverse) attributed (or wanted to attribute) to the manufacture and to the use of this object; if we do not refer to such a sense, the object remains completely unintelligible. (WEBER, 1971, p. 23).

Social action is not an isolated act, but a process in which a defined sequence of significant links is traversed. The elements of this process are articulated in what Weber calls the "motivational chain" (COHN, 1989, p. 27): each partial act performed in the process operates as the foundation of the following act, until the sequence is completed. All processes acquire their specific density through the meaning given to them by human action as an objective, means, obstacle and accessory consequence. Meaning is responsible for the unity of action processes, and it is through it that they become comprehensible.

> It is only through meaning that we can apprehend the links between the various significant connections of a particular process of action and reconstruct this process as a unity that does not dissolve into a dust of isolated acts. To do this is precisely to understand the meaning of action. (CONH, 1989, p. 28).

Therefore, scientific research, especially that which takes social actions as its object, is, in an effective way, a process of significant communication. A translation of different expressions of meaning attributed to phenomena related to relationships between men in community, being able, then, to establish the indispensable link between cultural levels and levels of concrete actions of the individuals.

About the possibility of applying the notion of meaning in research on the educational process

Alfred Schutz's sociological phenomenology, influenced by Weberian sociology, seeks the subjective meaning of social conduct, therefore, the possibility of understanding social action in an interpreted way, as an action endowed with meaning, which considers, as a starting point, the person who acts and assigns meaning to his action. In Weber, action is structured based on meaning, what is sought, therefore, is the meaning of the activity or relationship. In Schutz (2012), what is sought is the meaning of the relationship, hence his discussion of phenomenology and social relationships within the scope of the social sciences. For Weber, as explained above, the individual gives the action a certain direction, being, therefore, a "rational action", whose subject knows all the factors that involve the action and make it social if it is directed to the behavior of the other; if the conduct of the other is taken as a reference. In Weberian terms, the researcher is that assigns meaning to the behavior of actor he observes and constructs an analytical category called the ideal type. Regarding the notion of ideal type, it is considered to be important in the understanding of meaning in Weber, but Schutz (2012) does not assimilate it and criticizes the notion of rational action, the idea that consciousness knows all factors, real and potential, involved in action and acts on basis of probabilities. In place of notion of rational action, Schutz brings the notion of reasonable action for defending that there are flaws in practical knowledge, in execution of action, due to the relevance that can change during the execution of action. About relevance or interest, let's see what the author says:

> It is our immediate interest that motivates all our thinking, our planning, our action, and thus sets the problems to be solved by our thinking and the goals to be achieved by our actions. In other words, it is our interest that divides the unproblematic field of what is already known into several zones with different relevance to that interest, each demanding a different degree of precision in knowledge. (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 124-125).

Therefore, the subject can plan in terms of typification, according to tradition ("it has worked once, we can repeat it"), but may not obtain the same result due to relevance, because, "All our possible questioning about the unknown arises only within this world of things supposedly already known, and presupposes its existence" (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 124). In seeking to interpret the meaning of action for the individual, Weber will scrutinize the subjective aspects of conduct, which is also the interest of Shutzian phenomenology, that is, interpret and expose the subjective aspects of experience and reconstruct the meaning

of practice experienced by social actors. It is understood that practice of the same activity can have different motivations and, therefore, different meanings. However, what Weber seeks is a rational understanding of conduct and rejects a return to consciousness to understand action; in Schutz, it is precisely in return to consciousness, in an attitude of reflection, that the meaning of action is sought, the meaning of experience, being, therefore, a philosophy of consciousness, in Husserlian terms. Consciousness, in intentional movement towards the world of life, apprehends fragments of reality, but it will only be given to the observer to study them scientifically if, and only if, they are objects intended by consciousness.

Weber states that social structures - in which we can include school and non-school educational spaces, in which pedagogical behaviors coated with meaning are produced - do not exist independently of meaning that individuals attribute to actions, which is equivalent to saying: only the individual produces meaningful behavior. When considering Weberian thinking, in which the social structure can only be understood via agents who practice the action, it is understood that activities of individuals, in educational spaces, reveal behaviors coated with meaning. The Weberian basis of sociological phenomenology, as stated earlier, is the idea of acting with meaning; however, Schutz does not seek an explanation of cause and effect, in which, is the researcher who assigns meaning to the conduct. Unlike Weber, who inquires about meaning in action, Schutz understands that meaning is prior to action, it is of the order of consciousness, so what is investigated is the intentionality of action. Respecting this difference, we retain from Weber acting with meaning, which involves action, motivation and rationality. Regarding the term conduct, it refers to "all types of subjectively significant spontaneous experiences, whether those that take place internally or those that take place in the external world" (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 39). Action, in this case, is a project-based conduct, referred to here as work, a

> [...] action in the external world, based on project and characterized by the intention of realizing the projected state of affairs through bodily movements [...] important for the constitution of the world of everyday life. [...] The "*fully alert*" self integrates in its work and with its work, its past, present and future in its specific temporal dimension; he realizes himself as a totality in his labor acts; he communicates with others through acts of work; it organizes different temporal perspectives of the world of everyday life from acts of work. (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 140, author's emphasis).

Meaningful acting refers to motivation with a purpose of and motivation with purpose because. The motive for the purpose of involves future action, the decision to perform; on the other hand, the purpose because involves a biographically determined situation.

> To say that a situation is biographically determined is to say that it has a history; it is the sedimentation of all the individual's previous experiences, organized as a possession that is readily available in his store of knowledge and, as an exclusive possession, it is something that is given to him and him alone. (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 85).

The motives, for the social actor, arise in the context of everyday life "considered as an intersubjective world that already existed long before birth, which was already experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, as an organized world" (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 84).

The categorical application of the notion of meaning, in research in education, implies its apprehension as the content of consciousness, which encourages us to observe that, even sharing the same context, consciences apprehend the world differently, apprehending fragments of reality. There are always additions of content in the narratives that, perhaps one might think, are part of the Husserlian representation. It is about individual experience with an emphasis on subjectivity or, in Schutzian terms, individual experience as a derivative experience of the other selves (family, work, religion) and society. Perhaps it can be thought that Schutz, when using Husserlian method of accessing the content of consciousness, as a phenomenological foundation, to seek the subjective meaning of human action, starts from the idea of intersubjectivity just announced by Husserl, with regard to the conception that consciousnesses share the same world and apprehend it from different perspectives, which opens possibilities to develop a phenomenology of social relations.

The relationship between the subject and the thing/object is always an intentional relationship, because consciousness is always the consciousness of something, of something external to the subject, which is apprehended by consciousness. Consciousness moves towards things, and this principle is fundamental for the apprehension of the meanings of the educational process, since the intentionality of consciousness is what reveals the meaning of the world to a given consciousness. Based on this principle, let us take as an example the use of interview as a methodological instrument for investigating the educational process. Through the interview, in a block that we can call the relational block, we seek to apprehend the meaning attributed by the subjects to human and material elements. Still in this illustrative scenario, regarding data analysis, we can make use, among other possibilities, of *a posteriori* content analysis, as we understand that the meaning belongs to the other and, in a phenomenological-interpretative perspective, the empirical field is a field of problematization, not verification. The results tend to point to different and similar perspectives. In the educational process, the presence of subjective intersubjectivity has been observed, as it is crossed by representation, in Husserlian terms, and by the biography of each one, in Schutzian terms. There is, then, in the research relationship, a world shared by both the researched and the researcher, with no hierarchical relationship. The researcher's task consists precisely in the exercise of the "look through a magnifying glass", a look imbued with theory and method, so that, in an attitude of alterity, he can see through the eyes of the other. Therefore, it is important, during the analysis process, to stick to the manifested content, expressed in the "indicator" item of the conceptual matrix.

This passage induces us to think about the researcher's posture, in the relationship with the informants. The researcher asks himself: how is knowledge constituted? In response, we start from the hypothesis that there is a space-time, discontinuous reality; there is the subject whose consciousness moves and approaches this reality, because he knows that things exist outside of it and, from this encounter, between consciousness

and the thing, the phenomenon is born. Each phenomenon, then, is a system of meanings and, therefore, the educational process as a system of meaning can be read scientifically. Thus, to investigate consciousness in its ability to produce meaning, it is necessary: first, making the informant look at the object/phenomenon in a reflective way, which consists of thinking about his experience, turning to its subjective acts, and what appears is the intended object, the idea he has of it. And then, to reveal the intentionality of consciousness in the direct relationship with the intended object that is only possible with the phenomenological reduction, which consists of curbing the judgment we have about the thing, putting it out of the flow of life. And, in that movement, the thing passes into the flow of experience, into the consciousness of something, whose space and time do not correspond to the space and time of reality. In the Schutzian outlines, "Only if the actor turns to his past, he can have the chance to become an observer of his own actions, and thus be able to apprehend the real motives 'why' of his actions" (SCHUTZ, 2012, p. 143).

Final considerations

To think of educational process as production of meaning is to think of it as an action invested with meaning. In Weber, the possibility of subjective interpretation of meaning is glimpsed, that is, of interpreting the meaning that the action has for the subject; the idea is that acting is always invested with meaning and refers to the behavior of others. Through Shutzian phenomenology, such possibilities are expanded and allow us to think of the conduct of subjects as a conduct invested with meaning and, therefore, an action motivated by the behavior of the other who, according to Weber, can be individuals and acquaintances or a multiplicity of anonymous people (SCHUTZ, 2018). It is precisely the ideas of anonymous people and of social action guided by others, which allow, based on Schutz, a phenomenological reading of the educational process as a production of meaning, since the self-consciousness dialogues with other consciousnesses as the world is at their disposal. There are other social selves that influence the meaning attributed by consciousness in the world.

In methodological terms, the categorical application of the concept of meaning in research on the educational process allows: a) its apprehension as a production of meaning, which means apprehending it in its subjective dimension; b) reflection on the role of subject and object in the research relationship; and c) enhancement of research from the perspective of understanding. That, in addition to an intellectual gain, allows expanding the range of methodological expressions and can represent a great interpretive key for the field whose objective is to provide a theoretical and practical background to those interested in rigorous research.

References

AMADO, João (coord.). **Manual de investigação qualitativa em educaçã**o. 3. ed. Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 2017.

BAAR, Carl. Max Weber y el proceso de la comprensión de lo social. *In*: PARSONS, Talcott *et al*. **Presencia de Max Weber**. Tradução Marcelo Nowersztern. Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1971. p. 209-212.

BERTEN, André. **Modernidade e desencantamento**: Nietzsche, Weber e Foucault. Tradução Marcio Anatole de Sousa Romeiro. São Paulo: Saraiva, 2011.

COHN, Gabriel. Introdução. *In*: COHN, Gabriel (org.). **Max Weber.** São Paulo: Ática, 1989. p. 25-28.
DILTHEY, Wilhelm. **Der aufbau der geschichtlichen welt in den geisteswissenschaften**. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970.

FREUND, Julien. **Sociologia de Max Weber**. Tradução Luís Cláudio de Castro e Costa. Rio de Janeiro: Forense, 1970.

HUSSERL, Edmund. **Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie et une philosophie phénoménologique pures**. Tradução Paul Ricoeur. Paris: Gallimard, 1950.

MORA, José Ferrater. **Dicionário de filosofia**. Tradução António J. Massano e Manuel J. Palmeirim. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1982.

SCHNÄDELBACH, Herbert. **Philosophie in Deutschland (1831-1933)**. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983.

SCHUTZ, Alfred. **A construção significativa do mundo social:** uma introdução à sociologia compreensiva. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2018.

SCHUTZ, Alfred. **Sobre fenomenologia e relações sociais**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2012.

WEBER, Max. A "objetividade" do conhecimento nas ciências sociais. *In*: COHN, Gabriel (org.). **Max Weber.** São Paulo: Ática, 1989. p. 88-93.

WEBER, Max. **Economie et société**. Tradução Jacques Chavy et al. Paris: Plon, 1971.

WEBER, Max. **Essais sur la théorie de la science**. Tradução Julien Freund. Paris: Plon, 1965.

Edmilson Menezes holds a PhD in Philosophy from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), professor at the Department of Philosophy at the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) and permanent professor at the Graduate Program in Philosophy and the Graduate Program in Education, at the same university.

Nilma Margarida de Castro Crusoé holds a PhD in Education from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), with a doctoral internship at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. She is a full professor at the Department of Philosophy and Human Sciences and a permanent professor at the Graduate Program in Education at the State University of Southwest Bahia (UESB).