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Phenomenological social research: some observations from the field

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to undertake a phenomenological study of the working conditions and living standards of private security guards (private police) in New Delhi. The focus here is to bring forth their lived experiences as security guards.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper touches briefly upon the theoretical formulations on phenomenological sociology. The principal emphasis here is on the field application of phenomenology as a methodology of social inquiry – how phenomenology was put to use, the research problems encountered and how these research conundrums were navigated. The research makes use of interview as the technique of data collection. The study uses purposive and convenience sampling.

Findings – The research has tried to bring forth the lived experiences of the private security guards as regards to their job and living conditions, by “bracketing off” the author’s biases to the best of the author’s capacity. From the interview responses, some higher level concepts have been formulated, called the “essence” of lived experiences.

Research limitations/implications – As the sample size is small, the research cannot be considered a peremptory account of the “lived experiences” applicable to all the private security guards in Delhi. Such sweeping generalizations need to be avoided.

Practical implications – Besides highlighting the lived experiences of the private security guards, the larger purpose of this paper to solicit critical comments from the readers so that the field application of phenomenology could be better understood and refined further.

Originality/value – This is an original research work carried out by the author. During the fieldwork, “reflexivity” has been the author’s constant companion, where the author has tried best to keep the author’s prejudices at bay. Its value is twofold: first, as phenomenological research works on private security guards are few in India, this study can stimulate further research works in this field and second, the research can carry forward the debate on how to improve further phenomenological research works.

Keywords Phenomenology, Lived experience, Bracketing off, Essence, Life-world, Typification

Paper type Research paper

Introduction – phenomenology (phenomenological sociology)

Phenomenology as a philosophical method of inquiry was developed first by the German Philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)[1]. To Husserl, phenomenology involves the systematic investigation of consciousness. It assumes that our experiences of the world are constituted in and by consciousness. Husserl emphasizes that the cornerstone of phenomenology is the study of those phenomena which can be apprehended only through our senses. Husserl’s phenomenology rejects the assumption that we can ever know about anything which cannot be experienced directly from our senses. All our knowledge comes through sensory perceptions. Anything else is mere speculation and should be avoided (Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p. 263).

Phenomenological sociology is derived from phenomenological philosophy and its foundations in sociology were laid by Alfred Schutz (1932/1967). The paper does not discuss here what Lassman (1974, p. 125) calls the “murky waters” of phenomenological philosophy, because it does not concern us *vis-à-vis* the specific social research carried out and discussed here, and second because of space constraints. We focus here on Schutz’s contention on phenomenological sociology. Schutz’s ideas were strongly influenced by Husserl’s



phenomenology and were developed principally as a critique and modification of Weber's *verstehen* approach to interpretive understanding of social action (Roberts, 2006, pp. 80-81).

I discuss here very briefly the central points of Schutz's theoretical formulation[2] before moving on to the actual focus of this paper – the application of phenomenology in my fieldwork. Central to Schutz's intellectual scheme is the notion of "intersubjectivity" – how do social actors create a common subjective view of the world. Schutz considers "intersubjectivity" constituting the core of sociological inquiry an improvement over Weber's *verstehen* approach. The problem with Weber's notion of subjective understanding, or *verstehen*, is that it does not analyze the basic issue of how individuals have an intersubjective experience of social reality – not just their own specific understanding but one which is held in common with others (Schutz, 1967, pp. 3-35). Turner (1998, pp. 355-356) posits that for Schutz, all humans carry in their minds rules, conceptions of appropriate conduct and other information which allow them to act in their social world. Schutz views the sum of these rules, conceptions and information as the individual's "stock of knowledge" at hand. Such stock of knowledge gives people a frame of reference to interpret the social world as it unfolds around them. The existence of stock knowledge that bestows a sense of reality on events gives the social world, as Schutz agrees with Husserl, a taken-for-granted character. The stock knowledge is rarely the object of conscious reflection, but rather, an implicit set of assumptions used unconsciously by individuals as they interact. Further, the stock knowledge is learned. It is acquired through socialization within a common social and cultural milieu.

To Schutz, the common-sense knowledge (i.e. the taken-for-granted common stock of knowledge) is shaped in three ways: the social origins of knowledge, the reciprocity of perspectives – the others with whom the actor is interacting also share the same stock of knowledge at hand and the social distribution of knowledge (Roberts, 2006, p. 82). The presumption of the common world allows actors to engage in the process of "typification[3]". Using common stock of knowledge, actors categorize entities on the basis of their typical features, and this allows them to deal meaningfully and effectively with the world (Turner, 1998, p. 356). Phenomenology's most lasting influence has been on ethnomethodology.

In contradistinction to the stress on social structures and institutions which constitute the main interests of several sociological theorists such as Marx, Durkheim or Parsons, for phenomenologists, the stress is on the "analysis of the world of everyday life" (Schutz, 1970, p. 72). Phenomenology focuses on how individuals recognize and make sense of the experiences that characterize their everyday reality; and, how on the basis of such everyday reality, individuals construct their social world. The central point here is the construction of collective or common social world actuated by individuals experiencing similar social realities, brought into being through "intersubjectivity", "reciprocity of perspectives" and "typification" (discussed above). In other words, our reality is social. The world of everyday life which Schutz (1970) terms "life-world"[4] (p. 72), is a social world shared with others (Dillon, 2010, pp. 286-287).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) make use of this central perspective of Schutz in one of the most innovative and novel ways, in their path-breaking work *The Social Construction of Reality*. To them, the social reality is a human-made and human-experienced reality, yet a highly organized one with an objective existence of its own. To Berger and Luckmann (1966), "social order is a human production, or more precisely, an ongoing human production (p. 52). The social construction of reality implies that the individuals collectively create an objective social reality through their ongoing negotiations and common experiences; and the objects of such social reality (institutions, things, etc.) then arrange or order themselves in ways that make sense to individuals as they subjectively experience this reality. As such, the "institutional world" is experienced as an "objective reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 60). It is an objectification of the product of human social activity, and given externalization in the institutions and order created by the humans through common experiences and intersubjectivity.

Central to Schutz's phenomenological methodology for sociology is to attempt for a possibility to grasp the common social reality (formed through the continuous negotiations of subjective meanings) through a system of objective concepts (Lassman, 1974, p. 128). For Schutz, the major aim of social investigation is the analysis of human conduct in terms of its shared experiences and implications, within the dense structure and matrix of individual common-sense assumptions, motives, relevances, etc., which Schutz would identify as first-order typifications (discussed in next section). Such an attempt is committed to an attempt to capture the consensual image of the social reality of the life-world, through the construction of ideal-types, which Schutz would identify as "essence" or second-order typifications (discussed in next section) (Lassman, 1974, p. 128).

This paper is about the phenomenological research carried out in New Delhi (India) in April-June, 2016, to bring forth the lived experiences of the private security guards (private police) in New Delhi. A large number of public and private offices, banks, cinema theaters, etc., now employ private security guards in India. But sociological research works on their everyday life experiences, and a common social reality constructed by them through their shared experiences in jobs and living standards are meager in India. This prompted the researcher to undertake a phenomenological study of these private guards to highlight their lived experiences, and also to construct the "essence" of their shared social reality. A caveat must be added here. Since in any such research, the sample size is bound to be small, the conclusions arrived at in this research must not be taken as universally applicable to all private guards; instead, the research should be seen as an attempt to persuade others and pique their interests in carrying out further research in this field, and in the process, create a body of literature in this area, which, at present, is paltry.

Phenomenology in the field

Phenomenologists argue that, although people generally take the everyday world for granted, a phenomenological analysis must show how it is made up. According to Schutz (1967), the basic act of consciousness is (first-order) typification: building together typical and enduring elements in a stream of experience, building up typical models of things and people and building a shared social world. The job of the sociologist is to construct second-order typifications: a rational model of social world based on the (first-order) theories which actors offer to explain their own activities (Roberts, 2006, pp. 82-83; Marshall and Scott, 2009, p. 400).

In phenomenological research, the researcher tries to understand the "lived experience" of the participants *vis-à-vis* a concept or a phenomenon and attempts to identify the "essence" of human experiences of the phenomenon as described by the participants. The procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence, a "grasp of the very nature of the things" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Phenomenological study is carried out by the researcher by "bracketing off"[5] all of her/his biases, preconceptions and judgments about the participants or the social phenomenon under investigation. Roberts (2006) says that though bracketing off one's preconceptions is not easy, an attempt must be made toward this end by "consciously reflecting on his or her own life situations, bracketing out these influences, and adopting the position of the 'disinterested observer' in carrying out the scientific study" (p. 82).

Somewhat detailed exposition on "bracketing off" is essential here, as it constitutes one of the centerpieces of phenomenological research. While carrying out the phenomenological research, one must "bracket off" or suspend one's attitudes, values, biases, etc. taking

nothing for granted, but trying to see the social world, as those involved in it do, because it is they (and their assumptions and interpretations) who are creating it. For Schutz, “bracketing off” entails two interlocking components. On the one hand, the research should move into the social setting without any preconceptions, and mentally withdraw from it to study it objectively, and yet, at the same time, use one’s own human consciousness, understanding and even intuition to make sense of the world as those actually involved in the world see it (Slattery, 2003, p. 167).

The attempt toward “bracketing off” in phenomenology can be subsumed (for greater clarity of its application) within the broader contested concept of “reflexivity” in sociological research. To put it simply, reflexivity involves the process of constant reflection on one’s social position, values, biases, preconceptions, etc., so as to constantly weed them out, while carrying out the research and analyze the data. Giddens and Sutton (2014, p. 79) says that reflexivity presumes that a simple positivistic approach based on the objective study of an external world “out there” appears misguided. The methods adopted in sociology should reflect this, which is why in qualitative research, the inclusion of the researcher’s own biography in the research process is growing in popularity.

Gouldner (2004, pp. 382-383), a strong advocate of reflexive sociology, says “the mission of Reflexive Sociology is to transcend sociology as it exists now. In deepening our understanding of our sociological selves and of our positions in the world, we can help to produce a new breed of sociologists who can also better understand other men and their social worlds. A reflexive sociology means that we sociologists must acquire the ingrained habit of viewing our own beliefs as we now view those held by others [...] Reflexive Sociology requires that sociologists cease acting as if they think of subjects and objects, sociologists who study, and ‘layman’ who are studied, as two distinct breeds of men. There is only one breed of man. But so long, as we are without a Reflexive Sociology, we will act upon the tacit dualistic premise that there are two, regardless of how monistic our professions of methodological faith.”

Swartz (1997, pp. 270-283) says that for Bourdieu, a strong proponent of reflexive sociology, there is an element of symbolic power involved in intellectual practices, such as sociological research works, which do involve some element of symbolic domination of the researcher over the researched. Intellectual work is inescapably bound by viewpoint, and functions as strategy within fields of struggle for recognition and legitimation. To overcome such dilemmas, we need a reflexive practice of sociology. First, one needs to control the values, dispositions, attitudes and perceptions, that the researcher brings from his or her social background to the field of inquiry. This means a critical awareness of the social location of the researcher (e.g. class location, gender, race), and how this background may shape the inquiry. A researcher must identify those personal dispositions that infiltrate his or her own concepts, choice of research topics or methods. Second, reflexivity also involves cultivating an awareness that one’s intellectual position and work also represent strategies for scholarly recognition. It means acknowledging that sociologists are motivated in their research by the “practical interest” of struggle for scholarly recognition as well as for intellectual ideals. The researchers, too often, neglect this important sociological insight and simply project unexamined dispositions of “animosity” and “enchantment” onto the objects of their investigation.

However, many sociologists have expressed their skepticism toward reflexivity. Giddens and Sutton (2014) caution that though self-reflection is critical in sociological research works, but a fixation with it can be counter-productive. He says “the rush to include the researcher’s own biography within the research process can all too easily tip over into self-indulgence and an irrelevant listing of personal details. In addition, a focus on reflexivity can lead to a never-ending process of reflecting on reflection and interpretation layered on interpretation, which risks paralyzing researcher works who get caught up in

their own practice at the expense of what many consider the real task of sociology, namely to produce valid and reliable knowledge of social life in order to better understand or explain it" (Giddens and Sutton, 2014, pp. 81-82).

In this regard, the views of Karl Popper and Max Weber are quite instructive. Popper says that it is not necessary to seek objectivity at the level of an individual scientist. The objectivity of science is achieved at the collective level. It results from mutual criticism and in effect canceling out individual biases. Far from a handicap in the progress of science, the partiality of its participants is a benefit for the very diversity of strongly held views would motivate the critical effort of trying to prove that other people's views are wrong (Sharrock *et al.*, 1990, pp. 205-206). Weber (1903-1917/1949) too believed that value judgments cannot be completely withdrawn from scientific discourse. "An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific objectivity" (p. 60). He admitted that values have a certain place, though he cautioned researchers to be careful about the role of values. "It should be made constantly clear... exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak" (Weber, 1903-1917/1949, p. 60).

Following Bourdieu and Weber, I attempt to highlight some of my predispositions, and my social and intellectual backgrounds upfront. As regards to my social location influencing my subject of study, as I am myself a native of the State of Bihar in India and a migrant to New Delhi, this did motivate me to study the private security guards in Delhi, who are mostly migrants from my home State of Bihar and the neighboring State of Uttar Pradesh. As regards to my class location, since I belong to the middle class (to be more precise upper middle class), I might have inadvertently brought into the field some element of symbolic power over my respondents who mainly belonged to the lower income group. But, I have tried my best to take the edge off any such class biases by meeting my respondents four to five times over a period of three months of my research, and also by developing a degree of candidness and openness with them (as discussed below). Further my training in qualitative research in my university has also enabled me in minimizing any such biases arising thereof. As regards to my intellectual disposition, I have an inclination toward "critical" or "emancipatory" sociology and "humanist" philosophy, which did influence my choice of topic to study the security guards who were described in newspapers as living in penurious and constraining circumstances. This might also have let me to lend them a sympathetic ear, which Bourdieu might term my "enchantment" with them. But as an enlightened researcher, I would invite my fellow-researchers to read my research keeping in view the ideas of Popper (discussed above), and expose the biases in the findings of my research, so that we all together, in course of time, build a body of somewhat "objective" literature on the lived experiences of the private security guards in Delhi.

Coming back to a few points on carrying out the phenomenological research actually in the field, Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) say that from the interviews (or questions) to which the respondents are subjected, we highlight the significant statements, sentences or quotes from the respondents which throw light on their lived experiences. This might be considered quite akin to Schutz's first-order typification, as discussed earlier. From the individual statements of lived experience, we try to find out some common denominator, i.e. the commonly shared experiences. Then we go for composite description – encompassing the common experiences of all i.e. the themes within the rubric of "essence." The construction of "essence" can be considered what Schutz would call second-order typification, the primary task of the sociologist in a phenomenological research.

Field research: using phenomenology to study the lived experience of private security guards in Delhi

Believed to have now exceeded the total number of police personnel, private security guards (private police) are marked by a veritable presence on the streets of Delhi. Standing before

stately corporate buildings, banks, public sector offices and even before private residences, security guards can be spotted anywhere even with a gentle roll of eyes. However, in recent times, there have been a series of reports that behind every security guard standing in a well-stitched elegant uniform, there is a story of unmitigated exploitation. Newspapers and magazines are rife with reports that the private security guards are paid a measly monthly salary, working for long hours and living in deplorable condition. Further, as they fall into the unorganized sector, they are not protected under any socio-economic security net. Even though their work is demanding and perilous, there is no job security and they can be shown the door anytime by their legally unbounded capricious employers.

I came to know about the abovementioned observations on the security guards *vis-à-vis* their working conditions after I waded through some of the reliable and authentic sources (magazines, newspapers, internet sources) discussing the plight of private security guards in India[6]. This scanning of pertinent literature on security guards constituted the first step of my painstaking but highly absorbing and informative navigation through the lives of the private security guards in Delhi.

In my research, I have basically tried to examine the veracity of all these reports on security guards. And what better way to test the veracity of these reports than to talk to the security guards themselves and know about their “lived experiences” *vis-à-vis* their jobs, living standards and working conditions – a very robust and compelling reason which pushed me toward phenomenology. During this fieldwork, I have tried, as far as possible, to “bracket out” my own preconceptions about security guards by constantly reflecting on my own experiences, and have attempted to make an unprejudiced presentation of their lived experiences.

Following the works of Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research can be divided into three components: phenomenological study should be focused – it should concentrate on a particular concept or phenomenon – for my research, this implied my focus on the subjective experiences of the security guards with regard to a specific phenomenon i.e. their job conditions and living standards (both strongly enmeshed as one’s job and income strongly impinge upon one’s living conditions; phenomenology attempts to study the “lived experiences” of some individuals experiencing the same phenomenon; and out of the lived experiences of the people studied, we try to cull out the “essence” – the common denominator or experiences that binds them all, i.e. common universal lived experiences.

On the basis of the abovementioned fundamentals of phenomenology, the following research question was formulated:

This field-work is an attempt towards the phenomenological study of the lived experiences of the private security guards and the subjective meanings ascribed by them to their working conditions and living standards with a view to discover some common essence.

For the study, I have followed purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling based on the particular purpose or objective of study (Creswell, 2007). Within the purposive sampling, I have opted for – maximum-variation sampling (in it, the sample is so chosen as to have as much diversity as possible – this enhances the quality of the research process) and convenience sampling (sample is so chosen that it saves time, energy, effort and money, but in no way, such a sample compromises the desired effectiveness of the research work). I based my maximum-variation sampling on three factors – to include those security guards who have migrated to Delhi from different parts of India, to incorporate security guards working in different sectors and to have female security guards within the sample to maintain some degree of gender balance. As I also followed convenience sampling, my sample was chosen from areas close to the locality of my residence (I am referring to it as X to maintain anonymity).

In all, I studied ten private security guards[7] – six men and four women. My male respondents were stationed at two of the bungalow residences in locality Y (respondent A, age: 37 years; respondent B, age: 39 years), at one of the State Bank of India (SBI) branches in locality X (respondent C, age: 42 years), at one of the HDFC Bank automated teller machines (ATMs) in X (respondent D, age: 39 years), at M movie theater in locality Z (respondent E, age: 44 years) and at a renowned multiplex in X (respondent F, age: 43 years). My female respondents were from M movie theater in Z (respondent G, age: 47 years) and at the same renowned Multiplex referred to earlier in the locality X (respondent H, age: 33 years), two of them at a shopping mall in locality T (respondent I, age: 32 years; respondent J, age: 35 years) (Names of all the respondents have been withheld as they promised to talk to me candidly only on condition of anonymity. Names of all the concerned localities have also been withheld in requirements of the ethical needs of any publication)[8].

I relied primarily on in-depth interview as a tool of data collection. I generally started my interviews with pleasantries and general questions to make my respondents comfortable and relaxed and switched over to my research-related questions only when I felt that they have opened up sufficiently and were talking to me freely. But, during the whole interview, I also had to ensure that the interview did not veer off too far. If the interview went off on a tangent, I had to bring it back to my issue at hand, i.e. to get it focused back to the specific phenomenon of their lived experiences *vis-à-vis* their job and working conditions by asking a few pointed questions. So, the interview was neither completely unstructured nor completely structured. The best way to characterize it as semi-structured.

I tape-recorded the interview. I asked my questions in Hindi (language commonly spoken in North India) and also got my responses in Hindi. Later, I transcribed it and translated into English. During my translation from Hindi to English, I tried to ensure to the best of my capacity that the essence of what my respondents conveyed was in no way diluted or compromised. For this, on many occasions, I asked them twice or thrice as to what exactly they meant whenever I encountered some confusion in order to make sure that I do not lose the preciseness of the expressions they used to describe their lived experiences. I went through the field notes thrice or four times, culled out from them important expressions they used to describe their experiences and also looked for some common “essence” in their expressions. Looking for common denominator of experiences while going through their interviews was quite akin to the process of “coding.” Coding is the process of taking data apart, defining and labeling what these data are about. Researchers develop codes as they study and interact with their data. Codes are emergent and come out from field data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342). On these bases, I reached my conclusions *vis-à-vis* the job experiences and working conditions of the private security guards. However, once I had derived the conclusions and also the common themes or essence which undergirded their lived experiences, I went back to all of them and cross-checked with them that I had written exactly what they said and meant during the interviews.

I would like to highlight here a few interesting yet important issues regarding data collection which I experienced as a researcher.

Getting back to my sample, one issue that really dodged me during the initial stages of my research was to get the respondents to open up with me and talk to me freely. This was something that really tested my patience as a Field Worker. Initially, they all looked at me with skepticism as to why I was unnecessarily prying into their personal lives. I really had to work hard to convince them and get their informed consent in interviewing them. For this, initially I just visited all of them for two to three times to develop some familiarity and closeness with them, build some rapport and gain their confidence and trust. Only after these initial patient visits did I found them gradually opening up and talking to me freely and frankly.

As I had mentioned earlier, I generally started my interviews with pleasantries and general questions to make my respondents feel comfortable and relaxed and switched over to my research-related questions only when I felt that they have opened up sufficiently and were talking to me freely. But, during the whole interview, I also had to ensure that the interview did not veer off too far. If the interview went off on a tangent, I had to bring it back to my issue at hand, i.e. to get it focused back to the specific phenomenon of their lived experiences *vis-à-vis* their job and working conditions by asking a few pointed questions.

Another interesting issue is related to the technique of data collection. As I mentioned earlier, I relied primarily on interview. But, I found that some of my respondents also narrated to me stories about their lived experiences. Also, in one case when I was talking to my female respondent at the multiplex in locality X, one of her female colleagues came over and joined the conversation. On few occasions, they just conversed among themselves about their jobs and working conditions, and as a researcher, I soon found myself engaged in observing them and analyzing their conversations. Though I started with interview, I soon found myself engaged in narrative analysis, observation and in analyzing the contents of the conversations to have a glimpse of the lived experiences of the security guards.

What I would like to highlight here, based on the reflection of my experience in the field, field visit can throw surprises at us. We do not know, how the respondents will react to our questions, and in what ways they are most comfortable in answering our questions. So, when our fieldwork is not about close-ended survey questionnaires, but open-ended in-depth interviews as mostly in qualitative research works, we must not be inflexible in our approach to data collection. One cannot enter into the field with some rigid pre-set mindset regarding the technique of our data collection. Though we must have a larger perspective on data collection to be employed (e.g. interview here), but we must be flexible in our approach. The prime purpose is to extract as much relevant information from the respondents as possible. In the phenomenological research which tries to bring forth the lived experience of the respondents, it is imperative for the researcher to be a patient listener, let the respondent reply to our questions, and move in that flow of conversation he or she is most comfortable with. "Flexibility" and "improvisation" in techniques of data collection are the key. However, as I mentioned earlier, if the respondent veers off too far away from the stated objectives of our research, the focus to the research objectives must be brought back through the interjections of a few pointed questions.

Despite my efforts to win over my respondents, some amount of reactivity[9] on their part cannot be ruled out. I cannot completely dismiss some degree of consciousness on their part, as a consequence of which, they might have hidden some facts or had not been completely candid with and truthful to me. This, up to some extent, might have impinged upon the quality of my research.

Based on my fieldwork and interviews, I found the following commonly shared lived experiences of the security guards *vis-à-vis* their job and living conditions, once I put their responses to rigorous analysis to look for some common statements and expressions (can be characterized as first-order typification):

- All my respondents rued and complained about the meager monthly salary they were being paid: Rupees (Rs). 10,000 to Rs.15,000 (\$175-225 roughly in terms of current rupee-dollar conversion ratio)[10]. All of them had a duty of 10-12 hours. Compared to the hours of work they put in, they termed their salary a pittance.
- All but two of my respondents were migrant workers. They hailed from the underdeveloped regions of India such as the states Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. They all have migrated because of the "push factors" – completely shambolic economic conditions back in their home states.

For instance, respondent E, who worked at M movie theater in locality Z, told me the following during the course of the interview:

I hail from the district Ballia (state of Uttar Pradesh). I am around 44 years old. I am a school dropout; came here around 3 years ago [...] financial condition of my family back home is not good, rather wretched. You know quite well the poor economic condition of states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. I needed some job desperately [...] no question of getting any job back home; so, came to Delhi. A friend of mine helped me in getting this job; since then, for the last 3 years, I am working as a security guard here [...]. My salary is very low. I started with Rs.7000 a month three years ago. Now I get Rs.10,000 [...] I cannot sustain my family on such a small income, so they stay back home. I send Rs.5000 to my family every month. I stay here on remaining Rs.5000. Even this is not enough for a costly place like Delhi [...]. Have rented a house in a nearby slum along with four others.

- Migrant security guards mostly resided in slum or squatter settlements. Some had brought their families to Delhi while others whose salaries were very low had left their families behind. All my respondents with their families in Delhi brought to my notice the hardships they faced in maintaining their families in Delhi. All of them almost invariably expressed their worry and constant anxiety about the health of their families especially of their children in the extremely unhygienic conditions in slums.

My female respondent H, who worked at the renowned multiplex at locality X, stated:

I stay here with my husband and children. I have a daughter (8 years old) and a son (6 years old). We somehow manage to sustain here because both my husband and I work. My husband is a former army personnel. He also works as a security guard in a bank. Since he has a licensed gun of his own, he gets the salary on the higher side, around Rs.14,000 a month. I get Rs.9,000 [...] We have taken a house on rent in the nearby slum. The place is unhygienic and the drinking water there is really filthy. I constantly fear for the health of my children. We are planning to shift to some other area where rented houses are cheap and there is, at least, supply of clean and safe drinking water [...]. Education of my children is another worry. School fee in Delhi is so high [...] I work for 10 hours a day. Then back home, I have to take care of domestic chores [...] As a security personnel, I cannot relax even for a minute during my working hours [...] I have to be constantly vigilant and on my toes all the time [...]. This job is so tiring and enervating [...]. I cannot say till when my husband and I can carry on with this work [...].

- None of them expressed satisfaction with their job and working conditions. They characterized their jobs as extremely stressful, exacting and also exploitative. Working for 10-12 hours as a security guard was not an easy task. One had to be ceaselessly watchful and alert during working hours. There was no job security as well. Their jobs were contractual and there services could be terminated anytime even on the flimsiest of grounds. There is no union of them as such. As in India, only in special cases, private security guards are allowed to carry guns. Those without any weapon except a baton also fear for their own lives.
- All my migrant respondents expressed how desperately they longed to go back to their native places. They wished and hoped that things improve in their home states so that they go back away from the excruciating lives of Delhi.

Respondent A, who worked as a Home Guard at a residence in the locality Y, told me during the course of the interview:

I work for 12 hours a day. There is no holiday and I work all 7 days a week. If I take a leave, salary is deducted [...]. My job is completely at the mercy of my employers. Our jobs always hang in balance. There is also no union which can be our voice and take our concerns forward and press for them [...]. These house-owners do not want any security guard to work at their residences for long. They do not trust us [...]. What an irony – we protect their homes and they are skeptical of us. In last 3 years, my agency has shifted me across 5 residences [...]. They are also so rude in their behavior and treatment [...]. Since, I am not authorized to carry a gun, I also fear for my own safety, especially when I work in night shifts [...].

Respondent D, who worked at the HDFC bank ATM in X, said to me:

I get Rs.12,000 a month. I cannot sustain my family here. Staying away from family, at times, can be so frustrating and painful [...] I am planning to go back home. I have some land there; but, fragmentation of land through generations has made agriculture almost untenable. I will sell my land and will start a small business back home from whatever money I get [...] I want to go to my wife and children.

Following the process of coding from the significant statements and quotes and also from the shared concerns of the respondents (as discussed above), I try to develop some concepts/categories which can be used to develop the “essence” (second-order typifications) of the lived experiences of the security guards *vis-à-vis* their working and living conditions (Box 1).

Conclusion

Composite description of the “essence” of the lived experiences of the private security guards *vis-à-vis* their working and living conditions.

The security guards characterized their jobs as exploitative. They worked for long hours (10-12 hours) a day. Even a day off in a week was rare. They were paid a measly monthly salary of Rs.10,000-Rs.15,000. They all bemoaned that sustaining one’s family on such a meager income in a city like Delhi was next to impossible. Their economic squeeze compounded their woes and exasperating job environment. They all called their jobs too demanding and stressful. Working for 10-12 hours a day without relaxing breaks was not an easy task. My female respondents really seemed stressed out because after long hours of their taxing job, they also had to carry out the domestic chores back home. For those migrant security guards who had left their families behind, they suffered from a feeling of emotional void as staying away from their children and wives for months was truly painful and frustrating. Living in penurious conditions in unhygienic slums and squatter settlements made them constantly worry about the health and well-being of themselves and their families. There was no job security as their jobs were contractual. They could be shown the door anytime. Low job security heightened their anxiety and strain and kept them on the rack all the time. Lack of professional unions made them completely powerless and voiceless. There was no mechanism through which they could press forward their legitimate demands and present a united front before their unions. Low salary, long working hours, deplorable living conditions and constant fear of losing one’s job coupled with the scorns and rude treatment from their employers made their jobs dehumanizing.

Box 1. Deciphering “Essence” from interviews

<i>Significant statements, quotes, common concerns and expressions</i>	<i>Concepts/categories</i>
Very low salary; sustenance of oneself and one’s family in an expensive city like Delhi very difficult	Economic squeeze
Long working hours; exacting and enervating working conditions with little respite	Exploitative job conditions
Staying away from one’s family for long (those who have left their families behind) frustrating; and deep yearning to go back to them	Emotional void
No Job security; completely at the whims of the employers	Powerlessness
Living in deplorable unhygienic conditions of the slums; constantly worried about the health of oneself and of one’s family. Prohibition to carry weapon also causes fear for one’s life	Concern for well-being and safety
Stressful and demanding working environment; wretched living conditions; scorns and scolds of employers	Dehumanizing

Notes

1. Though Husserl (1913/1962, 1936/1965) coined the term “phenomenology” and was the first to elaborate upon its premises as the basis of knowledge, the roots and branches of phenomenology in philosophy were further developed and extended by Philosophers like Heidegger (1927/1962), Sartre (1943/1992) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962).
2. Any fleeting discussion on Schutz’s monumental work on phenomenology is not only bound to miss some of his important ideas but also in a way is an injustice to his erudition and the sweep of his work. While fully aware of these limitations, I still attempt to present in a coherent way the fundamentals of Schutz’s theory.
3. In phenomenological sociology, it is assumed that the great bulk of our knowledge of the social world is typified. That is, it refers, not to the individual or unique qualities of things or persons, but to their typical features. Typification refers to the process by which people typify the world around them (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2006, p. 400). Dillon (2010, p. 309) defines typification as the customary (typical) ways in which an individual’s intersubjective social world is organized. Slattery (2003, p. 166) defines typification as common ways of classifying objects (house, man) and experiences (hate, nightmare) which build into the stock of knowledge.
4. Life-world refers to the everyday world as it is experienced by ordinary men and women. The term was first used by Husserl (1936/1965). For phenomenological sociology, the life-world is the paramount reality and the main object of sociological inquiry (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2006, p. 222).
5. The concept of “bracketing” was first put forth by Husserl (1936/1965) through the use of his term “epoché” which enjoins the researcher to set aside his/her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants under study. Reflexivity is a crucial component of bracketing wherein a researcher constantly puts into question one’s assumptions, prejudices and experiences.
6. As very aptly lamented by Becker (1974) that the research works on private police are very few and that the private police in all their dimensions constitute a very fertile ground for sociological research, I too found that there were hardly any academic literature of significance on private security guards in India. Even newspapers and magazines covered them scantily. So, I relied for my information on security guards on some of the internet sources and newspaper articles. Some of the newspaper and journal articles I went through were “Horrible conditions of security guards in India” (www.rtiindia.org/forum); “Security guards on warpath” (*The Hindu*, March 14, 2012); and “Unorganized labor: private security guards in Delhi” (www.deshkalsociety.org).
7. Creswell (2007) posits that a phenomenological research can be accomplished through sustained interaction with five to ten respondents experiencing the same phenomenon.
8. Locality X is a colony in Delhi mainly inhabited by middle class families and is a well-known commercial center. Localities Y, Z and T are upscale residence-cum-commercial localities close to X. State Bank of India (SBI) is the largest public sector bank in India. HDFC is one of the largest private banks in India.
9. Reactivity describes the response of research participants to the fact that they know they are being studied. Reactivity is deemed to result in atypical behavior (Bryman, 2008, p. 698).
10. Rupee is the currency of India. Its shorthand is Rs. The average rupee-dollar conversion ratio for the last six months can be taken as \$1 equivalent to Rs.65.

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Further reading

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