

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Qualitative Methodology

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Abstract: This article argues that subjective processes, social relations, and artifacts (including re-research instruments and methods) enable researchers to objectively comprehend psychological phenomena. This position opposes the postmodernist contention that subjective processes, social relations, and artifacts interfere with objectivity. The article outlines a hermeneutic procedure for interpreting narratives in a way that comprehends the real psychological meanings that are expressed. This procedure is contrasted with an impressionistic summary of a narrative which imposes the researcher's theoretical perspective on the protocol instead of elucidating the subject's meanings.

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1. Subjectivism and Objectivism

Qualitative methodology recognizes that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved in scientific research. Subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data. In qualitative methodology, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives he brings to his research and how these affect the research project. Other researchers are also encouraged to reflect on the values that any particular investigator utilizes. [1]

A key issue that arises with the recognition of subjectivity is how it affects objectivity. Two positions have been articulated. Many qualitative researchers counterpoise subjectivity and objectivity. Objectivity is said to negate subjectivity since it renders the observer a passive recipient of external information, devoid of agency. And the researcher's subjectivity is said to negate the possibility of objectively knowing a social psychological world. The investigator's values are said to define the world that is studied. One never really sees or talks about the world, per se. One only sees and talks about what one's values dictate. A world may exist beyond values, but it can never be known as it is, only as values shape our knowledge of it. [2]

GERGEN (2001) outlines this subjectivist position under the moniker of postmodernism, which he contrasts with modernism. However modernists such as BERKELEY and HUME proposed exactly the same doctrine centuries ago. GERGEN states:

"For modernists, the world simply is out there, available for observation. Within the texts of postmodernism, however, there are no grounds for such a presumption. There is no means of declaring that the world is either out there or reflected objectively by an 'in here'" (p.805).

"To tell the truth, on this account, is not to furnish an accurate picture of what actually happened but to participate in a set of social conventions ... To be objective is to play by the rules within a given tradition of social practices ... To do science is not to hold a mirror to nature but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. The major question that must be asked of scientific accounts, then, is not whether they are true to nature but what these accounts ... offer to the culture more generally" (p.806).

"A postmodern empiricism would replace the 'truth game' with a search for culturally useful theories and findings with significant cultural meaning" (p.808).

"Arguments about what is really real are futile" (p.806). [3]

Perception, cognition, and communication are mired in a web of values that prevents getting beyond these. Consequently, the criteria of truth and objectivity denote congruence with cultural values, symbols, and terms; they do not denote apprehending a world beyond the individual (and his culture). The limitations of this perspective are obvious. If Catholics accept Vatican dogma that Christ was born from a virgin mother and that his body levitated to heaven after his death, they are objective and even scientific according to GERGEN'S definition, since they are playing by the rules of the game. Germans who accepted Nazi propaganda that Jews were genetically inferior to Aryans would also have been objective and scientific! Science, religion, and ideology are indistinguishable once all values, cognition, and social relations are construed as distorting mechanisms rather than as potentially augmenting one's understanding of social and physical matters. [4]

In subjectivism, all viewpoints are simply another way of approaching a thing. But none of them delivers any information about the thing itself. My view that Santa Claus is a myth and your view that he is a real person have equal truth value—namely, none at all. Whether one favors one or the other is simply a matter of how interesting they appear as cultural expressions. [5]

Similarly, I may think women enjoy being raped while you think they hate it. Neither indicates what women truly feel. They are simply our views of the topic. They are to be judged according to what meanings they contribute to the culture. If my opinion imparts a cultural meaning that women are happy and well adjusted while yours contributes a cultural meaning that women are frightened and angry and maladjusted, we select among the two views on that level.¹ [6]

¹ One's *Erlebnis* is not necessarily fully known to oneself. It may be unconscious (cf. RATNER, 1994). DILTHEY employed the term *Besserverstehen* to denote the process whereby an observer can know a subject's *Erlebnis* more accurately than the subject himself knows it. This is similar to a physician knowing what is bothering the patient better than the patient knowing what is wrong with himself.

Subjectivism is often regarded as the *sine qua non* of qualitative methodology. However, this is untrue. Qualitative methodology has an objectivist strand as well. Objectivism states that the researcher's subjectivity can enable her to accurately comprehend the world as it exists in itself. Of course, subjectivity can bias the researcher and preclude objectively understanding a subject's psychological reality. However, this is not inevitable. In fact, one of the advantages of recognizing subjectivity is to reflect on whether it facilitates or impedes objective comprehension. Distorting values can then be replaced by values that enhance objectivity. [7]

Objectivism integrates subjectivity and objectivity because it argues that objective knowledge requires active, sophisticated subjective processes—such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction, and the distinction of essences from appearances. Conversely, subjective processes can enhance objective comprehension of the world. [8]

Objectivism was enunciated by DILTHEY (1833-1911) in his articulation of the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The key procedure in the cultural sciences was a qualitative hermeneutic interpretation of life expressions (*Lebensäußerungen*). Hermeneutic interpretation requires that the researcher employ an active, sophisticated subjectivity to objectively comprehend subjective experience (*Erlebnis*) in life expressions. *Verstehen* is to achieve *Allgemeingültigkeit*, or valid interpretations, of *Erlebnis*. DILTHEY'S objectivist approach to hermeneutics continued its earlier use during the Reformation when theologians employed it to identify the true original meaning of biblical texts. The objectivist sense is also contained in the etymological origin of hermeneutics. The term derives from Hermes, the Greek messenger god who helped humans understand what the gods were trying to say. Hermeneutics in social science is similarly to help an observer clearly understand (disambiguate) what the subjective experience of another is, i.e., what their expressions mean. [9]

Objectivity presupposes an independent reality that can be grasped. If there is no independent reality, or if reality cannot be apprehended, or if reality is merely the concoction of the observer, then the notion of objectivity is moot. [10]

The psychology of people is independent of the observer just as physical objects are. Just as the moon is there and has certain characteristics independently of the astronomer, so my wife has certain emotions about her mother independently of me. It is incumbent on me to understand my wife's emotions as they exist for her. If I do not understand my wife's emotional state as it is—if I try to construct it as meaningful in my terms rather than as meaningful for her—I will pay dearly. Of course, some of her emotions are generated in part by my acts. Nevertheless, her emotions are HER *Erlebnis* and I must objectively understand them as they are FOR HER, as her psychological reality.² [11]

2 According to postmodernists, we can't know what effects our values really have on culture because that would be an old-fashioned modernist attempt at trying to understand social reality. We can only *talk* about the effects our values have as we construe them through linguistic conventions. But talk, like perception, does not refer to any reality beyond linguistic conventions. When I state that women enjoy being raped, you may construe this as leading to suppression of

The observer may be correct or incorrect in assessing peoples' psychology. Just as the observer may accurately perceive or misperceive an optical illusion, so he may perceive or misperceive peoples' psychology. There must be empirical criteria to establish the degree of accuracy/objectivity with which one perceives peoples' psychology, just as there are empirical criteria to determine the degree of illusion in the perception of objects. [12]

Of course people must agree about what constitutes evidence. And they use socially constructed instruments to obtain evidence. However, their agreement and measurement concerns what is real. When physicists agree that their instruments have measured certain properties of atoms, they are not simply talking about their measurement operations, per se, or how the properties are mere reflections of those operations. They are not trapped in a web of subjective processes that distance and distort phenomena. Whereas postmodernists are fascinated by the fact that their data reflect their theories and methods, realists emphasize how their theories, methods, and data reflect real things. The objective information about real things which social and subjective processes (including measurement) generate is reflected in real results such as producing nuclear weapons, which really kill people, and medical procedures, which really cure disease (cf. MERTON, 1972 for an incisive refutation of the subjectivist position that one's values insulate oneself from the world). Theories, methods, and conclusions which are incompatible with real results are winnowed out so that better ones can be cultivated. In contrast, postmodernism smugly assumes that social constructions are self-confirming, reality beyond social constructions does not exist or (what amounts to the same thing) is unknowable and inconsequential, and any construction is tenable as long as it commands interest. [13]

Objectivism is the highest form of respect for the subjects we are studying. It respects their psychological reality as something meaningful and important which must be accurately comprehended. Subjectivism either denies a psychological reality to subjects, or else makes it unknowable. The psychology of other people is clouded by the subjectivity of the observer and is not recognized for what it (truly) is. [14]

To objectively comprehend peoples' psychology, the researcher must organize his subjectivity appropriately. Hypothetical concepts must be well-defined so that they can be identified unambiguously. An appropriate methodology must be adopted in order to solicit complete, meaningful evidence that can be used to test the validity of hypothetical concepts. And the evidence must be analyzed through sensitive, systematic procedures which can detect its features and compare them to the characteristics of hypothetical concepts. In this way, the researcher can be warranted in believing that her concepts illuminate the true nature of peoples' psychology. Nebulous hypothetical concepts, insufficient or inappropriate

women while I construe it as a positive recognition of women's adaptability. There is no *real* significance to my opinion that could be tested and rejected if necessary. For postmodernists, language is like a set of Russian dolls with each utterance shrouding the previous one in a web of meanings that insulate us from social and physical reality.

behavioral evidence, and arbitrary analyses vitiate objectivity and allow the researcher to impose her theoretical constructs on the data. [15]

2. Objectivistic and Subjectivistic Qualitative Research: Empirical Examples

Let us examine how subjective acts of a qualitative researcher, interpreting statements in a document, can elucidate the true nature of a person's psychology. [16]

The first step is to identify "meaning units" within the document. These are coherent and distinct meanings embedded within the protocol. They can be composed of any number of words. One word may constitute a meaning unit. Several sentences may also constitute a unit. A meaning unit may contain a complex idea. It simply must be coherent and distinctive from other ideas. The meaning unit must preserve the psychological integrity of the idea being expressed. It must neither fragment the idea into meaningless, truncated segments nor confuse it with other ideas that express different themes. [17]

It will be instructive to illustrate this point by identifying the meaning units in an actual interview protocol. I will use as data an account that was published by HIGGINS, POWER, and KOHLBERG (1984). The subject was asked whether a student is morally obliged to offer a ride to another student in the school (whom he did not know) who needs a ride to an important college interview. I shall bracket meaning units that express issues related to the moral obligation of doing favors for strangers.

"[I don't think he has any obligation]. If I was in his place and I [didn't know the kid too well], [if I wanted to sleep late], [I don't feel that it is my responsibility] to go drive somebody to their interview, [it is up to them, they are responsible]. If I were going there, [if I had an interview there at the same time, sure I would]. But if I had the opportunity to sleep late and didn't know the kid at all, I wouldn't ...

[People seem to think as long as you have a car they have a ride], and in my opinion it doesn't operate that way. [If I wanted to give him a ride, I will give him a ride], [if I am going there and they want to go there]. It is [my car and I am the one who is driving], and I don't see why I should give him a ride.

It doesn't mean I shouldn't give them a ride, but [if I don't know them well enough], I think [just out of protection for myself and my property], I wouldn't. I think people may say that [being responsible to yourself is more important than other people]. I think there is [an extent where you put yourself first]. And when you [believe in putting yourself first, like I do] ... [I don't feel I should be obligated to somebody else's work, especially if I don't know them], I don't think I should give them a ride." (p. 90) [18]

After the meaning units have been identified, they are paraphrased by the researcher in "central themes." If the meaning unit is "Oh hell," the researcher may construe this as "anger." "Anger" will be the theme, or central theme, of the unit. [19]

The central themes should represent the psychological significance of the meaning units. For instance, when the subject surmises that if he wanted to sleep late he need not worry about driving a schoolmate to an interview, it seems that he is emphasizing his own desire over other people's and that this is a form of self-gratification. Similarly, when he says that it's his car and he is the one driving, the implication is that he can use his property however he wishes and is under no obligation to use it to help another person. Central themes involve interpreting the psychological significance of the meaning unit that is often not explicitly stated. However, the inference must be consistent with the body of statements. [20]

The meaning units of the statement on moral reasoning can be represented by the following central themes:

- no moral obligation to drive/help—(meaning unit: "I don't think he has any obligation")
- don't help distant social relations—(meaning unit: "don't know him well")
- self-gratification—(meaning unit: "sleep late"; "put yourself first")
- self-responsibility—(meaning unit: "everyone responsible for own self"; "not responsible for others")
- help if it's convenient for self — (meaning unit: "if he & I were going to the same place")
- people use each other—(meaning unit: "people think as long as you have a car they have a ride")
- private property can be used as one desires without obligation—(meaning unit: "it's my car")
- self-protection—(meaning unit: "don't know people well"; "out of protection for myself") [21]

The central themes are the significant psychological elements expressed in the narrative. Although central themes are constructions of the researcher that go beyond the subject's literal words, they are consistent with these and represent their significance. In this sense, the central themes objectively summarize the psychological meanings that the subject expresses in the narrative (cf. RATNER 2002). This procedure avoids impressionism that is common in qualitative methodology, whereby the researcher simply declares meanings without grounding these in empirical evidence in the form of the subject's statements. [22]

It will be illustrative to examine an instance of qualitative research in which the researcher's values were allowed to generate a conclusion that was not empirically grounded. The contrast with the foregoing example will highlight what objectivity consists in and how it can be achieved. [23]

The impressionistic research was conducted by ROWE, WERTSCH, and KOSYAEVA (2002). It was guided by the theoretical orientation that individuals construct personal meanings about things rather than reflect social meanings. Social meanings are said to be impersonal, reified, monolithic, and static.

Individuals are said to be active and to never merely receive social meanings. Instead, individuals always transform social meanings into personal significations. This testifies to their activity, creativity, and agency. The authors present a brief conversation to document this point of view. Let us examine it to see whether their conclusions are empirically validated. [24]

The authors observed patrons in the Winter Palace museum, St. Petersburg, looking at a 19th century painting that depicts the Winter Palace and its locale. One conversation between two patrons went as follows:

"K: See here? It's the Winter Palace, and in 1985 I lived in St. Petersburg for a summer with a friend in her apartment down this street here.

S: You lived right there?

K: Yes, well, not right in that building but down the street here a little way and I would walk down to the square everyday." (p.105) [25]

From this minimal interchange, the authors conclude that the two patrons have transformed social meanings into personal ones. They state:

"Instead of bringing autobiographical narratives into contact with official culture as part of an attempt to enrich the latter, it seems to us that this [narrative] involves an escape from the public memory sphere...These visitors are refusing to engage in the museum's public memory space ... It is meaning making on one's own terms" (p.106). [26]

The question is, do the patrons say, or even imply, this? To refuse and escape from something is to actively reject it. One has to specifically express a dislike and a deliberate avoidance. Patron K. simply made a casual remark that she lived on a street that appeared in the painting. This in no way implies that she is escaping from the public memory sphere, refusing to engage in public memory, or making an idiosyncratic meaning. Patron S. was even less expressive. She simply asked a single, simple clarifying question of K. There is no evidence that the strong terms the authors use (escape, refusal, making own meanings) correspond to K's or S's words or intentions. Much more substantial evidence is necessary to justify an interpretation that an escape or refusal is being signified. [27]

Even making a personal remark about the painting is not necessarily making one's own meaning. The modern era is highly individualistic and people often look for personal issues in social, political, religious, and economic events. It is common for Americans to focus upon the personalities and sex lives of politicians or the cooking recipes of their wives. Such obfuscation of important political issues is encouraged by the posturing of politicians and the superficial, sensationalistic reporting of the news media. Consequently, there is nothing novel, creative, or idiosyncratic about people raising personal issues in relation to public phenomena such as paintings (RATNER 1997, 2002). [28]

The contrast between the two examples I have presented illustrates the flaws of subjectivism and a step toward making interpretation objective. It illustrates how the active subjectivity of the researcher can elicit and work on complex data (statements) to elucidate their psychological significance. Such objective interpretation will be corroborated by behavioral results in the way that individuals eventually act. Subjectivism will be also exposed by behavioral results which contradict its arbitrary conclusions. If qualitative methodology emphasizes this distinction and strives to direct researchers' subjective processes to objectively study the psychology of subjects, it will make a great contribution to social science. [29]

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