

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Objectivity

### Book Section

How to cite:

Hollway, Wendy (2013). Objectivity. In: Theo, Thomas ed. Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology. Heidelberg: SpringerReference.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2013 Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.springerreference.com/docs/html/chapterdbid/304856.html>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology: **Objectivity**. Wendy Hollway. 2013

### **Introduction**

Objectivity became one of the central defining principles of scientific psychology, its purpose to achieve value neutrality and knowledge untainted by the preferences of those who produce knowledge. The scientific paradigm defined the new psychologies emerging in the late nineteenth century. The principle of objectivity relied on its excluded others. These can be recognised as subjectivity and social construction, both of which figure the idea of belief as in opposition to scientific objectivity. Isabelle Stengers, philosopher of science (2000) takes the impasse between these positions and proposes a reconnection between science and the world and a toleration of the tension between scientific objectivity and belief.

### **Definition**

The objectivity principle, according to the historians of psychology Murphy and Kovach (1972, p.241), was to be found in 'avoiding all assumptions about consciousness and turning to the explicit description of the relations between stimulating situations and the responses to them'. Objectivity involved, primarily, a 'rational' attitude that achieved detachment from the subject of inquiry: the root of the word implies the treatment of subjects like objects; that is, dispassionately. Subjectivity came to mean 'influences proceeding from "within" the human being – not supplied by the world outside the perceiver - which are capable of affecting how the world is perceived', and hence a knower's 'false inner projections on the outer world of things' (Bordo, 1987, pp.50 & 51).

### **Keywords**

Strong objectivity, rationalism, subjectivity, objectivism, knowing, binary, countertransference, situatedness.

### **History**

When psychology parted company with philosophy and allied itself with science in the last years of the nineteenth century, the tenets of scientific method became central to all the knowledge that 'modern' psychology produced, so that psychological methods became based on the scientific paradigm that emerged in the Enlightenment period of European history and philosophy. These are usually viewed as originating in 'the Cartesian promise of absolute epistemic objectivity' (Bordo, 1987, p.2). René Descartes, rationalist philosopher and mathematician, writing in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, espoused ideals of 'clarity, detachment and objectivity' (Bordo, *ibid*). Empiricism (associated with the name of Francis Bacon, writing in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century) emerged in the same period and, along with Cartesian rationalism, Baconian empiricism dominated the methodology of 'modern' (that is, scientific as opposed to philosophical) psychology. Daston and Galison (2007) have shown that objectivity, a seemingly neutral epistemological concept, has a history that has demanded very different moral commitments and activities from the researcher. The temporality of objectivity and its ethical character are anathemas to traditional psychology.

Although the early scientific psychology of Fechner, Wundt and James used a wider range of methods - psychophysics (the correlation of objective stimuli with subjective experiences) introspection and stream of consciousness - this strict version of objectivity defined the influential experimental studies on animals that followed. Men like Ivan Pavlov and J.B. Watson adopted the dominant mechanistic paradigm in order to study 'behaviour'. Pavlov, 'severely objective and quantitative' (Murphy and Kovach, 1972, p.241), explained dogs' behaviour in terms of conditioned stimulus and response, through his central concept, the reflex. He became convinced that 'all the problems of psychology could be handled in this way' (op cit., p.243), an argument set out in '*Objective Psychology*' (1907). Watson, in the U.S., inspired by the new objective methods in animal psychology, 'decided to throw overboard the entire concept of mind or consciousness and to make both animal and human psychology the study of behaviour' (Murphy and Kovach, 1972, p.245). Attempts were made to bring language and meaning into the same paradigm: for example, Holt (1915) argued that 'the "meaning" of a word is *nothing but* a conditioned response to that word' (Murphy and Kovach, 1972, p.247, original emphasis). Thus we see epistemic objectivism dominating psychology in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially in the US) through learning theory and animal psychology.

While behaviourism used experimental methods, child study was based on detached observation. Arnold Gesell, for example, isolated the observed child behind a one-way screen to conduct his observations. Even for the men who observed their own children, a scientific attitude was favoured. James Sully, for example, expounding at length on the phenomenon of scientist-fathers observing in the nursery, adds (humourously) that a mother's way of regarding children 'unfits her from entering very cordially into the scientific vein. She rather dislikes their being made the objects of cold intellectual scrutiny and unfeeling psychological analysis' (Sully, 1881, cited in Riley, 1983, p.49).

### **Traditional debates**

These principles, largely unchallenged, underpinned a growing Western psychology until the radical developments of the 1960s and 1970s, starting in the US. The American 'crisis in social psychology' emerged through dissatisfaction with the knowledges produced through experimental, quantitative, so-called objective methods (Ring, 1967). Although the experimental method in social psychology was criticised for manipulating variables, deceiving participants and producing reductive and irrelevant findings, little changed. In 1989, Rijsman and Stroebe, European social psychologists, concluded that although new theories had emerged, 'the research conducted to test these ideas was completely traditional' (1989, p.341).

Psychoanalysis, unlike modern psychology, has been able to contribute to an understanding of the experience of 'actual occasions', both ontologically and epistemologically. It is well known that Freud wished psychoanalysis to be recognized as a science (understandable given the dominance and reputation of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century). He approached

this through medicine, but carved out a niche there by focusing on conditions that were not readily explicable within the biomedical model because they seemed to have a 'subjective' dimension. The core principles of psychoanalysis - in which the mind is embodied, conscious intention never fully in control, and desires motivate - render untenable the Enlightenment 'equation of mind and conscious thought or reason' (Flax, 2000, p.53). Rejected by academic psychology (unconscious conflict was regarded as unfalsifiable and therefore invalid), psychoanalysis developed independently of university Psychology departments, able to base its evolving epistemology primarily on clinical practice. As a result it is relatively free of the troublesome binaries that underpin Psychology: here notably objectivity/ subjectivity, body/ mind, cognition/ emotion.

### **Critical Debates**

A critical discussion of objectivity requires consideration of the subject-object distinction so central to Western thought. The binary of objectivity and subjectivity poses a problem for philosophers of science. Thomas Nagel (1986) believes that modern science – which has changed irrevocably the way the world can be thought about – can aspire to describe the world independently of its knowers and is therefore more objective than a common sense view. But – and this is especially relevant to psychology – an objective viewpoint is unable to provide an understanding of human beings ourselves. If an objective viewpoint leaves out what it is to be a thinker, it is, Nagel argues, a falsely objectifying view. In this view, psychological science leaves out something essential: the thinker/knower. The cognitivist tradition that largely replaced behaviourism has not been able to help in this respect, still heir to the mind-body dualism of Enlightenment science (Bordo, 1987; Flax, 1995).

Many philosophers have made distinctions between kinds of knowing that challenge the hegemonic Cartesian knowing. Michael Polanyi (1958), scientist turned philosopher of science, advocated 'tacit knowledge' and criticized what he called 'objectivism' which 'has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and cannot prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we can prove' (cited in Ghent, 1990 p.236). With feminism, psychoanalysis and recently the turn to affect, there is broad agreement that the knower's relationship to emergent knowledge, if it is not to be stripped of life, needs to be characterized by sympathy (Bordo, 1987), com-compassion (Ettinger, 2006) or passion (Despret, 2004): 'to "depassion" knowledge does not give us a more objective world, it just gives us a world "without us" and therefore without "them" ... a world "we don't care for"' (Despret, 2004, p.131).

An energetic critique of epistemic objectivity and its consequences for scientific method (in which scientific psychology was largely ignored) came from feminist philosophy and feminist sociology in the 1980s and '90s (Susan Bordo, 1987; Donna Haraway, 1988; Sandra Harding, 1991; Jane Flax, 1995; Susan Hekman, 1997). This critique became articulated around Sandra Harding's 'standpoint theory' (1991), which starts from the experiences of those who have been excluded from the production of knowledge. It is based

on the situatedness of knowledge, the opposite of the ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel, 1986) implied in scientific objectivity. In this view, ‘strong objectivity’ can be achieved by starting inquiry from the lived experiences of women and others who have been traditionally outside the institutions in which knowledge about social life is generated and classified; it acknowledges the political nature of knowledge production and pays greater attention to the context and social location of knowledge producers. Although its claims to more reliable knowledge can rest in its transparency and breadth, this version of objectivity is still based on the ideal of being value free. Donna Haraway (1988) argued, in contrast, that situatedness entails a partiality of epistemological position, pluralistic and in flux, which is essential to reach objectivity. Evelyn Fox Keller defined ‘dynamic objectivity’ as a stance that ‘actively draws on the communality between mind and nature as a resource’, ‘maximally authentic, and hence maximally reliable’ (Keller, 1985 p.116).

Paul Stenner (2008), a psychologist, draws attention to the tendency in recent psychosocial theory to champion subjectivity, ‘no doubt a reaction against the objectivist biases of mainstream experimental psychology which has long striven to guarantee scientificity by way of the expulsion of subjectivity from the midst of its procedures’ (2008, p.91), but he detects a trend to go beyond an “anti-object subjectivism” and regards the process philosophy of A.N.Whitehead as an undervalued resource. For Whitehead, subject-object relations are ‘the fundamental structure of experience’ (Stenner, 2008, p.92). However, they required a reconceptualization, which Whitehead did through his central concept of an ‘actual occasion’ of experience: ‘the occasion as subject has a “concern” for the object. And the “concern” at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed towards it’ (Whitehead 1933/35, p.226, cited in Stenner, 2008, p.92). Stenner introduces a useful distinction between deep and shallow empiricism, the former based on the principle that ‘subjective and objective aspects are fused together in each occasion of actuality’ (Stenner, 2008, p.98).

Psychoanalysis has been used to identify the reasons for the hegemony of Cartesian objectivity, linking it to a ‘flight from the feminine’ (Bordo, 1987, p.105) and a conflation of woman and nature (Fox Keller, 1985) in the desire to predict and control which are at the heart of the scientific paradigm. For Bordo (1987, p.4) ‘Cartesian anxiety discloses itself as anxiety over separation from the organic female universe ... rationalism a defensive response to it’ in a desire to exorcise all the messier (bodily, emotional) dimensions of experience from knowledge and to institute certainty and clarity in its place – objectivity banishing subjectivity. Two British psychoanalysts, Wilfred Bion and Donald Winnicott, draw, rather, on their clinical experience to address subject-object relations in what Whitehead called the fundamental structure of experience.

Unlike dualistic theories that create a binary between thinking and feeling and between mind and body, for Bion (see Ogden, 2009), the capacity to think is precipitated by raw experience and its affective charge. A further binary is transcended in Bion’s account of the origins of thinking in the early

intersubjectivity of baby and mother (1962). He describes a container-contained relationship where, in early life, a mother receives and contains her baby's potentially overwhelming raw experience, which she does through 'reverie' and embodied identification, not conscious cognitive analytic thought. In time and in good enough circumstances, the baby will internalise this capacity to think, inseparable from a capacity to contain its own emotional states. This theory of thinking not only transcends the cognition-emotion binary on which objectivity depends, but also, in the place it makes for unconscious intersubjectivity, undermines the idea of an autonomous rational thinker who is the conscious initiator of objective thought. Bion explores the role, in thinking, of doubt, living with uncertainty and reflecting on emotional experience; not-knowing over knowing (Grotstein, 2007).

Donald Winnicott, paediatrician as well as psychoanalyst, specifically addresses the vicissitudes of subject-object relations in early life: '...in childhood we are watching the human being only gradually becoming able to distinguish between the subjective and objective ... A large proportion even of adults never achieve a reliable capacity for objectivity, and those who are most reliably objective are often comparatively out of touch with their own inner world's richness' (Winnicott, 1958 [1950] p.208). The experience of a 'Me' differentiated from a 'Not-Me' world of objects develops in an intermediate area where the distinction between subjective fantasy and external objects is suspended in the service of creative imagination and to provide respite from an external world that imposes limits on desire. This area, accessed in playing, is the basis for creativity throughout life. External objects do not impose on a passive infant, rather one whose capacity for illusion mediates the relationship. Winnicott refers to these as 'subjective objects'; that is, objects experienced through the compelling psychological need of the infant for control, however illusory. Successive encounters with reality oblige the infant to recognize that some aspects of the world are beyond omnipotent control and these become 'objects objectively perceived'. Objectivity in this view means phenomena experienced 'outside the area of projection'. To the extent that the frustrating, sometimes painfully obdurate external world is faced, the baby (the developing 'knower' of the world) moves from creating 'subjective objects' to 'objects objectively perceived'. However, objectivity, Winnicott says, 'should not forget the fantasy, the unconscious fantasy' (Phillips, 1988 p.33).

### **International relevance**

The European Enlightenment tradition of scientific objectivity dominated the Western world and, via colonization and globalization, became hegemonic. However, non-European traditions survive and prosper. Wilfred Bion's concept of reverie (based on the principle of allowing the unbidden to emerge) was close to Indian meditative traditions and is recognized as central to any psychotherapeutic practice that achieves the 'objectivity' of being available to listen 'without memory and desire' to what is being communicated (and not necessarily in words). Daoist Buddhism, based on embodied knowing of Qi (life energy flows) within and beyond the material body, taps into other, non-objectivist, sources of knowing (Capra 1976). The recent (in Western thought) challenge of absolute distinctions between human and non-human animal

knowing and communication (Despret 2004) also widen the scope of critical debates.

### **Practice relevance**

Georges Devereux, exploring the relationship between psychoanalysis and the behavioural sciences, concluded that psychoanalysis is ‘first and foremost an epistemology and a methodology’ (Devereux, 1967, p. 294). This was based on Freud’s recognition that people communicated directly at the level of the unconscious, which Sandor Ferenczi elaborated in the idea of a ‘dialogue of unconsciousnesses’ (Ferenczi, 1932), especially the potential of the psychoanalyst’s countertransference. The concept of countertransference underwent relevant changes in the 1950s, from something seen as an impediment to objective perception of the patient to being recognized as an important ‘instrument of research into the patient’s unconscious’ (Paula Heimann, 1950, p.81). It was acknowledged that analysts had their own feelings, as the patient did. Questions arose about the status of the analyst’s feelings: an invaluable guide to the patient’s state of mind or an interference of the analyst’s own personal difficulties, not worked through in his or her own analysis? Concern that analysts could easily misunderstand or misuse the feelings aroused in them, to the detriment of their patients, continue to be articulated (the dangers of ‘subjectivity’, old version). However, the response has been to reflect on these feelings, to recruit support in ensuring that they are not acted out and to inquire deeply into which feelings might belong in the analyst and which, emanating from the patient, can be informative in communicating the kinds of experiences that cannot be articulated, cannot even be thought.

### **Future Directions**

The recognition of the need for a richer version of ‘reflexivity’ in psychological research practice invites parallels: the same worries about the effects of feelings in knowing apply to psycho-social and other qualitative empirical researchers addressing the implications of using researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing, or, noticing and reflecting on emotional responses (Hollway, 2012). This – which is the basis of much recent psychosocial research (for examples, see Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Clarke and Hoggett, 2009) - supports what we might call objectivity through subjectivity and can address, at the level of empirical research practice, the enduring issues of validity which require redefinition. More broadly, it seems of central importance to critical psychology that there are ways of knowing – of theorising and doing research – that transcend the stable of binaries reliant on the idea of scientific objectivity: objectivity - subjectivity; cognition – emotion/affect; autonomous individual – relationality; masculinity – femininity; reason – unreason; construction – reality.

### **REFERENCES**

- Bion, W. (1962) *Learning from Experience*. London: Karnac Books.  
 Bordo, S. (1987) *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays in Cartesianism and Culture*. NY, Albany: SUNY Press.  
 Capra, F. (1976) *The Tao of Physics*. London: Fontana/Collins.

- Clarke, S. and Hoggett, P. (2009) (eds.) *Researching Beneath the Surface*. London: Karnac.
- Despret, V. (2004) 'The body we care for: Figures of anthropo-zoo-genesis', *Body & Society*, 10, 111-134.
- Devereux, G. (1967) *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioural Sciences*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Daston, L., & Galison, P. (2007). *Objectivity*. New York: Zone.
- Ettinger, B. (2006) 'From proto-ethical compassion to responsibility' *Athena*, 2, 100-135.
- Ferenczi, S. (1932) *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Flax, J. (1993) *Disputed Subjects: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Politics and Philosophy*, London: Routledge.
- Ghent, I. (1999 [1990]) 'Masochism, Submission, Surrender', In *Relational Psychoanalysis: the Emergence of a Tradition*, Hillsdale, NJ: Academic Press.
- Grotstein, J. (2007) *An Intense Beam of Darkness*. London: Karnac.
- Harding, S. (1991) *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 581-607.
- Heimann, P. (1950) 'On counter-transference', *International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, 31, 81-84.
- Hekman, S. (1997) 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited', *Signs* 22(2), pp.341-365.
- Hollway, W. (2012) 'Infant observation: Opportunities, challenges, threats' *International Journal of Infant Observation and its Applications* 15(1), 21-32. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2012.654653>
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Sage.
- Murphy, G. and Kovach, J.K. (1972) *Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Nagel, T. (1986) *The View from Nowhere*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ogden, T. (2009) *Rediscovering Psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac.
- Phillips, A. (1988) *Winnicott*, Modern Masters Series. London: Fontana
- Polanyi, M. (1958) *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Rijsman, J. and Stroebe, W. (1989) 'The two social psychologies, or whatever happened to the crisis', *European J. of Social Psychology*, 19, 339-344.
- Ring, K. (1967) 'Experimental psychology: some sober questions about some frivolous values' *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 3, 113-123.
- Stengers, I. (2000) *The Invention of Modern Science*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stenner, P. (2008) 'A.N.Whitehead and subjectivity', *Subjectivity* 22, 90-109.
- Sully, J. (1881) 'Babies and Science' *Cornhill Magazine* 43, 539-54, cited in Denise Riley, D. (1983) *War in the Nursery*. London: Virago.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1958 [1950]) 'Aggression in relation to emotional development' In *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers*. 204-218, London: Karnac.