

# Objectivity & subjectivity

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## Objectivity & subjectivity

The issue of objectivity and subjectivity in professional practice is a complex one because, at one and the same time we, collectively in society and individually as clients, have to be assured that the significant judgements professionals are often making on our behalf are sound and also relate to our individual needs. We are considering further the nature of thinking and experience in professional practice. The questions of objectivity and subjectivity give rise to further questions. What can be termed your 'unquestioned beliefs' that underpin your practice? These assumptions are a necessary part of the expertise we bring to a professional task but there is a danger of them becoming either outmoded or simply reflecting personal beliefs or potential prejudices if we do not have the opportunity to expose and critique these beliefs.

In empirical thinking, which has influenced social sciences, there is a tendency to privilege objectivity over subjectivity. However, more recent discussions have emphasised the importance of subjectivity and experience when we are dealing with human behaviour. In this section we are going to consider Habermas's treatment of the role of experience and the issue of subjectivity and objectivity.

## The role of experience

One of the crucial aspects of professional practice is the ability to make sound judgements which rely to a considerable extent on the practitioner's own experiences and values. To make judgements a practitioner has to draw from his or her previous experiences, his or her knowledge and values. However, as Schon (1983) in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* argues, the thinking of professionals in these circumstances is distinctive. The practitioner has built up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions to draw upon. To make a judgement about a new case a practitioner does not go to a scientifically established body of objective knowledge but instead goes back to his or her previous experience. The practitioner has to compare the new case with other cases he or she has dealt with in the past, to think about how similar or dissimilar the new case is. The purpose of such reflection is not to establish general theoretical principles to be applied objectively. Instead the subjective experience of a practitioner working as a professional is the means of making diagnosis or deciding on particular courses of action. Therefore, we must recognise the importance of subjectivity in professional practice. Habermas sees the subjective having another vital role to play in the development of knowledge.

Stryker (2000:223) makes a cogent point:

*“Habermas' critics argue that there is no detached, objective standpoint from which any given argument can be criticised or justified independently of social contexts, collective identities, and historical traditions. There are only specific arguments embedded in particular social lifeworlds. What, then, makes it possible for social actors to step outside of the horizon of their particular lifeworlds? What allows them to question the validity of norms which they ordinarily take for granted?”*

These are key questions that Habermas has not successfully tackled. It may be the case that Carola Conle's (2001:28), view of narrative is more successful in coping with the issue of subjectivity, and has potential to be applied to any reflection on a communicative situation:

*"I see narrative, more than other types of communicative action, as highlighting an inner world of subjectivity".*

Perhaps in our reflection on action or on professional contexts we can only deal with our own subjective world. Would that render professional reflection useless since it might not enable us to reach a state of critical objectivity? Perhaps there is usefulness in the narratives and stories we create about our everyday experiences of professional practice.

## Experience and emancipatory knowledge

Schon (1983) looked to experience to establish ways of dealing with a new case. It is in another way that subjective experience seems important to Habermas' discussion. His theory can prompt us to see reflection on our experiences as a means to perspective transformation: that is, a change to our consciousness. The concept of emancipatory knowledge, developed by Habermas, is a powerful one. It enables us to reflect on how our own history and biography influence and shape the way we see ourselves and our professional identities, for example, our social and professional roles, our expectations, the expectations which others have of us, and so on. It becomes a question of how to construct our professional identities.

The idea of universal pragmatic functions in communication developed by Habermas encourages us to think about the notion that participation in dialogue allows us to reinterpret and re-perceive situations. However, as Habermas argues, to do so we must overcome distorted communications that arise from systems of ideological dominations/discourses. If distortions are analysed, they can be reduced, and objectivity can then be reached.

Habermas' method in communicative action allows us to look at dialogue and to challenge whether what is being said:

- is true;
- is socially or morally appropriate (what norms are being expressed);
- truthfully reflects the speaker's feelings and motives;
- is clear and can be understood.

In this, however, we are not striving to claim some objective truth but to recognize the role of the subjective in communication and in the generation of ideas. However, there are some significant questions that have been raised about the ideas put forward by Habermas in his discussion of communicative action.

Stryker (2000) mentions criticisms of Habermas that are relevant: notably that the theory of communicative action fails to take account of how argument and discourse are shaped over time and are culturally bound. It is, therefore, difficult to argue convincingly that there is, in actuality, an agreed set of universal language characteristics even within one culture. Habermas has tried to address criticisms of his theory, but Stryker argues that he has not been successful in overcoming his critics' objections.

## How do we know what is being communicated?

Habermas seems to argue that there is one set of rules that can be brought to bear on any communicative action. Yet we know from our own experiences that human communication is hugely complex. Think of an example from your own experiences in the classroom or in a training session: the communications within a formal lesson, in a group discussion, in a lecture theatre with students, or in a meeting. Even within formalised situations there are expected norms of behaviour and (more or less) shared expectations of the teachers' role and pupils' role. These expectations are: largely unspoken, agreed tacitly, sometimes challenged subtly or overtly, bounded within the subtleties of body language, tone of voice, shared or opposing norms and values, and so on.

In addition to these expectations there are a range of other features. Think about how we know what is meant when anyone says something in any given situation? We read complex cues, we make judgements about whether what is said has veracity, we judge whether we trust the other person based on whether we know them or not. Human interaction within any given situation can be a matter of reading signs and making judgements that we often do not make consciously. If this is done consciously, we sometimes cannot reduce to a set of logical propositions why we felt that person A was stating proposition Y in a manner we thought was veridical.

## Unconscious and reflective norms

Habermas does distinguish between particularistic norms (often unconscious) and universalistic norms (based on reflective argument), (Stryker, 2000:218).

But in reality, even when we reflect on a particular set of discourses or spoken communications, can we render the reflections empirically and objectively based? Can we sufficiently divorce ourselves from the complexities that were engendered in the context of the communication (either during the communicative action or subsequently) to successfully manage the level of abstraction required to implement Habermas' theory of communicative action?

## Reducing distortions

The implication of Habermas' idea of analysis to reduce distortions is based on two assumptions. It is assumed firstly, that objectivity can ever be reached and secondly, that objectivity is central to the professional discourse underpinning practice. Our every day understandings of ideas such as truth, judgement and professional practice imply that objectivity is not only possible but necessary. However, these assumptions about the importance of objectivity seem to constantly force us to ask, and to justify the question: what is wrong with subjectivity?

We must recognize that subjectivity can also be a useful dimension in the process of professional reflection. But we need to consider why subjectivity is either neglected or rejected. There are a number of questions we can pose:

- what are the consequences of taking a subjective stance?
- what might be the limitations of trying to be completely objective?
- what might be the advantages of attempting to reflect subjectively?

## References

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