

The Subjectivity of Scientific Method

My basic thesis is that the irreducible basis of all knowledge is consciousness and perception, that is, it is ultimately subjective.

This thesis has several implications:

1. The knowledge generated by scientists is to a large extent a function of the scientist's own consciousness.
2. When the field of scientific investigation is human nature, experience and functioning, what is reported is the investigator's observations, which are his perceptions and his perceptions are limited by his consciousness. His consciousness may be different from the consciousness of the person or persons he is studying and because of this difference, what he reports represents his consciousness and not the consciousness of his subjects.
3. Since consciousness of non-self is to a large extent dependent upon consciousness of self, it can be maintained that, in the social sciences, the scientist's own self-consciousness determines what he perceives and ultimately what he reports.
4. It seems to be a basic contradiction that behaviourist psychologists, for example, should view the study of consciousness and experience to be irrelevant to our understanding of persons, when these psychologists themselves are dependent on their own consciousness and experience in order to conduct their investigations.
5. It seems futile to claim that psychology is not related to philosophy, because the subject matter of psychology has been created by persons who have attempted to develop procedures and conventions to minimise subjective influence. To state that the method of psychology is an objective one, is to indicate a *preference* for a particular epistemology. Furthermore, the objective study of persons reflects a series of assumptions about the nature of persons. Assumptions, traditionally, belong to the subject matter of philosophy.
6. It could be argued that to choose to conform to objective procedures and conventions when studying persons is to restrict or limit one's own consciousness, and this restriction can be perceived as a self-destructive act, since one is denying the possibility of an expanding consciousness.

The Study of Self, Others and Learning

What is the purpose of studying the self, the self in relation to others and the self in relation to learning? I will consider two possibilities:

- (a) When the purpose of psychology is to understand human behaviour in order that one can better manipulate, exploit and control others, psychology takes on some of the following characteristics:

- It assumes that persons are totally malleable
- It denies the person the capacity for self-determination
- It tends to describe the conditions which elicit specific behaviour
- It tends to describe techniques of manipulation and control
- It tends to study the person as an object static in space and time
- It tends to belittle human experience
- It tends to be described in a language which the non-academic psychologist cannot relate to his own experience

- (b) When the purpose of psychology is to foster self-awareness in order that the person can exercise his capacity for self-determination, psychology takes on some of the following characteristics:

- It tends to describe how persons, in a variety of dynamic states, experience themselves
- It acknowledges the person's capacity to change himself
- It tends to be more concerned with the study of the bases of behaviour than overt behaviour
- It values the 'subjective' data of the person
- It tends to study that which persons consider to be relevant to their beings
- It tends to be described in a language of experience

Skinner is a representative of a psychology of control.

We are concerned with the causes of human behaviour. We want to know why men behave as they do. Any condition or event which can be shown to have an effect upon behaviour must be taken into account. By discovering and analysing these causes we can predict behaviour; to the extent that we can manipulate them, we can control behaviour. (1953:23)

Psychologists in their task of predicting behaviour, value precision. In fact a psychology of control can be perceived as a psychology which aims to become more precise in its account of human behaviour. The obsession with precision has led psychologists to develop increasingly sophisticated procedures of investigation, to describe their findings in the precise language of statistics, and to discount 'subjective' data on account of its vulnerability to bias, distortion and unreliability.

Rollo May demonstrates the absurdity of the view that subjective states are irrelevant to understand behaviour.

Let us for example examine the inner experience of some psychologist or philosopher writing a paper to deny the concept of consciousness of self. During the weeks he was considering writing this paper, he no doubt pictured himself sitting at his desk at some future day writing away. And from time to time, let us say, both before he actually began to write and later as he sat at his desk at work on his paper, he considered in fantasy what his colleagues would say about the paper, whether Professor So-and-so would praise it, whether other colleagues would say, 'How brilliant this is!', whether

still others might think it stupid, and so on. In every thought he is seeing himself as an identity as definitely as he would see a colleague walking across the street. His every thought in the process of arguing against the consciousness of self proves this very consciousness of himself. (1953: 79-80)

It can be said that man has consciousness and self-consciousness, or awareness and self-awareness, and because of this all research is limited by consciousness and is conducted in consciousness. Since consciousness is a concept which is considered by many psychologists to be 'merely subjective', then it can be said that research is 'merely' subjective.

The decision as to what constitutes science or psychology is arbitrary. But to propose that the science of psychology is concerned only with overt behaviour because overt behaviour can be seen, measured and precisely described, is to propose that psychology is a study of the superficial, and as such can only deal with matters peripheral to human experience.

The Subjective Basis of Objective Research

It will be argued later that objective research of necessity dehumanises the subject. It could be argued that the researcher is also dehumanising himself, or could it be that he allows himself the privilege of choice which he denies the experimental subject?

The Existentialists' emphasis that man is a choosing being is clearly illustrated in the research methodology which implicitly denies its assumptions. The researcher *chooses* an area of investigation; he *chooses* the manner in which he defines his problem; he may *choose* relevant theoretical ideas to support the assumptions he has *chosen*; he formalised his *choices* through developing operational or testable hypotheses; he *chooses* an appropriate research design to test his hypotheses; he *chooses* statistical procedures which he considers will best test his hypotheses; he *chooses* the conclusions he makes; and he *chooses* the manner in which he communicates his findings. He may find that the statistics most appropriate for the analysis of his data suggest that he must state the opposite of his opinion, the null hypothesis, in order to use these statistics. In such an example he may be developing reasons for a particular hypothesis, but then negates his own reasoning in order to state his hypothesis as a null hypothesis.

Dehumanising the Subject and its Consequences

Implicit in a scientific method which reduces human experience and behaviour to the language of statistics is the assumption that the person is static in relation to space and time. In other words the person is transformed into an object akin to non-living objects. The experimental subject is treated as a thing or an 'it', without consciousness, without choice, in short without self. If the person is treated in this way, what is observed during the process of treatment must surely reflect the way in which the person is treated. If the person is treated as a vegetable will he not demonstrate a tendency to behave like one?

Laing explains the inappropriateness of utilising the research models of the physical sciences with human beings.

Persons are distinguished from things in that persons experience the world, whereas things behave in the world. Thing-events do not experience. Personal events are experiential. Natural scientism is the error of forming persons into things by a process of reification that is not itself part of true natural scientific method. Results derived in this way have to be dequantified and dereified before they can be re-assimilated into the realm of human discourse. (1967: 62)

Cause for further concern on this issue must be emphasised in the light of work conducted by those sociologists and social philosophers who suggest that the knowledge produced by social scientists has been and is being used to control human behaviour to further the interests of elitist, powerful and governing groups. (see Berger 1963: 122-133).

The 'Objective' Study of 'Subjective' Data.

In the past decade there has been considerable research produced in areas such as self-concept, person perception and interpersonal interaction. Previously unacceptable data, subjective data, can become respectable, apparently, if the psychologist is able to quantify this data. The precise and vigorous methods of the Behaviourists are now being used to make available for statistical analysis data which is supposedly relevant to the experience of persons. We have a host of data collecting instruments which supposedly measure self-concept, attitudes, motives, values, feelings etc. Questionnaires, opinionnaires, inventories and rating scales used in psychological measurement attempt to standardise observations and hence limit to some degree what is observed. This *'predisposes its user to see some aspects of reality and to be blinded to other aspects; such is the nemesis of all our attempts at objectivity.'* (Olmstead 1959: 111-112)

The possibility that man research findings are created by the research methodology is stated as an actuality by Laing.

The theoretical and descriptive idiom of much research in social science adopts a stance of apparent 'objective' neutrality. But we have seen how deceptive this can be. The choice of syntax and vocabulary is a political act that defines and circumscribes the manner in which 'facts' are to be experienced. Indeed, in a sense it goes further and even creates the facts that are studied.

*The 'data' (given) of research are not so much given as taken out of a constantly elusive matrix of happenings. We should speak of *capta* rather than data. The quantitatively interchangeable grist that goes into the mills of reliability studies and rating scales is the expression of a processing that we do on reality, not the expression of the processes of reality. (1967: 61-2).*

In reporting subjective data which has been recorded on a rating scale which may have been validated by correlation with an earlier rating scale, which may have been validated by correlation with an even earlier rating scale, which may have been validated by the opinion of three 'experts' whose judgements were based on an alienated experience of self, researchers may well be reporting fiction.

It must be realised that what is often presented as subjective evidence is only subjective in the sense that the researcher presents the reactions of others to questions

he himself asks. His questions may be irrelevant to the experience of the experimental subjects (See Laing, 1960: Chs. 1 & 2). Thus it would appear that attempts to objectify subjective evidence may well fabricate the subjective evidence, and represents the subjectivity of the researcher rather than the subject. Unfortunately much of this research has been labelled 'phenomenological' which fosters the illusion that the subjective experience of the subject is being reported.

If we accept the idea that persons are self-alienated to some degree, as indicated by the work of Fromm, Marcuse and Laing, and that the process of self-alienation is the process of developing a 'false' consciousness, we can raise even more fundamental questions about the validity of research findings in the field of human experience. To what extent does the 'false' consciousness of the researcher generate 'false' data? Does it make sense for a researcher who is more self-alienated than his subjects to investigate these subjects?

Towards Subjective Research

One might wonder if it is possible to conduct research into the self, others and learning. It could be said that the methods attacked in this paper depend on a bastardised subjectivity. It may not be possible to restore completely this situation but it is possible to utilise methods which better represent both the subjectivity of the researcher and the subjectivity of the subjects.

First it is necessary to assume that the consciousness of consciousness is an essentially private matter, and it is the decision of the individual which determines how much of his awareness or consciousness of his own consciousness he makes known to others.

Kneller writes:

The existentialist epistemology (if such it may be termed!) assumes that the individual is responsible for his own knowledge. Existentialist knowledge is 'intuition'. It is 'human'. It originates in, and is composed of, what exists in the individual's consciousness and feelings as a result of his experiences and the projects he adopts in the course of his life. (1958: 59)

A major task is that of achieving access to the experience of another, and this may not be possible unless one is able to find access to one's own consciousness. Presumably we are not particularly interested in 'false' consciousness, but may have to become aware of our own alienated self prior to examining our authentic self. If a person recognises that he is becoming more aware of himself, then presumably his disclosure of the what, the how and the why of his increasing self-awareness, is the most basic data of subjective research.

Although some pains have been taken to criticise those social scientists who take the position that self-disclosures are either non-evidence or evidence not to be trusted, it should be indicated that there have always been psychologists who have developed theories on human experience, utilising self-analysis and the self-disclosures of others over an extended period of time.

For example, some of the earliest work in psychology was conducted by psychologists interpreting their own experiences amidst an interrelated mixture of speculation, logic and naturalistic observation. James was one of the first psychologists of modern times to use the self-disclosures of others in conjunction with his own introspection to

theorise on the meaning of experience. However, the self-disclosures he collected were normally directive, that is, responses to questions, and were usually 'one-shot'. In addition to Jung, several others used Freud's free association technique simultaneously in therapy and research. Horney, in fact, encouraged the use of self-examination for some of her patients when they were not in her presence. (1942). Sullivan, too, used free association, and Rogerian counselling has similarities with the free association technique.

It is interesting to note that therapists tend to be in long-term and continuous contact with persons, and through this contact data not readily available to the experimental psychologist is disclosed. This has been recognised by some experimentalists who are using explanations of human experience offered by therapists as hypotheses for testing. (Rogers, 1970: 117-34)

In striving towards a more subjective psychology through the use of freely-given self-disclosures, several problems are encountered.

1. It is recognised that in attempting to communicate one's own meaning, a person may exercise influence on his future introspection and retrospection. There is a relationship between self-consciousness and self-disclosure. (Jourard 1964: 9-10)
2. The disclosure of consciousness is limited by the person's ability to communicate his meaning. This limitation, in part, explains the existentialists' use of the arts and of philosophy to communicate meaning. The language limitation clearly excludes the possibility of investigating the inner experience of very young children.
3. One can never be entirely certain as to the authenticity of the self-disclosures.
4. It is widely recognised that the social climate in which self-disclosures are given influences the nature of the self-disclosures.

These problems can be viewed as evidence to support the idea that one cannot entirely control the actions of others, even if we wished to. Are we back at Square One?

It seems to me that what the psychologist must do is to decide which social settings he considers to be most appropriate to the area of human experience he is investigating, from which he will collect self-disclosures.

If one is studying the self, the self in relation to others, and the self in relation to learning, then it would seem appropriate to choose a setting in which persons are known to experience changes (learning) in consciousness and consciousness of self. For example, persons have disclosed that they have experienced personal changes in love relationships, during and following experiences labelled as 'cultural shock' experiences, during and following periods of intense involvement in a course of action, during individual and group therapy and during encounter groups and similar experiences.

The task of a humanistic social science is to report the self-disclosures of persons, and to describe the conditions both environmental and social, under which these disclosures have been collected. Perhaps in this approach to objectify means to report the experience of others in terms which have been verified by these others as truly representing their experience. To disclose oneself to another implies that one must

objectify what it is about oneself that one wishes to disclose. (Berger and Berger, 1972: 67-70) But the objectivity created through this process of objectification does not represent or describe the total reality, or reality for all persons, or the reality which the majority, in any given society, assumes.

At best, a humanistic social science can describe several realities. *'The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached'*. (Sapir, 1966:69) We could extend Sapir's statement to include different cultures within the same society. Ultimately, however, what is real is a matter for individual decision. Through individual agreement it is possible that views of reality may coincide. When persons become engaged in taking responsibility for developing and accepting their own views of reality and communicating with others on this basis, they will be better able to resist passive conformity to the dehumanising views of reality imposed on them by social engineers. *'Objectivity in any given society in fact gets defined as the political and social status quo'*. (Poole 1972:44)

A humanistic social science, in valuing the self-disclosures of persons, values the person's capacity to create his own knowledge, and recognises that what a person discloses about himself, about his relationships with others and about his own learning is ultimately more valid than attributions made by a dispassionate observer.

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The child's acquisition of all faculties is retarded ten fold or a hundred fold by the role he must play as Mother's product, toy and achievement. (Quoting Janoslov Koch of Prague)

The self-reliant woman is always loved, she cannot be lonely as long as there are people in the world who need her joy and her strength. Lovers who are free to go when they are restless always come back; lovers who are free to change remain interesting. The bitter animosity and obscenity of divorce is unknown where individuals have not become Siamese twins. A lover who comes to your bed of his own accord is more likely to sleep with his arms around you all night than a lover who has nowhere else to sleep.

The Female Eunuch Germaine Greer (McGibbon & Kee)