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Author(s): Elliot Eisner

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Objectivity in Educational Research

ELLIOT EISNER
Stanford University
Stanford, California

Objectivity is one of the most cherished ideals of the educational research community. In fact, it is so important that if our work is accused of being subjective, its status as a source of knowledge sinks slowly into the horizon like a setting sun. Yet, though we use the term *objective* with ease in our conversations and in our literature, its meaning is not particularly clear, nor, I will argue, are the consequences of the tacit, almost unexamined assumptions upon which it rests. When we speak of being objective, just what do we mean? One thing, apparently, is that we have taken pains to try to diminish or eliminate bias. To be objective or to do an objective study is to be or do something that is not primarily about ourselves, but about the world itself. Objectivity means in some contexts being fair, open to all sides of the argument. In other contexts, objectivity refers to a method or procedure through which we acquire information; an objective test is an example of such a procedure. In common discourse, to be objective or to have an objective view is to see things the way they are.

When we conceptualize objectivity, we ineluctably imply its opposite, subjectivity, and between the two there is no doubt about which one comes out on top. We want to be objective in our views, objective in our methods, and above all, to have objective knowledge. To use the vernacular, we want to see and to tell it like it is.

I know that in talking about objectivity as a condition through which the world can be accurately seen, described, and interpreted, I will be accused of creating a “straw person.” No one, I will be told, believes that *complete* objectivity is possible, but that we ought to be as objective as we can. But just what do we mean by “being as objective as we can”? Do we mean that we can get to know only a part of the world as it really is? Do we mean that

The major ideas in this paper are derived from a chapter in *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, by Elliott Eisner. New York: Macmillan and Company, 1991.

we should try to neutralize ourselves from our work? Is either possible? Some think so. After all, we do say that we discover the facts; we do not create them. We discover the laws that govern the universe; we do not make them. The truth *is*; it is not a fabrication. The distinctions we make between the inner and the outer, between object and subject, abound in our vocabulary. In fact, we take pains to depersonalize our language in order to create the illusion that we ourselves have had no hand in our own work. We refer to “the author,” we use the imperial “we,” we talk about “subjects” or use the even more depersonalized “S.” We formalize our talk because what we want is the truth of the matter and the best way to undermine truth is to accuse someone of being subjective. Objectivity, like democracy and virtue, are things we believe we should strive for. Furthermore, if we give up objectivity as an ideal, what do we replace it with? If we give up objectivity, don’t we fall into the bottomless pit of solipsism? Then what?

My comments address these questions. My analysis will be built upon a distinction between what Newell (1986) calls ontological and procedural objectivity. I hope to persuade readers that ontological objectivity cannot, in principle, provide what we hope for, and that procedural objectivity offers less than we think. I will then present a conception that I believe provides a more reasonable and useful way of thinking about the status of our empirical beliefs.

When we say we have an ontologically objective view of things, we mean that we see things the way they are. We see them in a way that reveals their actual features. To see things the way they are is to experience or know them in their ontological state. Veridicality is what we call such a state. What we seek, in the best of all worlds, is veridicality in both perception and understanding. What we wish to see and know is not some subjective, make-believe world created through fantasy, ideology, or desire, but what is really out there.

Those familiar with epistemology will know that veridicality as an ideal is predicated upon a correspondence theory of truth. The aim of epistemology, as the Greeks conceived of it, was to achieve true and certain knowledge. Such an achievement was what differentiated knowledge from belief. Knowledge was *episteme*, belief was *doxa*. Thus, whatever we *knew* was, by definition, true. If it wasn’t true, we could not know it. We could *believe* it to be true, but belief and knowledge were regarded then and today as different states of being.

It should also be noted that as an ideal, correspondence between the world and the inquirer not only refers to what the inquirer perceives and understands but to what he or she has to say about the world. In other words, correspondence is to occur not only in perception and understanding but in representation as well. At its best, such representation provides, as Rorty (1979) chided, a mirror to nature. Ontological objectivity gives us an undistorted view of reality.

Procedural objectivity, the second type of objectivity, is achieved by using a method that eliminates, or aspires to eliminate, the scope for personal judgment. One of the most common examples of such a method is the

objectively scored achievement test. Once the test has been constructed, identifying a correct or incorrect response does not require interpretation. Although there are interpretive issues at stake at the level of test construction, at the level of scoring, the optical scanner will do. Since no judgment is needed in scoring, the procedure is procedurally objective—hence, we say that we have an objective test or an objective method for scoring responses.

Operational definitions are also procedurally objective. When we define a concept or a skill by what it is that we do to measure it, we mean that we employ a set of procedures that others can also use. Furthermore, we fully expect that when such procedures are used, they will yield identical or nearly identical results as long as the procedures are followed and as long as the phenomenon that was measured does not itself change. When we design tests or use procedures that yield responses whose evaluation depends upon personal judgment, we refer to them as subjective, and as most of us have been taught, subjective judgments cannot be trusted. Traditionally, the aim of the research enterprise, from a methodological perspective, is to use a procedurally objective set of methods in order to gain an ontologically objective understanding of the events and objects we study.

The problems with ontological objectivity and procedural objectivity are important, not only because they lead to certain practical problems in the conduct of empirical research (we often tend, for example, to avoid studying what we cannot measure), but also because they reinforce a view of knowledge that is itself problematic. Consider, for example, the correspondence theory of truth upon which ontological objectivity rests.

How can we ever know if our views of reality match or correspond to it? To know that we have a correspondence between our views of reality and reality itself, we would need to know two things. We would need to know reality, as well as our views of it. But if we knew reality as it really is, we would not need to have a view of it. Conversely, since we cannot have knowledge of reality as it is, we cannot know if our view corresponds to it.

Some argue that a “true” view of reality allows us to predict or control events. When we are able to do this, our view of reality may be said to correspond with reality itself. But our ability to predict or control events does not entitle us to conclude that the views we hold about the world correspond to the world as it really is. Witch doctors have for years used currares to treat pain and have beliefs about why it works. The fact that given their beliefs it works does not mean that their views are true, or that our views are. Using prediction and control as criteria for verifying belief is an instance of affirming the consequent, a procedure that is not logically justified, as Popper (1959) and others have pointed out. Indeed, Popper’s view is that we can never verify the truth of a claim, we can only refute it; and even refutation, Popper claims, cannot be certain. Popper is a fallibilist, not a verificationist.

Related to the impossibility of knowing that we know the world in its pristine state—a kind of immaculate perception—is the framework-dependent character of perception. Perception of the world is perception influenced by skill, point of view, focus, language, and framework. The

eye, after all, is not only a part of the brain, it is a part of tradition. How shall teaching be perceived? It depends upon what I think counts. Am I interested in “wait time”? If I am, then I will look for it. The clarity of language, the teacher’s relationship and rapport with students, the significance of the ideas presented, the teacher’s personal style, warmth, and enthusiasm are all candidates for attention. Which to choose depends upon framework. To paraphrase Kant, percepts without frameworks are empty, and frameworks without percepts are blind. We secure frameworks through socialization, professional and otherwise. What we come to see depends upon what we seek, and what we seek depends upon what we know how to say. Artists, Gombrich reminds us, do not paint what they can see, they see what they are able to paint. An empty mind sees nothing.

There is, of course, a further complication regarding ontological objectivity. That complication deals with the limitations inherent in representation. Any report of the world has to take some form and be carried by some symbol system (Goodman, 1976). Some systems, such as language, describe. Others, such as visual art, depict. Some languages describe literally, others metaphorically. Some visual systems depict visually but appeal basically to our gut—expressionism, for example. Others depict visually but appeal to our imagination—surrealism. Still others depict visually but appeal to our optical experience—the work of Josef Albers and color field painting come to mind. The same holds true for narrative structures. No single genre can say everything. What one sees is that even within a single symbol system there are unique constraints and unique possibilities. Because any symbol system both reveals and conceals, its use provides, of necessity, a partial view of the reality it is intended to describe or depict. In fact, the form of representation we choose to use is constitutive of the understanding we acquire: the medium is a part of the message.

To complicate matters still further, the particular schemata we use also structure perception. These schemata may be thought of as “structures of appropriation” (Eisner 1991). They define the contours through which our perception and comprehension of the world is created. In this sense, Goodman’s (1978) point about the world-making nature of symbol systems becomes especially cogent: To pro-life proponents, a fertilized egg is a child and its destruction is murder. To the pro-choice population, it is an unviable protoplasm that has not yet achieved the status of a person. Each group creates its own world through the image of the human it embraces. Which view is the objective one?

Given these considerations, the prospects for achieving ontological objectivity—the pristine, unmediated grasp of the world as it is—seems to fade. For many, I suspect, the absence of what Goodman has called “something stolid underneath” creates a troublesome psychological problem. Without an anchor how can we maintain our stability? The need for such an anchor creates the motivation to find it, to assure ourselves that it is there, and that with adequate effort and ingenuity, it will be found. The quest, as Dewey (1929) lamented, is a quest for certainty.

As for procedural objectivity, the creation of procedures that eliminate judgment is certainly possible. Hermetically sealed, plastic-wrapped achievement tests, whose questions are to be answered by filling in blanks with

graphite so that they can be scored by machines untouched by human hands, provide ample testimony to the attractiveness of such procedures. Such tests are not only politically safer than exercising judgment—exercising judgment on high-stake tests can be dangerous—they are also very efficient. Yet consensus achieved through procedural objectivity provides no purchase on reality. It merely demonstrates that people can agree: we hope for good reasons, but what constitutes good reasons as contrasted with poor ones is itself a matter of consensus. That might be all we can ever have, but we ought to recognize it for what it is.

Why the need for objectivity? Part of the reason, I believe, has to do with our intellectual traditions. The distinctions between knowledge and belief, biased and unbiased perception, truth and falsity are directly related to familiar dichotomies between inner and outer, mind and body, subject and object. The legacy of the Enlightenment and the effort to create a tidy, intellectually orderly world contributes further to beliefs with which we have become so comfortable. Indeed, it is very difficult to alter the naive realism that pervades our culture. When Sergeant Friday says he wants “the facts, just the facts,” he is not only making a request, but expressing a philosophy of mind. Take away the prospects for a neatly defined, objectively knowable world, and we have lost our bearings.

As understandable as such needs may be, there are, to make a pun, more constructive ways to look to our relationship to the world. The ways I will describe are rooted in the work of Dewey, Piaget, Cassirer, Langer, Goodman, and Arnheim. They participate in Rorty’s philosophy and in the ideas of poststructuralism.

If the ideal of ontological objectivity is rejected, must we therefore be thrust into a solipsistic subjectivism? Once we give up our hope for knowing the world as it really is—the kind of immaculate perception I mentioned earlier—do we fall into a personal abyss from which there is no escape and no possibility of communication with others? I think not. We need not embrace a solipsistic subjectivism by recognizing that ontological objectivity is impossible. With Dewey, Piaget, Goodman, and others, I believe we are better served by recognizing that whatever it is we think we know is a function of a *transaction* between the qualities of the world we cannot know in their pure, nonmediated form, and the frames of reference, personal skills, and individual histories we bring to them. These histories are, of course, a contribution of the culture in which we live, both the social culture and our more narrowly defined personal culture. What we see and understand is not *given* by what Dewey (1938) called “objective conditions”; they are *taken* by us. What we are able to take depends upon both the features of the world-out-there, a world we cannot directly know, and what we bring to it. It is in the transaction between objective conditions and personal frames of reference that we *make* sense. The sense we make is what constitutes experience.

Experience thus conceived is a form of human achievement; it is not simply had, it is made. The features of this construction depend upon the frameworks we are able to employ and our skill in their use. What can be made with any particular framework is not makable with any other. Each provides a special value. Indeed, acculturation and education can be con-

sidered the psychosocial processes used to provide frameworks to the young so that the worlds they make for themselves will have some commonality with those of others. It is this commonality, this *communis*, that makes communication possible. When people do not share frameworks, there is no common ground; they cannot understand each other.

The argument that I have made for a framework-dependent view of cognition and the importance of regarding knowledge as the result of transaction is sometimes misunderstood by some as a form of mindless relativism. My views are both relativistic and pluralistic, but I hope not mindless. The relativity of my views pertains to the belief that knowledge is always constructed relative to a framework, to a form of representation, to a cultural code, and to a personal biography.

My pluralism relates to the belief that there is no single, legitimate way to make sense of the world. Different ways of seeing give us different worlds. Different ways of saying allow us to represent different worlds. Helping people participate in a plurality of worlds made, I believe, is what education ought to try to achieve. The ability to participate in a variety of worlds need not lead to a Tower of Babel. And the specter of everyone marching to the same drummer or forced to speak an official social science Esperanto thrills me not. We need multiple voices and we need people who can understand them.

If we relinquish the search for an ontological objectivity, do we give up the ideal of Truth? Not necessarily. We can retain truth as a regulative ideal as long as we understand that what we regard it to be depends upon shared frameworks for perception and understanding, and that truth, in the literal sense, is relevant only to literal statements. Insofar as our understanding of the world is of our own making, what we consider true is also the product of our own making. The history of science provides ample evidence that what we regard as true changes. It will, undoubtedly, continue to change as we are persuaded that other paradigms or frameworks are more attractive or more useful.

Furthermore, we ought not to limit inquiry only to those forms for which a literal conception of truth is a relevant criterion. A novel as well as a statistical mean can enlarge human understanding. Fields like history, anthropology, sociology, and political science, fields that depend upon interpretation and imagination, are themselves literally fictions—things made (Geertz 1973). They are the results of a framework-defined world transacting with a framework-dependent mind. The facts never speak for themselves. What they say depends upon the questions we ask.

The upshot of my message is to urge that we recognize objectivity for what it is: a concept built upon a faulty epistemology that leads to an unrealizable ideal in its ontological state and a matter of consensus (we hope for good reasons) in its procedural state. I also urge that we accept the idea that all experience is transactive; hence all we can know is the result of a transaction between our sentient and intelligent selves and a world we cannot know in its pristine state.

The world has changed since Copernicus told us how it worked. The world has changed since Tycho Brae provided a picture of the heavens. The world has changed since Newton, Einstein, and Bohr gave us their

versions of how it is. I suspect it will continue to change. It seems to me high time that we recognized the creative dimensions of human rationality and accepted the notion that a view of the world from God's knee is unlikely, at least for most of us. Therefore, is the hope for an objective view useful? Can we ever know the world as it really is? How could we know if we had? Do we need another ideal? I think we do. Recognizing and accepting the inevitable transaction between self and world seems to me more realistic and more useful. This recognition would underscore the constructed, tentative, and framework-dependent character of perception and knowledge. It would contribute to a more pluralistic and tentative conception of knowledge, one more dynamic and less dogmatic, one with a human face. It would recognize that *doxa*, not *episteme*, is all we can have.

I close with a quotation from one of the world's leading philosophers of science, Stephen Toulmin. Writing about the relationship of belief to knowledge, he says,

All of our scientific explanations and critical readings start from, embody, and imply some interpretive standpoint, conceptual framework, or theoretical perspective. The relevance and adequacy of our explanations can never be demonstrated with Platonic rigor or geometrical necessity. (Not to mince matters, *episteme* was always too much to ask.) Instead, the operative question is, Which of our positions are rationally warranted, reasonable, or defensible—that is, well-founded rather than groundless opinions, sound *doxai* rather than shaky ones? (1982, 115)

What Toulmin has to teach us is that belief, supported by good reasons, is a reasonable and realistic aim for inquiry. The reasons Toulmin alludes to are judged good not by a correspondence we cannot determine, but by the exercise of reason. What we believe, in the end, is what we ourselves create. With such a vision, the scope for method in research can be widened and the criteria for assessment made more generous. Such a prospect when put into practice will not only make possible the use of a more diversified array of talent, but it may also help us better understand and improve educational practice.

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