The Social Context of Research

Introduction

Malcolm Williams and W Paul Vogt

The recent and mainly welcome plethora of methods writing, helping and advising us toward better technical competence, should not lead us to ignore the importance of the social context of social research itself. The knowledge social researchers produce is done so in a world of commitments. These commitments are those of the respondents/informers themselves and those of the researchers. Were it the case that we could separate those two spheres of existence, social research would be a more straightforward activity. However, researchers are seekers of knowledge in one context and citizens in another. Conversely, researchers do not have a monopoly on the generation of social knowledge, but rather citizens themselves may generate insights within a context, or beyond that context. Moreover, citizens may be oppressed or disadvantaged and these characteristics will shape their knowledge acquisition. Almost always researchers will begin from a position of material and cultural privilege and some would say that this changes the power relations and the nature of knowledge thus produced. Social research takes place in a flux of moral relations.

This is far from a new insight and can be traced back to the writings of John Stuart Mill who recognised that the subject matter of (what he called) the moral sciences was morality itself. However Mill and the positivist philosophers that followed him, of the Comtean, Durkheimian and Logical kind, were optimistic that the methods of science themselves would lead us to a morality that was self evidently and universally true. This perspective was remarkably resilient in the idea of value freedom that was a key tenet of the positivist social research in much of the twentieth century. Perhaps, more implicitly, it survived as a regulatory ideal in après or post-positivist quantitative research. Unlike the nineteenth century positivists who believed that method could lead to moral verities, the

supporters of value freedom believed that method could and should be separate from morality. Thus, the first position is one that we can derive an ought from an is and the second that we must separate ought from is.

Three of the four chapters in Part 1 are concerned in one way or another with questions of the relationship between 'ought and is' and the fourth chapter is concerned with the causal outcomes of the reality that I have described as the moral flux.

Two dilemmas faced the editors when considering contributions to a part on the social context of research. The first was whether there should be such a part. Would there, for example, be chapters on the social context of organic chemistry in a volume given over to methodological advances in that discipline? Some would say that this is just the trouble with social research; it spends too much time examining itself. But social research is not organic chemistry. Its methods aim to capture social reflection, and in qualitative research at least, are shaped by such reflection. Methodological innovation is inextricably linked to context. Indeed in this volume the innovation deployed is shaped by or arises out of particular social context.

Having decided to include such a part, we were faced with a second dilemma, that of what or who to include. The literature in this area is vast, as are the numbers of producers of that literature. One principle did guide us, that the chapters should be conducive to the methodologically pluralist approach of the volume, that is they should not be narrowly partisan toward particular epistemological positions. Beyond that it became an issue of what particular ideas or thinking were innovative in some key areas. Consequently, objectivity, causality, feminism and what might be termed the 'starting conditions' for research were finally chosen as areas in which there was something new to say that would complement the rest of the volume. In each of these areas there is a very large literature, but specifically in social research there has not been much new thinking in recent years. Discussions of objectivity are muted or oblique, especially in the post-science war period, so as not to offend either of the former protagonists. Indeed, as Martyn Hammersley observes in his chapter, discussions of objectivity have been eclipsed by those of reflexivity. At least in the case of feminism some of the insights and innovations of earlier years have been absorbed and there is less talk of 'malestream' research than there once was. Indeed one of those insights has itself been reflexivity. Causation has continued to attract interest in the philosophy of science and philosophy of the social sciences, but in social research itself, probabilistic causation manifested as causal analysis, counterfactual analysis, etc. has become an epistemological done deal, with only realists proposing wholly new ways of approaching the methodology, as opposed to the method.

Despite 'calls to reflexivity' it is rare that we acknowledge the conditions of production of research knowledge. Reflexivity is so often an abstract concept, as Martyn Hammersley puts it 'autobiographical excavation', that it is meant to reveal ones value position. Somehow reflexivity becomes quality control, but

how good are our data and how does this relate to training, career or the culture of peer review in academia – what might be termed 'the relations of production', an important and often ignored area that Geoff Payne takes up in this volume.

Part 1 begins with a chapter by Martyn Hammersley in which he reconceptualises objectivity. He begins by examining its narrow use in the positivist tradition which sees it as isomorphic with subjectivity, the former equating with methods which will lead to truth about the world and the latter as personal or group values which will diminish objectivity, so consequently should be eliminated. It is this narrow objectivism that has been an easy target for sceptics from a number of post-positivist perspectives including postmodernism and feminism.

The former have been especially influential in qualitative research and have abandoned any form of objectivity as a search for truth in favour of constructionist approaches to research accounts that do not privilege one set of findings over another, because this is a matter that is not decidable and it is said, such privileging is arbitrary. This inevitably leads to the abandonment of social science as science (in any sense of that word) and ethnography in particular (according to James Clifford) becomes and should become indistinguishable from fictional accounts.

Feminists have criticised objectivity on the grounds that it is an androcentric concept that privileges male forms of knowledge and consequently produces mistaken accounts of the world. Standpoint feminists, in response, have argued that knowledge is always from a perspective, but some perspectives can provide better knowledge than others. The standpoint of women, because it is one of oppression, produces more authentic accounts of the world. As Hammersley points out (and many feminists now accept) this is very problematic for a number of reasons, particularly the core one of why should oppression produce better knowledge? Surely the oppressor in attaining and maintaining his position will have become very knowledgeable about particular things. However, as Hammersley notes, there is much to learn from these critiques. Feminism teaches us that the answer we get will depend a lot on the questions we ask. Historically, Western society have been dominated in the public sphere by men who have asked particular questions. These questions and the knowledge acquired has been male so far that they advance forms of technology which perpetuate hegemony through war and forms of social organisations, that exclude or diminish the role of women. There is no Archimedean point, no place where we can ask neutral questions, they are always socially situated.

Some critics of objectivity replace this with reflexivity and indeed reflexivity as some form of personal auditing of one's perspective and subjectivity has become very influential, particularly in qualitative research. As Hammersley puts it

> . . .'reflexivity' here is the attempt to make explicit all the assumptions, value commitments, feelings, etc. which went into, or which underpin, one's research, how it originated and progressed, etc., so that readers can understand the path by which the conclusions were reached.

Nevertheless, even though reflexivity is a valuable tool we cannot do without some form of objectivity. As he goes on to say 'Without a viable conception of objectivity it seems unlikely that social science can flourish or even survive'. Yet, objectivity as a more broadly conceived epistemic virtue is both necessary and possible.

Hammersley asks us to focus on what objectivism, standpoints and reflexivity have in common 'that error can derive from the individual and social characteristics of the researcher, and that there are ways of minimising this threat'. A commitment to enquiry is an

> epistemic virtue that is designed to counter one particular source of potential error: that deriving from preferences and preconceptions associated with commitments that are external to the task of knowledge production – in other words, those that relate to the various goals any researcher has as a person, citizen, etc.

Enquiry as 'epistemic virtue' is, of course, not enough to guarantee good research as Geoff Payne persuasively argues. Payne's chapter explores the relationship between discipline (in this case sociology) and the conditions of production of research and shows how it is often the case that sociological reasoning is often compromised by methodological shortcomings and these are, at least in part, the result of a lack of reflection on what we do.

> Our collective research quality could benefit from reviewing the process through which people end up as researchers, and how 'junior' researchers become involved in carrying out projects often with little awareness of what really goes on in data capture, what informants are doing when we research them, or how the data captured and analysed with our sophisticated techniques actually relate to theoretical questions.

He illustrates this by examining anonymised examples of research papers rejected by leading journals. As he notes such output comprises a large part of that of sociology (and presumably other disciplines), where journal rejection rates can be very high. The methodological shortcomings Payne describes afflict both qualitative and quantitative research. Each often involves 'over claiming', the former through generalising social processes from specific local examples, the latter through poor selection of data sets, or a failure to recognise the limitations of those datasets. This second problem is all but endemic in secondary analysis, where sophisticated statistical techniques often disguise poor operationalisation or variable selection.

Payne's chapter is a cautionary tale. Innovation is not always about technique, but actually may be much more mundane and about our own professional development as researchers and disciplinary and interdisciplinary relations. Many of these problems Payne describes stem from a complacency about methods within disciplines and a culture which does not place them at the heart of what we do, or what we teach. Payne concludes his chapter with a call for greater humility and a reflection on 'what we know and how we know'.

It is a rare thing that a methodological approach is so successful that it is less visible or discussed than it once was. Arguably this has been the case for feminist

methodology, though as Gayle Letherby points out, one seeks a particular feminist method or methods in vain, despite the belief that it is associated with qualitative methods. Certainly it was true that many feminist researchers did embrace qualitative approaches on the grounds that much of quantitative research used to be androcentric in its theorisation, assumptions and analyses, but really this was much more to do with the possibility of qualitative methods (especially the in-depth interview) allowing the voice of the interviewed to come through more clearly and authentically. Placing the researched at the heart of the research enterprise was a prerequisite if social research was to be used as a tool to overcome sexism in society.

As we have noted above, the legacy of this was reflexivity and the questioning of value freedom in research, an approach which has become mainstream. Indeed as Letherby cites Sue Wise as saying, the notion of 'mainstream' itself is now difficult to sustain and rather it is a matter of centres and peripheries in disciplines and indeed one might add interdisciplinarity. Whilst it is true that the myth of quantitative equals male and qualitative equals female has been persistent, it is equally true that feminists have embraced problem-centred methodological approaches placing them in the vanguard of methodological pluralism.

The strength of feminist approaches that have led to such pluralism is that they have emerged from a long epistemological gestation (though as Letherby notes, this process is not without its critics, even within feminism). The consequence of this has been a thoroughgoing questioning of the 'relations of production' of knowledge and a recognition that all knowledge is from some or other social perspective. Letherby's own contribution to this epistemological auditing has been the concept of 'theorised subjectivity', which

> relies on a recognition that, while there is a 'reality' 'out there', the political complexities of subjectivities, and their inevitable involvement in the research/theorising process make a definitive/final statement impracticable.

An examination of ones subjective position is however possible and desirable, particularly that as researchers we occupy a position of intellectual privilege. Whilst the specifics of methodological debate within feminism may draw on atypical methods or approaches, that the foregoing has a feel of familiarity to most social researchers is an indication of the interpolation of feminist methodological insights into the practice of research. One might speculate that whilst feminism will continue to influence how we do research, the concept of a feminist methodology may well eventually disappear.

Feminism's contribution to social research was for a long time controversial and even (as Letherby notes) a contributor to the 'paradigm' wars. Conversely, for several decades causality has simply divided those in social research into those who believe in it and those who don't, so in a sense it too had a role in the paradigm wars. But these wars are over and even the former nonbelievers are mostly prepared to accord a limited role to causal reasoning in the social world. Those who believed in causality all along were mostly located in the

neo-empiricist 'causal analysis' tradition, which whilst immensely productive (see Rubin in this volume), was just one way of approaching causality in social research. As Nancy Cartwright remarked of the concept 'one word, many things': Two 'movements', realism and complexity, have challenged some of our starting conditions for thinking about causality in social research. David Byrne, in his chapter, challenges us to think about causality quite differently by coming at it 'backwards', that is starting from effects, not causes. Whilst 'experiments' in social research are rarer than they once were, they are making a come back in policy-based research, emulating the 'gold standard' (*sic*) of the randomised control trail (RCT). Perhaps just as importantly, the same logic of the search for elegant (Byrne would say simplistic) causes underpins the *post hoc* survey analysis. The idea of simple causation has been challenged by realism and complexity theory, the starting points for Byrne's chapter. He argues instead for the development of comparative method to aid us develop retrodictive accounts of complex social causality. Through a case study example he demonstrates how this can be done by using existing quantitative and qualititative methods in combination as ways of comparing multiple cases in order to establish multiple and complex causal processes. He does this through a case study example of 'effects' in the development of the post industrial city, in this case Leicester, in England.

Byrne's chapter, in so far as it is not about the 'relations of production' of research is different from the other three. Yet what is fascinating is that if we begin with a theorised narrative of what caused (what he describes as a 'system state') one might argue that a necessary condition is a reflexive stance, something each of the previous authors discuss as a key contextual issue. Moreover, Byrne's approach effectively dissolves the quantitative–qualitative divide in thinking about causality by incorporating both narrative and number in causal attribution.

Objectivity:
A Reconceptualisation

Martyn Hammersley

In recent times, the word 'objectivity', like 'truth' and 'reality', has come to be interpreted by some social scientists as referring to a fiction, and is treated by most commentators with great caution or avoided altogether. The uncertain status of the word is sometimes signalled by it being placed within inverted commas. While these do not always indicate sneering rejection (Haack, 1998: 117), they are usually intended to distance the writer from any implication that what the word refers to actually exists, or at least to suggest that there is doubt about it.[1] In this chapter I want to examine the reasons why objectivity is found problematic, and I will also try to develop a clearer understanding of what function the concept might usefully serve in the context of social inquiry.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT OBJECTIVITY

There are several reasons for current scepticism about objectivity. Part of the problem is that the words 'objective' and 'subjective' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and these need to be distinguished. Daston and Galison (2007: 29–35) have outlined their complex semantic history, suggesting that, over time, they have reversed their meanings.[2] They were introduced into Scholastic philosophy in the fourteenth century, at which point 'objective' meant 'things as they appear to consciousness' (in other words, objects of thought) whereas 'subjective' meant 'things as they are in themselves' (in other terms, subjects with attributes). Kant modified this usage, so that 'objective' came to refer to the

'forms of sensibility' that structure our perceptions, by contrast with the subjective, that is the empirical, content that is poured into these vessels by the Ding-an-sich, thereby generating our perceptions and cognitions. Post-Kantian usage involved a further twist: 'objective' came to refer to what belongs to nature or to reality independently of our subjective experience of it. In these terms, a judgement can be said to be objective if it corresponds to an external object, and as subjective if it does not. The other side of the same conception of objectivity is the assumption that there is an objective, 'external' world in the sense that things exist and have the character they do irrespective of our beliefs or wishes about them; though, confusingly, there may also be an 'internal' subjective world in which things exist in this sense too. Daston and Galison go on to document different versions of this late modern conception of objectivity, one appealing to the idea of truth-to-nature, another to the possibility of mechanical reproduction, a third to trained judgement – and these are almost as different from one another as they are from Scholastic usage.[3]

Given this confusing history, it is perhaps not surprising that the concept of objectivity should be found troublesome today. Within the context of social science we can identify several, by no means isomorphic, contrasts that often participate in how the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' are intended, or interpreted, on particular occasions:

1   Mental versus physical
2   Internal as against external
3   Private rather than public
4   Implicit versus explicit
5   Judgement as against mechanical procedure
6   Idiosyncratic rather than shared or intersubjective
7   Variable versus stable or fixed
8   Particular rather than universal
9   Dependent as against independent
10 Relative rather than absolute
11 Erroneous versus true.

In much of the usage these various distinctions are blended together. All this reflects the continuing influence of a particular conception of objectivity that emerged within social inquiry most influentially during the early twentieth century, and one that has come to be questioned by many social scientists today. This is frequently given the label 'positivist'. However, this term is misleading, because of the range of (almost entirely negative) ways in which it is now used. For this reason, it seems better to employ a different label, and the one I will use here is 'objectivism'.[4]

OBJECTIVISM AND ITS ERRORS

Objectivism treats the word 'objectivity' as having a single sense, in which all the different meanings listed earlier are combined. In particular, the substantive

senses of 'subjective' and 'objective' – referring to the mental versus the physical, the inner versus the outer, etc. – are generally treated as isomorphic with the epistemic sense of these two terms – as referring to the false and the true. Objectivism amounts to a particular conception of the nature of scientific inquiry, how it should be pursued, and what it produces. Its starting point is the idea that we are often led into error by false preconceptions and preferences that result in our tending to see or find what we expected or wished rather than what is true. In short, subjective factors of various kinds are treated as leading to conclusions being subjective rather than objective, in the sense that they reflect our errors rather than the world. Subjectivity is believed to bias inquiry, deflecting us from the truth that we would otherwise discover. From this it is concluded that we must engage in inquiry in a manner that is unaffected by our personal and social characteristics (prior beliefs, values, preferences, attitudes, personality traits, etc.), or at least that minimises their influence.

Several strategies are proposed for avoiding subjective error. One is that we should restrict ourselves to what is directly observable, and what can be inferred logically or via calculation from given data. Of course, there is an important sense in which nothing is directly observable with absolute certainty, so this tends to turn into the idea that researchers should only rely upon the sort of observational capabilities that every human being has, or that anyone could be easily trained to employ, rather than on specialised forms of intuition or connoisseurship.[5] More broadly, there is the idea that we must commit ourselves to a research design that specifies in procedural terms what will be done through all stages of the process of inquiry, not just in data collection, but also in drawing conclusions from the data. And this plan must then be followed as closely as possible. Thereby, it is argued, the inquiry process can be standardised and rendered transparent, eliminating the effects of idiosyncratic, subjective factors; an ideal that is sometimes referred to as procedural objectivity (Eisner, 1992, see also Newell 1986).

Such proceduralisation is viewed by objectivism not only as of value in itself, in that it minimises error deriving from subjectivity, but also as facilitating the use of checks on the accuracy of observation and inference, so that one investigator's findings can be compared with those of others. Of course, such comparisons had long been recognised as a means of assessing validity, but objectivism claims that if researchers use quite different approaches, reflecting their personal characteristics, then it is impossible to determine who is right and what the source of any discrepancy is. However, so it is argued, if multiple investigators use the same method their findings will be comparable.

In one version of objectivism, the very use of procedures designed to eliminate subjectivity is taken as itself constituting objectivity, and as defining what counts as objective, or scientific, knowledge. In other words, from this point of view, knowledge or truth is simply whatever conclusions are reached via such proceduralised inquiry. This nominalist version was influential in some strands of US psychology and sociology during the second quarter of the twentieth century, under the influence of Bridgman's operationism and elements of logical positivism.

However, most interpretations of objectivism have tended to treat proceduralised inquiry as achieving objectivity because, by eliminating subjective factors, it allows the objective voice of the world to speak through the research. In other words, it enables us truly to capture the make-up of the world, as consisting of distinct objects belonging to types that have essential characteristics defined by law-like relations. This might be labelled realist objectivism. However, the distinction between this and its nominalist counterpart is sometimes hard to draw, and it is probably of little significance in practice.

Some serious problems have been identified with objectivism. These can be outlined as follows:

1   While it is true that we may be led astray by subjective factors (whether conceived of as mental, inner, inexplicit, particular or whatever), it is also the case that we are inevitably dependent upon personal knowledge, capabilities and motivations in producing any evidence or conclusions. For instance, we cannot avoid relying upon our senses in making observations, and these are in important respect, of subjective, culturally constituted and cannot be separated from expectations or habits. Nor is it possible to reduce them entirely to the following of explicit procedures (Polanyi, 1958). Much of the same applies to the processes of inference involved in producing evidence from data and drawing conclusions from it. Here, we cannot operate entirely in the manner of a calculating machine, we cannot avoid employing assumptions, ampliative inference and imagination.

2   It is also important to recognise that research necessarily depends upon subjective commitments of various kinds. Even in the case of objectivism, researchers must be committed to following procedures carefully, and this is a personal characteristic as well as a social one. I will argue later that research requires a range of epistemic virtues, of which objectivity is itself one.

3   It may be true that evidence coming from the use of ordinary everyday perceptual capabilities is less open to potential error than that which relies upon specialised knowledge and skills; or, at least, that it is easier to check the results. However, this does not mean that reliance solely on those capabilities is more likely to lead to sound knowledge of the kind desired. What needs to be observed may not be accessible to ordinary capabilities, so that the questions we are addressing cannot be resolved by appeal to evidence of this sort. Similarly, drawing the kind of conclusions required, in a sound manner, will also often depend upon specialised knowledge and skills.

4   Subjective factors are not the only source, and certainly not the only cause, of error in observation and reasoning. For example, we may accurately note how the sun rises in the sky each morning, but to describe it as moving over the earth is still an error. Similarly, we may correctly document the similarities between two pieces of rock and infer, on the basis of their easily observable characteristics in comparison with other types of object, that they must have been produced by a common causal process when, in fact, one rock is igneous while the other is a product of sedimentation. In other words, we may employ careful observation and uncontroversial modes of inference yet still reach false conclusions. It could even be that the questions we are asking are based on false assumptions, the effect we are seeking to explain may not exist, our hypotheses may be misconceived, and so on.

5   It is never possible to ensure that different researchers will apply a procedure in exactly the same way, however closely it is specified. This is particularly true in social research because here much depends upon how the people being studied respond to the procedures employed. It is not just the behaviour of the researcher that must be standardised but theirs too. Moreover, it is in the nature of human social interaction that the actions of each side will be shaped by the other. Objectivism requires that people be presented with the stimulus field that is implied by the relevant procedure, but since what they experience will depend partly on their background

expectations, cultural habits, interactions with the researcher and so on, there is always considerable danger that what they *actually* experience will be rather different from what was *intended*; and may vary among them. For example, even if experimental subjects are all presented with the same instructions they may interpret them in discrepant ways, and behave differently as a result; whereas, had they interpreted them in the same way, their behaviour would have been the same. Similarly, two subjects may interpret the instructions differently and as a result produce the same type of response; whereas, had they interpreted the instructions in the same way, their behaviour would have been different.

6   Following a procedure will not *always* improve the quality of the observation or reasoning. This is because any procedure relies on assumptions, and these could be false. Furthermore, applying a procedure may rule out the use of some personal capability that is essential if the required type of observation is to be made, or if error arising from use of the procedure in particular circumstances is to be detected. Procedures and guidelines can serve a useful function in reminding us of what needs to be taken into account, but they can also result in our failing to notice what could be important in particular cases. There are issues too about what is and is not measurable by means of fixed procedures, which relate to the nature of the world being investigated. Some have argued that social phenomena are complex, in the technical sense that they are systems subject to influence by a potentially unlimited number of variables, and 'the influence of particular factors is variable according to the relationships that they enjoy with others at any moment in time' (Radford, 2007: 2). This raises questions about the viability of procedural objectivity in social science.

7   For all the reasons outlined above, the fact that two or more observers using the same procedure agree in their observations, or that two or more analysts using the same procedure come to the same conclusion in working with the same data, does not in itself indicate that their reports are true, even where they have operated independently of one another. Instead, their work may be affected by errors, including those built into the procedure itself, that lead them in the same, false direction.

There are also problems that arise specifically with what I have called realist objectivism. This portrays knowledge as in some sense representing, reflecting or reproducing reality, in such a way that there is a correspondence between the account produced and the object(s) to which it refers. There is a danger of being misled by metaphor here. In the face of visual metaphors of picturing, or even those of mapping or modelling, it is essential to remember that any body of knowledge consists of answers to some set of questions, and that many different questions can be asked about any specific set of objects, producing different knowledge about them. While there cannot be contradictory knowledge about the same set of objects, there can certainly be a very wide range of knowledge claims made about them. This suggests that it is false to assume that we are dealing with a world made up of objects, each having a finite set of features, that can be exhaustively 'represented'. What objects are identified and what features they have will depend partly on the questions we ask about the world. This seems to rule out the ontology assumed by realist objectivism.

While it is probably true that most social scientists have never adhered completely to objectivism, much methodological thought and research practice has been strongly affected by it. Indeed, it continues to have some influence even today – especially among quantitative researchers and in the context of research methods training courses. At the same time, the problems with objectivism have

led many social scientists, especially qualitative researchers, to reject it completely. Indeed, a few have attacked, or abandoned, the concept of objectivity itself, while others have sought to fundamentally reconstruct it.

REACTIONS AGAINST OBJECTIVITY

Radical critics of objectivity sometimes start from the claim that, despite researchers' commitment to it, systematic error has operated across social science. For example, Hawkesworth writes:

> A significant proportion of feminist scholarship involves detailed refutations of erroneous claims about women produced in conformity with prevailing disciplinary standards of objectivity. (Hawkesworth, 1994: 152)

Much of the same sort of argument has been put forward by other radical critics, focusing on other sorts of bias: relating to social class divisions, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. What makes their criticisms radical is that the problem is held to stem not from social scientists being insufficiently objective but rather from the concept of objectivity itself.

These radical critics have tended to focus their attack upon particular elements of objectivism that they believe have served to disguise bias. For example, they have sometimes seen objectivity as requiring that research be entirely value-free, in the sense that it should not be dependent upon or influenced by any value commitments at all. On this basis they argue that objectivity is impossible, and any claim to have achieved it ideological (see Williams, 2005). Similarly, critics often take objectivity to require the elimination from research of all passion and personal involvement. In these terms, it is presented as requiring researchers to turn themselves into robots without feeling. And, given that this is undesirable, objectivity is rejected for this reason too. A related criticism is that objectivity implies that researchers must separate themselves from all inherited assumptions, from the particular circumstances in which they are located and from their other background characteristics, so as to adopt a universalistic 'view from nowhere'. Again, the impossibility and/or undesirability of this is used as a basis for denouncing any commitment to objectivity.

In the face of these criticisms, it is important to emphasise that what are being rejected are key elements of objectivism, and that by no means all interpretations of 'objectivity' make these impossible or undesirable demands upon researchers. For example, in its original Weberian form the notion of value freedom was more sophisticated than its critics usually recognise. Weber acknowledged that there are constitutive ('theoretical') values guiding research, notably true, and that other ('practical') values are involved in defining relevant phenomena for investigation, even though he insisted that bias from practical value commitment is a persistent danger (see Bruun, 2007; Keat and Urry, 1975: chapter 9). Similarly, objectivity does not require the suppression of all passion or personal involvement

in research, or the pretence that it is possible to step outside of one's social location and background assumptions; what the term refers to is the effort to prevent these things leading us into factual error. There is also sometimes a failure to distinguish between objectivity as achievement and objectivity as ideal or goal. It is one thing to say that we can and should try to be objective, quite another to say that we can ever *be* objective, or know that we have objective knowledge, in some absolute sense. Nevertheless, approximating the ideal of objectivity is of value in pursuing knowledge, since it reduces the chances of error, even if we can never fully eliminate it.

However, the most fundamental attacks on objectivity challenge the very concepts of truth, knowledge and error on which any interpretation of that concept relies, amounting to a sceptical rejection of traditional notions of inquiry.

Abandoning objectivity

There are critics who reject objectivity because they deny the possibility and desirability of knowledge, as conventionally understood (see, for instance, Lather, 2007). Also involved here may be the idea that objectivity amounts to a form of inauthenticity, an attempt (inevitably futile) to produce knowledge that does not reflect the distinctive personal characteristics, or unique social location of the investigator. What is required, instead, it is argued, is that any account be explicitly presented as a *construction*, rather than claiming to represent the object(s) to which it refers. Moreover, it should be a construction that openly acknowledges the fact that it draws on particular resources in particular circumstances, for particular purposes. What is also demanded is recognition that there can always be other, and contradictory, accounts of any scene; with choice amongst these being in an important sense undecidable or arbitrary.

This sceptical approach denies that it is possible for us to escape the influence of our social identities and locations, or that it is desirable for us to try to do this; *and it insists that this undermines any possibility of knowledge*. Closely related is the argument that any claim to objectivity is naïve or deceitful, that the idea of gaining knowledge of a world that is independent of our beliefs about it is an illusion. Furthermore, not only are all claims to knowledge necessarily constructions or socio-historical products, but so too are all means of assessing these. In place of the possibility of knowledge, we are faced with potentially irreconcilable *claims* to knowledge or beliefs. And it is suggested that the only grounds for evaluating these, at best, are ethical, political, or aesthetic.[6]

While this kind of scepticism is currently quite influential, sometimes travelling under labels like 'relativism' and 'postmodernism', we should note that it is unsustainable in practical terms: we cannot live without relying on the concepts of knowledge and truth. Indeed, even to argue for scepticism involves claiming to know that knowledge is not possible. Moreover, while actively generating doubt about what we take for granted may occasionally be of value, so as to remind ourselves of the fallibility of whatever we believe we know, this does not

require denying the possibility of knowledge. And the idea that knowledge claims cannot be evaluated epistemically but can and should be assessed in ethical, political, or aesthetic terms amounts to a failure to follow through the logic of sceptical arguments. These apply in much the same way to claims about what is good or right as to claims about what sorts of things exist in the world, what characteristics and powers they have, and so on.

Re-specifying objectivity

Other critics of objectivity, rather than abandoning the concept, have set out to respecify it in very different terms. I will outline two broad approaches of this kind here; though there are different versions of each, and the two are sometimes combined.

  (a) It is quite common today, especially amongst qualitative researchers, for a commitment to reflexivity to be seen as, in effect, a substitute for objectivity. What is meant by 'reflexivity' here is the attempt to make explicit all the assumptions, value commitments, feelings, etc. which went into, or which underpin, one's research, how it originated and progressed, etc., so that readers can understand the path by which the conclusions were reached.[7] This idea was anticipated by Myrdal (1969) in *Objectivity in Social Research*, though it seems unlikely that he envisaged it as implying the sort of autobiographical excavation that it has sometimes induced on the part of qualitative researchers, culminating for example in various forms of auto-ethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Interestingly, here an ideal of transparency is shared with procedural objectivity. Moreover, the commitment to reflexivity often seems to involve two forms that parallel the two versions of objectivism. There are some who see reflexivity as a process of research auditing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt and Halpern, 1988; Erlandson et al. 1993). This involves treating it as an instrumental requirement designed to allow error to be recognised and rectified. The argument is that, for the findings of research to be trustworthy, it must be possible for an auditor to retrace the path of the researcher, checking the premises on which each step of the analysis depended. By contrast, in what is now probably the most influential version, reflexive transparency is treated as of value in itself, rather than being designed to allow readers to determine whether the researcher 'went wrong' in reaching the conclusions they did; even less is the idea that it will allow readers to replicate the study. From this point of view, all accounts of the world are relative to, or are reflections or expressions of, how they were produced, most notably who was involved in producing them. Given this, it is taken to be incumbent upon social scientists to display this fact, and to show the particular manner in which their own accounts were generated.

  While there is something to be learned from both these notions of reflexivity, they encounter serious difficulties. While financial audits are by no means unproblematic, by comparison with the assessment of research they are very straightforward indeed. Assessing the validity of research findings involves making

judgements about their plausibility and credibility (Hammersley, 1997); it is not merely a matter of ensuring that the required information has been provided and that it 'adds up'. There is a great deal of room for disagreement in judgements about the cogency of arguments and evidence. One reason for this is that research is not founded upon data whose meaning and validity are given. Moreover, the concept of research auditing seems to imply that research proceeds by inference from data to conclusions in a relatively linear way, so that each step in the process can be checked. This does not match how research is actually, or could be, done; as is illustrated in the huge collection of 'natural histories' of research now available (Hammersley, 2003). Moreover, it is not clear that readers always need the sort of very detailed and extensive background information, about the researcher and the research process, that this version of reflexivity demands: we need to know the evidence supporting the main knowledge claims, and to be provided with sufficient information about the research process to assess likely threats to validity, but more than this can be an encumbrance.

The constructionist version of reflexivity amounts to relativism, of a personalist kind: the notion of validity or truth is transposed into a form of personal authenticity. Contradictory accounts of the world are to be tolerated, so long as their proponents are tolerant of others' accounts; in other words, so long as they refrain from claiming that their own views are true in any sense beyond 'honestly believed'. Indeed, it is sometimes implied that there is no other ground for judging the value of accounts of the world than in terms of their degree of reflexivity, including their recognition of their own constructed and particularistic character. The notion of social science as systematically developing knowledge is abandoned here (see Eisenhart, 1998). It is also important to note that this kind of reflexivity is an unending, indeed an unachievable, task. This is partly because there is no limit to what could be included in a reflexive account, as regards personal background, cultural history or epistemological assumptions. There is also the problem that, presumably, any reflexive account must itself be explicated if it is to facilitate full reflexivity, this explication in its turn also requires reflexive excavation, and so on *indefinitely*.

(b) A rather different strategy for re-specifying objectivity is what has come to be labelled 'standpoint theory' or 'standpoint epistemology'. Standpoint theorists reject the idea, central to objectivism, though not to all conceptions of objectivity, that the background perspectives and orientations of the researcher are necessarily a source of error that must be eliminated or suppressed. More importantly, they argue that some particular social location or identity within society can facilitate discovery of the truth about it, and may even be essential to this; whereas other locations or identities are viewed as involving serious epistemic blockages. In other words, it is claimed that those occupying a particular type of social position have privileged access to the truth. Moreover, this is often taken to include normative as well as factual truths: namely, knowledge about how the world ought to be, what is wrong with how things are, and what ought to be done.

An influential model for standpoint theory is Marx's claim that, once the capitalist system has become established, the working class are in a uniquely privileged position to understand its mode of operation. Here, Marx is sometimes portrayed as relying upon a philosophical meta-narrative similar to that of Hegel, who had portrayed history as a process of dialectical progress towards true knowledge, and the realisation of all human ideals. In the Marxist version: 'the self-understanding of the proletariat is simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society' (Lukacs, 1971: 149).

Various other arguments have been employed by Marxists to bolster, or substitute for, this metaphysical meta-narrative. One appeals to a notion of cultural lag: it is claimed that the ideas of any dominant class were forged in the past but later become obsolete because of changed circumstances. Alongside this, it is also sometimes argued that once in power a class no longer has a motive to understand society; indeed, it may even be motivated to misrecognise the character of the society, in order to rationalise its own dominance. In short, it will seek to deny or explain away unpleasant truths about the social relations over which it presides. By contrast, so the argument goes, the subordinate class has a strong motive to understand the real nature of society in order to gain power for itself, and it will have no motive for refusing to recognise the defects of existing society. Indeed, members of it are likely to develop a 'double consciousness', recognising the true nature of the society even while paying lip service to the official myths about it.[8]

The most influential recent exponents of standpoint theory have been among feminists (see Harding, 2004). Generally speaking, they have not relied upon a metaphysical meta-narrative. They have argued that because women are subjected to oppression and/or marginalised within patriarchal societies they are better able than men to understand the nature of those societies, in particular, to recognise forms of sexist prejudice and discrimination.

However, there are some serious problems with standpoint epistemology, and it has been subjected to criticism even by several Marxists and feminists (see, for example, Bar On, 1993). The first issue concerns with whether the warrant or rationale for epistemic privilege on the part of the subordinated or marginalised group is true. The Marxian–Hegelian meta-narrative is open to doubt; indeed, it is less than clear what would count as strong evidence for or against it. The other sorts of warrant, relying on a social psychology of oppressor and oppressed, are less problematic in this sense, but they tend to be put forward without much evidence supporting them. And, while they have some plausibility, as with many such theories there are competing arguments that are equally convincing. For example, even if we adopt the simplistic assumption that society is composed of a single set of oppressors and oppressed groups, it could plausibly be argued that the oppressors must have gained considerable knowledge about the nature of the society in course of achieving power, knowledge that is not available to the oppressed, and whose value could be durable. Moreover, they may have substantial motivation to seek further knowledge and understanding in order to sustain,

and perhaps even expand, that power. What seems likely is that the two groups may have access to rather different sorts of knowledge, but this does not epistemically privilege one side or the other in any general sense. Similarly, while the marginalised may escape the effects of the dominant ideology, this does not guarantee that they will therefore 'see reality clearly'. Knowledge is not produced by gaining direct contact with the world, through immediate perception. Rather, cognitive work is required that draws on cultural resources. Whether or not any particular marginalised group, or sections amongst them, have access to the necessary resources and are able to engage in this cognitive work is an open question. Furthermore, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they may generate their own ideology or myth in order to reconcile themselves to their position, as Nietzsche argued had been the case in the development of Christianity as a 'slave morality'. From this point of view, it would be unwise to privilege just any set of ideas that is at odds with mainstream views in Western societies, especially when these may include fundamentalist religions and nationalist creeds of various kinds.

A second problem with standpoint epistemology concerns how any particular standpoint theory is to be assessed. Crudely speaking, there are two options here, one of which undermines standpoint theory itself while the other is circular and therefore cannot provide support. The first tries to assess the warrant for epistemically privileging one category of person on the basis of the evidence available, without assuming that any one evaluator of that evidence is better placed to do this than any other by dint of their social identity or location. But even if this evaluation were to support the particular standpoint theory, there is an important sense in which it would simultaneously have undermined it. This is because it amounts to founding standpoint theory on, or justifying it in terms of, a competing epistemology. So the question would arise: if we can determine whether or not a particular standpoint theory is true or false without relying upon the standpoint of the well-placed evaluator, why would we need to draw upon a distinctive standpoint for evaluating substantive claims to knowledge? The other option would be, of course, to insist that only those whom a particular standpoint theory treats as epistemically privileged can judge its validity. But this is circular, and therefore can provide no support.

The final problem concerns how we are to identify who does and does not belong to the epistemically privileged category of person.[9] Once again, because of circularity, this cannot be resolved by reliance on the standpoint theory itself, but must be decided in more mainstream epistemological terms. Again, though, if the latter serves for this purpose, why not for others? Even putting this aside, there is the possibility, recognised by many standpoint theorists, that some members of the epistemically privileged category may have inauthentic perspectives, for example, because their views have been shaped by the dominant ideology or by sectional interests. Examples would include women who reject feminism. The problem here concerns how any judgement of inauthenticity can be justified, given that anyone placed by one commentator on the wrong side of the membership line could themselves draw the line in a different place; and it is unclear how

there could be any nonarbitrary resolution to this dispute. Another problem of a similar kind arises from the way in which the boundaries of different categories of oppressed or marginalised groups intersect. If multiple types of oppression or marginalisation are accepted – for example centering on gender, social class, sexual orientation, 'race'/ethnicity and disability – then how are these to be weighed in relation to one another in determining who speaks with epistemic privilege and who does not, or whose voice is more true and whose is less so? Again this looks like an irresolvable problem within the terms of standpoint epistemology.

It is worth noting that the various alternatives to objectivism I have discussed are incompatible with one another. Reflexive auditing and standpoint theory retain the concepts of truth and knowledge, whereas postmodernist scepticism and constructionist reflexivity do not.[10] At the same time, the first two positions involve quite different notions of what is necessary for sound knowledge to be produced from one another. Despite this, elements of these approaches – especially constructionist reflexivity and standpoint theory – are sometimes combined. An example is Harding's notion of 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995). She argues that evaluation criteria must take into account both who is putting forward the knowledge claim and its implications for what is taken to be the goal of inquiry, which extends beyond the production of knowledge to bring about emancipation. She criticises, what she sees as, the weak objectivity that has operated within natural and social science, claiming that it has failed to challenge the patriarchal, and other oppressive, assumptions that she believes pervade Western societies, and social research itself. So Harding argues that greater reflexivity is required than what weak objectivity generates: much more of the background assumptions and institutional structures of social scientific work must be exposed to scrutiny. She claims that conventional forms of both natural and social science are shot through with the ideological assumptions that come naturally to the white, middle-class men who predominate among researchers. It is the task of strong objectivity to challenge these. Moreover, she regards engagement with the perspectives of those who are oppressed or marginalised as essential for stimulating this process. It is not that their concerns or views should be accepted at face value, but rather that these people are in the best position to identify the normalising assumptions that operate within mainstream society, and that bias conventional research.

It is worth noting how Harding's position relates to the criticisms of the two approaches outlined above. The notion of strong objectivity places limits on reflexivity, since what needs to be exposed is defined by a comprehensive social theory about the current nature of Western society and its social divisions, and about the sorts of bias that these are likely to generate. So, there is no longer the problem that achieving reflexivity is an unending task. As regards standpoint theory, she avoids the criticism that adopting the perspective of the oppressed or marginalised may involve taking over false assumptions on their part, since she recognises that epistemic privilege cannot be treated as automatically leading to the truth. However, there are still serious problems with her position. The most

important concerns the epistemic status of the comprehensive social theory about social and epistemic inequalities on which she relies. She simply takes its validity for granted, yet many social scientists would dispute it; and, in particular, the claim that it encompasses the only, or the main, source of systematic error operating on social research. Furthermore, dismissing these critics' arguments on the grounds that they (or some of them) are white, middle-class males would be circular. As this indicates, the fundamental dilemma of standpoint epistemology remains.

RECONCEPTUALISING OBJECTIVITY

In my view, neither objectivism nor currently influential reactions against it provide us with a satisfactory basis for the concept of objectivity, though there is much to be learned from them. We need a more subtle approach that identifies what is wrong with, and also what was right with, objectivism. The solution that objectivism proposes – and even its diagnosis of the problem – may have been wrong, but it was nevertheless a response to a genuine concern. This is about the threats to validity that stem from the background assumptions, preferences, commitments, etc. of the researcher. At the same time, in light of the problems identified with objectivism, it no longer makes sense to try to preserve a coherent sense of the word 'objective' as simultaneously applying to the inquirer, the mode of inquiry, the conclusions reached and the phenomena to which those conclusions relate. A more specific meaning must be given to the term.[11]

As a starting point, we should focus on the core idea – common to objectivism, audit reflexivity and standpoint theory – that error can derive from the individual and social characteristics of the researcher, and that there are ways of minimising this threat. Of course, we do not need to, and should not, assume that research can operate without reliance upon personal or socio-cultural capabilities and motivations. Similarly, we should not imply that preconceptions and preferences always lead to error, and that they never help us to understand the truth. Rather, the focus of any concept of objectivity must be on protecting the research process from the negative effects of these 'subjective' characteristics. At the same time considering contra standpoint theory and Harding's 'strong objectivity', we cannot rely on a prior, supposedly comprehensive theory to tell us where sources of error might lie and whom they will affect. There is no well-validated, exclusive theory of this kind available, and none may be possible. Rather, we should draw on the full range of ideas about how errors *could be* generated, from whatever directions. And we must assess their likelihood in particular cases, and take precautions against and check them, as far as is possible.

In order to make any progress in reconceptualising objectivity, we probably need to differentiate among the ways in which error arising from 'subjectivity' can arise, and treat it as designed to counter just one of these. I propose that it is treated as being concerned solely with error resulting from preferences, and the

preconceptions associated with them, deriving from substantive commitments *that are external to the pursuit of knowledge*.[12] In these terms, objectivity amounts to continually being on one's guard against errors caused by preferences and preconceptions coming from this source.

Motivated bias, of the kind I am suggesting objectivity should be conceptualised as being designed to minimise, arises, primarily, from the fact that all researchers have additional identities and roles, which are concerned with different sorts of goal from research itself. Moreover, there will be overlap in areas of concern between research and these other roles. One effect is that researchers may believe that they already know the answers to questions that are, from a research point of view, still open to doubt; or they may be too easily persuaded of some things and too resistant to considering or accepting others. In other words, there may be a tendency to opt for or against particular possibilities because of false prior assumptions or preferences (for example inferences from evaluative views about particular people, places, situations, etc.); or there may be a temptation to fill gaps in data in ways that are false or at least speculative. Moreover, these tendencies may be increased by a sense of urgency or disquiet, for example by anger over injustice or fear of change.

Each of the various roles that we play involves not only distinctive goals but also relevancies and assumptions about the nature of pertinent aspects of the world, why they are how they are, how they ought to be and so on. In performing any one role we foreground what is taken to be appropriate and necessary to it and background the rest. While we cannot and probably should not completely suppress what is relevant to other roles, at the same time the assumptions and preferences associated with these latent roles can interfere negatively with how effectively we play what is our main role on any particular occasion. Objectivity is designed to minimise such negative interference, and the notion applies to other roles as well as to that of researcher (see Gouldner, 1973; Williams, 2005, 2006a, b). For example, in selecting candidates for admission to an educational institution, recruiting them to employment, or ranking them in terms of priority for medical treatment, there is usually a requirement of objectivity. Objectivity, in this general sense, requires that all, *and only*, the considerations relevant to the task must be taken into account. Any other matters, however significant they may be from the point of view of other roles, or in terms of our own personal convictions, should be put on one side or downplayed.[13]

So, in place of the very broad interpretation of 'objectivity' associated with objectivism, I suggest that we interpret the term more narrowly. Given this, there are several sorts of 'subjective' error that lie outside the scope of objectivity as I have defined it here. One is error that derives from the failings of our perceptual and cognitive capabilities, or from misuse of them. Also excluded is what we might call wilful bias (see Hammersley and Gomm, 2000). This is the knowing committal, or risking, of systematic error in the service of some goal other than the production of knowledge, whether this is a propagandist misusing and even inventing evidence in order to support some cause or the lawyer or advocate

deploying genuine evidence to make the best case possible for a preconceived conclusion. In the context of research, such wilful bias is, I suggest, best conceptualised as stemming from a lack of proper commitment to inquiry or to its rational pursuit, in favour of commitment to other goals. Of course, I am not suggesting that these other goals, or these ways of pursuing them, are in themselves illegitimate. After all, inquiry can be subordinated to other activities (Hammersley, 2004). However, a key feature of *academic* research, in my view, is that it should not be subordinated to any other task.

I suggest that we see objectivity as one, among several, epistemic virtues that are essential to research.[14,15] Other epistemic virtues include a commitment to truth and truthfulness (Williams, 2002), intellectual sobriety (a determination to follow a middle way between over-caution or excessive enthusiasm for any particular knowledge claim, form of evidence, or method) and intellectual courage (a willingness to resist fear of the consequences of pursuing inquiry wherever it leads, including personal costs relating to life, livelihood, or reputation) (Montmarquet, 1993: 23). Like objectivity these other epistemic virtues relate to distinctive sorts of threat to the rational pursuit of inquiry, and the need to resist them.

Of course, it must be remembered that my reconceptualisation of objectivity here is premised on a view of academic research as having no other immediate goal than the pursuit of knowledge; an assumption that is certainly not accepted by all social researchers today. For example, standpoint theory is often associated with the idea that research is inevitably committed to political goals and is properly directed towards social change. I do not have the space here to argue against this position, but I have done so elsewhere (see Hammersley, 1995, 2000).

CONCLUSION

As with a number of other terms, today the word 'objectivity' is often avoided, treated with derision, or at least handled with great caution by social scientists. While part of the explanation for this is uncertainty about the meaning of the term, evidenced by its complex semantic history, the main cause, I have suggested, is the considerable influence, and subsequent collapse, of what we might call objectivism. This portrays scientific inquiry as needing to eliminate, or minimise, the effect on the research process of subjective beliefs and practices, in other words, of what is psychological, private, or implicit in character. Suppression of these beliefs and practices is taken to be necessary, from an objectivist point of view, because they are regarded as the main, if not the only, source of error. On this basis, it is required that inquiry follow explicit procedures that *anyone* could use, so that no reliance is placed upon the subjective features of the investigator, and so that the results can be checked by others using the same procedures.

Ideas approximating to objectivism were very influential within social science during the second quarter of the twentieth century, but came under sharp attack later. They are now rejected by many social scientists, and this has sometimes led

to a jettisoning of the concept of objectivity itself, as well as to attempts fundamentally to reconstruct it. At the same time, the influence of objectivism has never been entirely extinguished.

In this chapter I have examined objectivism and the main reactions against it, and tried to clarify some important functional distinctions that objectivism conflates, so as to allow a more satisfactory view of the concept of objectivity. This is necessary, I suggested, because some of what this term refers to is essential to any defensible form of inquiry. I have argued that we should think of objectivity as an epistemic virtue that is designed to counter one particular source of potential error: that derive from preferences and preconceptions associated with commitments that are external to the task of knowledge production – in other words, those that relate to the various goals any researcher has as a person, citizen, etc. Objectivism was wrong to treat the preconceptions deriving from external roles as simply a source of error, and therefore as needing to be suppressed or eliminated: they can stimulate, and even be essential resources in reaching, true answers to factual questions. However, they *can* also be a source of error, and objectivity as an epistemic virtue is concerned with minimising the danger that they will lead us astray in assessing the likely validity of knowledge claims. It involves a deliberate and sustained attempt to counter any tendency for such external commitments, and the preconceptions and preferences associated with them, to interfere with the rational pursuit of inquiry (Rescher, 1997).

Of course, it remains to be seen whether this argument will be found persuasive by other social scientists, in a climate that tends to polarise objectivism and subjectivism, scepticism and dogmatism, despite various attempts to find some middle way (e.g., Williams, 2005, 2006a, b). Without a viable conception of objectivity it seems unlikely that social science can flourish or even survive; and yet the prospects for it being given proper recognition are not good, in a world where many intellectuals and academics betray their calling in favour of political, ethical and aesthetic engagements, oppositional or compliant; and where 'truth' is a word that is either suppressed or clothed in scare quotes (Benson and Stangroom, 2007; Blackburn, 2006), lest it be taken to imply that there is something beyond rhetoric (Hammersley, 2008). In much the same way, claims to objectivity have either been denounced as special pleading or only allowed to stand once they have been re-specified as claims on behalf of oppressed or marginalised groups. What this makes clear is that recognition of the essential role that objectivity needs to play depends upon more fundamental changes in attitude on the part of social scientists; ones that, at present, still seem a long way off.

NOTES

1 In short, they usually operate as 'scare quotes'. Note that my putting quotation marks around 'objectivity' in this chapter does not conform to this usage – instead, it signals when I am *mentioning* not *using* the word.

2 Anscombe (1965: 158–9) had pointed this out earlier. Collier (2003: 133) links it to a shift from ontology to epistemology within Western philosophy. See Dear (1992: 620–21) for a detailed explication of the original

meanings of these terms and how 'objectivity' came to mean disinterestedness. See also Zagorin (2001). Accounts of the current range of meanings given to the term include Megill (1994) and Janack (2002).

3 See also Farrell's (1996) illuminating account of changing conceptions of subjectivity in the history of philosophy, and the theological background to this.

4 This too has been employed in diverse ways, but it has not been debased to the same extent as 'positivism'. Indeed, Ratner (2002) defines it in a positive manner, different from my usage here, tracing it back to Dilthey.

5 This idea can be traced back at least to the writings of Francis Bacon. See Gaukroger (2001: 127).

6 For some background to this, see Hammersley (2008).

7 There are many different interpretations of the term 'reflexivity', see Lynch (2000).

8 For discussion of standpoint theory and the notion of marginality, see Pels (2004). See also Pohlhaus (2002).

9 This is what Pels (2004) calls 'the spokesperson problem'.

10 Though, arguably, even they cannot avoid reliance upon them (Porpora, 2004).

11 As part of this, we will not only have to distinguish objectivity from other epistemic virtues but also to sort out its terminological relations with near synonyms like 'detachment' and 'neutrality', see Montefiore (1975).

12 I have identified the type of error associated with objectivity elsewhere as one form of culpable, systematic error that can be termed 'motivated bias'. See Hammersley and Gomm (2000). It is worth noting that there are pre-conceptions and preferences that can lead us astray that are generated by the research process even though they are not intrinsic to it. There include a researcher's public and/or private attachment to the truth of some knowledge claim or to the value of some method or source of data, the desire to find an interesting pattern or some clear answer to the research question, and so on. One aspect of this – bias deriving from theoretical commitments – was the preoccupation of seventeenth century natural philosophers, see Dasron (1994). Perhaps objectivity should be regarded as concerned with these kinds of threat to validity too.

13 Of course, there may well be disagreement about *which* considerations should, and should not, be taken into account in any role or decision.

14 There is a considerable literature on epistemic virtues, and on virtue epistemology more generally. See Kvanvig (1992); Montmarquet (1993); Zagzebski (1996); Axtell (2000); Brady and Pritchard (2003); DePaul and Zagzebski (2003). Another line of approach is to draw on Merton's discussion of the scientific ethos, and the literature dealing with this, see Merton (1973: part 3); Stehr (1978); Mulkay (1980); Hollinger (1983). Relations with near synonyms. like 'detachment' and 'neutrality', see Montefiore (1975).

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