

## Subjectivity and Reflexivity: An Introduction

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The (social) sciences usually try to create the impression that the results of their research have *objective* character. In this view, scientific results are—or at least should be—independent from the person who produced the knowledge, e.g., from the single researcher. According to this perspective objectivity is what makes the difference between valid scientific knowledge and other outcomes of human endeavors and mind. On the one hand, there are many efforts to justify this perspective on epistemological and philosophical grounds. On the other hand, various practices are used to support and produce this idea of objectivity (a rather well-known and mundane example is the rhetorical strategy of avoiding the use of the first person pronouns in scientific texts). In their everyday scientific life almost all (experienced) researchers nevertheless "know" about the impact of personal and situational influences on their research work and its results. "Officially" and in publications these influences are usually covered up—they are treated as defaults that are to be avoided. [1]

During the last decades, studies in a variety of fields, including the history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology of science turned up a lot of evidence supporting the contention that personal, social, and local factors influence the research process and its results (research teams, working practices in laboratories, personal characters of a researcher). Still, such observations are generally dismissed or at least, their impact is not acknowledged as an unavoidable and integral aspect of every scientific work. An important means to keep the fiction of objectivity is to use standardized methods: data collection and interpretation should in this view be done by procedures (preferably technical apparatus) that help eliminate subjective and local influences. [2]

Qualitative research characteristically does not use standardized procedures—and this is a main reason for the low reputation of qualitative research in some social disciplinary "communities." Doing qualitative research makes the impact of the researcher far more obvious than in its quantitative counterpart: the interactional and constructional nature of epistemological processes become more than elsewhere evident and can be experienced in existential ways. (The relevant contexts include fieldwork, intensive interviews, and other "close-range" techniques.) From this perspective, qualitative researchers tend to deal with this problematic and to engage with it in a reflexive way. [3]

These are some of the starting points that encouraged us to plan and initiate the current issue. We wanted to encourage social scientists from different disciplines to report on their experiences, ideas, and possible solutions to this topic. We were particularly interested to deal with the issue proactively rather than defensively, as it happens so often to maintain the fiction of objectivity. Rather, we wanted the subjective nature of epistemic activity and its results to be treated in an aggressive and productive way. How does this characteristic appear in

research, what are its effects on the research process, and how can it be dealt with in the sense of a productive epistemic window? [4]

The call for participation in this issue, which we sent to specific colleagues who we knew to be interested in the topic and published in several different contexts (e.g., social science mailing lists) went like this:

"We would like to invite you to consider writing an article for the forthcoming FQS issue 'Subjectivity and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research.' The issue will be published in September 2002, and it will deal—among others—with the following topics:

- The constructive character of research in the (social) sciences;
- (inter-) subjectivity as a determinant of the (qualitative) research process;
- epistemological subjectivity: using (self-) reflexivity as an important tool to access and to develop scientific knowledge.

Research—the process and its products—depends on the characteristics of the persons involved, on their biological, mental, social, cultural, and historical etc. make up and/or condition. In this issue, we would like authors to describe/analyze/discuss this fundamental subjectivity of any—and also of scientific—knowledge (a) from different scientific and disciplinary contexts; (b) during different stages of the research process; (c) according to different types of knowledge as outcomes of the researchers' efforts, etc.

We presuppose that research is inherently structured by the subjectivity of the researcher. We therefore do not want authors to limit themselves by characterizing subjectivity in defensive ways as an epistemological 'deficiency,' accompanied by methodological efforts, to minimize/to eliminate possible "biases.' Instead, we are asking for possible ways to face the epistemological and methodological challenges in a proactive way that takes into account this core characteristic of any form of knowledge. What are the methodological, pragmatic, and research/writing strategies that result from such a presupposition of subjectivity as an unavoidable core characteristic of research?" [5]

The response to this call was enormous: we received more than 120 proposals (abstracts, sketches, etc.), mostly from new researchers who wrestle with these issues and wanted to contribute. We suppose that the topic of subjectivity and reflexivity is a pressing and challenging problem of the social sciences. [6]

To deal with the quantity of proposals, we first decided to devote two issues to the topic of subjectivity and reflexivity (issues 3/2002 and 2/2003, which will appear in May of next year). We also had to make a selection to arrive at a suitable number of manuscripts, which was not always easy on the basis of the rather brief proposal sketches. In the course of the actual writing and feedback cycles, the number of contributions was further reduced, leading to two rather manageable issues. [7]

Across the two issues, we categorized the contributions into three main areas.

1. Foundational consideration and theoretical frameworks on the topic subjectivity and reflexivity.
2. The meaning of subjectivity and reflexivity in the research process (contingency of perspective, interactional nature of research process, role of research identity, reflexivity as a research strategy, construction of the other as object in the research process, and knowledge/power issues in the research process, etc.).
3. Tools and means to uncover and reflect on the subjective nature of scientific knowledge production, possibilities of productive use, etc. [8]

The contributions in the present, first issue pertain to points 1 and 2, the contributions in the second issue will be devoted to the issues outlined in points 2 and 3. [9]

The editors will write a summary discussion piece at the end of the second issue. Our readers are invited to contribute comments concerning the already published pieces and thereby participate in a discussion that appears to be needed and overdue—a conclusion that the large number of responses to our call seems to support. [10]

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