A theory of sociological objectivity
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Abstract

Sociology, with its roots in positivist philosophy, was seen by several of its early practitioners as a science capable of producing objective knowledge. However, the concept of objectivity has increasingly been held within the field as problematic. Today many sociologists believe that the discipline is not and cannot hope to be objective. Several of the fronts of this debate are discussed, including positivism and its conventionalist critics, Max Weber's methodological work and relativist opposition to the concept of objectivity. Definitions of the word are also examined. A clear definition of objectivity seems essential if meaningful discussion of its viability in the field of sociology is to occur, yet few unambiguous definitions exist. Definitions are shown to be bound up in partisan philosophy tracing back to the divide between empiricism and rationalism. A sociological definition, in the form of a practical test of a statement's objectivity, is suggested to bridge this divide. Drawing on Max Weber's ideal types, the fact-value separation and the 'transmission chain' tool used in psychological experiment, this definition provides a chance for sociologists to discuss objectivity across the philosophical divide.
The following is a summary of the investigation I conducted as an honors thesis. It explores the issue of objectivity in the context of a variety of related debates in the social sciences. The basic problems of objectivity, in particular its definition, the debate between positivism and conventionalism, and its relation to objectivity, will be the first topics explored. The second section shall consider Max Weber's contributions to the topic, including his concept of the ideal-type. The third shall derive some conclusions from the contents of the first two areas of discussion. In particular it shall propose the use of several features taken from the ideal-type concept to better define objectivity, creating a definition with sociological rather than philosophical foundations. In the first two sections, I have largely limited my investigation to summarizing of the thoughts of others, where as in my final part I have allowed myself the indulgence of proposing a potential improvement to matters, in the form of a sociological definition of objectivity.

Georg Simmel saw objectivity as the greatest achievement of Western cultural history (Ritzer, 2004, 165). Yet, my investigations have convinced me that opinions on objectivity rarely enjoy a consensus. Even more concerningly, while it is customary to frame a serious discussion of any topic with a clear definition of key words, it appears discussions of objectivity often employ a confused, problematic or non-existent definition of the word. It is impossible to begin meaningful discussion of objectivity without an agreed upon definition.

A brief investigation of written definitions of objectivity, for example Moore (2008), Kim & Sosa (1999) Abercrombie's Dictionary of Sociology (2006), or Daston's thoughts on the definition (1992) reveals some immediate problems. Firstly, discussion of objectivity, even in the context of subject dictionaries, appear to neglect thorough discussion of a definition. In some cases, the focus is on discussing objectivity's utility or validity. Secondly, multiple meanings of the word exist, but are not always clearly distinguished, and are mistakenly treated as interchangeable. Briefly, these
meanings include objectivity as:

1. A quality or state or attribute of all objects, used to describe the state of 'being an object'
2. An attribute of a sentence or statement
3. An attribute of a piece of knowledge
4. An attribute of an investigation, for example 'objective research'
5. An attribute of a single person, often associated with a lack of bias
6. An attribute of a group or community, associated with some form of debate

Any confusion or conflation of these meanings is very damaging to a fruitful discussion of the topic. Further, objectivity can be discussed as having a number of conceptual 'structures'. At the most simplistic level, we might indulge a binary view of objectivity – something is either objective or it is subjective - a view I found that usually is associated with objectivity's most fervent critics and defenders. A variety of more complex structures exist, for example views of objectivity as a spectrum, or as a linguistic framework.

Discussion of any model of objectivity may be further subdivided. Firstly, establishing objectivity as an unambiguous, understandable and logically consistent concept. Secondly, establishing whether objectivity is in some way desirable, either in itself as a primary value or because it is useful to achieve other desirable ends, such as intellectual cooperation amongst competing groups of scientists. Thirdly, deciding whether objectivity is a realistic pursuit for humans, specifically scientists, researchers and theorists. Put simply, any discussion of objectivity can be seen as having three components – definition, desirability, and feasibility.

A discussion of objectivity should first explicitly limit itself to one of the six meanings, clearly
define a conceptual structure, then be clear in distinguishing between arguments related to
definition, desirability or feasibility. To my knowledge, few discussions achieve this level of clarity.

When examining the definition or conceptual structure, we might briefly look at the roots of the
philosophical use of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', or previous to that, the 'object' and the 'subject'.
This lead us back to Cartesian origins in *Discourse on Method* (1968, 53). Descartes lays the
foundation of today's debates by separating the mind and the body, and consequently the subject
and the object. One offshoot of this thought is the great philosophical chasm between the empirical
and the rationalist streams of western philosophy - do we derive our conclusions from the subject's
mental deduction of first principles or does empirical observation result in objects impressing
themselves upon the subject (Bourdieu, 1992, 45)? Even the object-subject distinction itself tempts
our criticism. One path of criticism is the questioning of the "I" in "I think, therefore I am"
(Kierkegaard 1985, 38-42), problematizing the entire Cartesian separation that 'objectivity' and
'subjectivity' so precariously rest upon.

A look into certain fundamental debates in various disciplines show how modern discussion mirrors
the unstable philosophical ground below. One example is the positivist-conventionalist debate. A
lengthy summary of these two schools of thought will be tedious for those immersed in the
philosophy of science, so I will be brief. I draw my discussion largely from Keat and Urry's (1982)
particular reading of the topic, which appeals to me personally because Keat and Urry see
themselves as realists advocating neither positivism or conventionalism.

Positivism might be broadly described as the view that all true scientific knowledge is
fundamentally reducible to observable, empirical information. From this information, it is argued,
one can induct a series of rules, usually referred to as laws, which nature is said to obey. Specific
sets of events can then be explained scientifically with the aid of these laws. The purpose of positivist science is to 'discover' laws for the goal of explanation and prediction (Machamer, 2002, 4). We may note that positivism is not a single concrete doctrine, with accounts of science that are widely labelled as positivist changing over time, with positivism varying greatly depending on the field it resides in. Additionally, individuals broadly thought to be at least partially positivist have at times categorically rejected the label. Comte, Durkheim and the Vienna circle each had their own unique version of positivism. Sometimes positivism is seen as tied to the Deductive-Nomological model described by Carl Hempel. It is also sometimes associated with a correspondence conception of truth and a restriction on the usage of any language seen as 'theoretical' or lacking in empirical foundations. Positivism fundamentally seeks to produce a single scientific model that explains the past and predicts the future in all spheres of investigation.

Of course, this has drawn many criticisms. Very briefly, some of these pointed out by Keat and Urry include:

-Difficulties reconciling a distaste for 'theoretical' language with the theoretical nature of the main achievements of science
-Difficulties selecting between competing explanations or developing incomplete theories that may not initially meet positivist standards
-The lack of an account to explain observable social trends in theory selection among scientific thinkers
-The problem of induction, though Popper claims to avoid this via his theory of falsification.
-The problem of conclusively falsifying explanations when almost all empirical tests are supported by a large array of "auxiliary theories"
-A failure to differentiate between explanation and prediction, associated with confusion in regards
to causation and correlation.

-Difficulties in defending the 'neutrality' or 'theory-free' status of any language in which empirical information is described.

We can note at this point that many of these positivist difficulties also serve to problematize the aim of creating objective knowledge in academic investigation, including the social sciences. The conventionalist tendency is to respond to these problems by rejecting the positivist project to create objective scientific knowledge and instead studying knowledge as a product of social circumstances and the result of highly subjective factors.

The Kuhn-Popper debate is an example of how the positivist-conventionalist debate has continued to evolve. Both Kuhn (1981) and Popper (1981) have positions somewhat softened from the traditional conventionalist-positivist ones, but they still illustrate the continuation of the same themes from the first half of the twentieth century. Once again, those who study the philosophy of science are most likely to be very familiar with this debate, and a just consideration would consist of volumes rather than paragraphs. However, a brief consideration of the debate does suggest some variation over whether main concern is with what science is, or what is ought to be. In this regard Kuhn and Popper might be seen as grappling with two distinct and separate questions.

Discussions on objectivity within the social sciences often follow similar themes as the positivist-conventionalist debate. Many follow or extend the conventionalist critique. Gouldner (1970) challenges objectivity by contrasting French attempts to conquer and control the social world through viewing knowledge as being equal to information, with a German Romantic tradition that sees knowledge as equating to understanding. Subjectivity is resolved not by objectivity but by reflexive sociological knowledge. Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that sociology ought to put aside
'epistemic' objectivism and focus on creating knowledge that engages with the pressing concerns of the community it studies. Greiffenhagen and Sharrock (2008) call for a collapsing of the distinction between subjective and objective, which they conceive as a false opposition. They also believe that claims of objectivity are disguised subjective statements hiding agendas of power and authority. Agger (2002) calls for sociological theory to abandon scientific pretensions and willingly identify itself as literary, in that it tells a partisan, value-driven 'story' about social reality.

Others attempt to walk a 'middle' path or attempt to reform positivism in the face of its critics. Bourdeiu is a prominent example. He suggests the construction of a topic is the most significant act in a social inquiry, as it frames the entire study (Bourdeiu 1992: 44). However, he also suggests that objectivity is still an indispensable concept. The interaction between Habitus and Field are the interaction of the objective and the subjective, which are both vital to Bourdeiu's sociological framework.

Fuchs (1997) also provides an attempt to re-conceptualize objectivity in light of conventionalist concerns. Besides providing an excellent summary of a variety of arguments on the topic of objectivity, Fuchs presents a novel approach to the topic. In his own words, he wishes to "sociologize" objectivity. He proposes a novel usage of Luhmann's theories of social systems, suggesting objectivity be seen as a "medium" through which scientific communication can travel, filtering communication to conform to a predefined code, with the justifying arguments for the code being less important for than the code itself.

Fuchs is the most creative approach to the problem among those looked at in my investigation, and is of particular interest a largely unique attempt provide a sociological foundation for objectivity. It does require some acceptance of Luhmann's ideas. The concept of "medium", being somewhat
metaphorical, is also open to attack and a variety of interpretations. Additionally, while Fuchs may provide a clear vision of objectivity, he does not attempt to mount a significant argument for his vision acting as a guide to how objectivity ought to be achieved. His argument doesn't require or attempt a defense of the validity of the medium's "predefined code", but the code he specifies contains much that has been previously criticized as erroneous positivist assumptions.

The problems of objectivity exist because discussions, in order to be meaningful, require a sound definition of objectivity. However, definitions of objectivity usually rely on complex, largely partisan philosophical arguments that have been debated without resolution over many hundreds of years. Fuchs proposes a move towards a descriptive sociological definition of objectivity, but does not completely escape the old lines of debate.

In order to escape the stalemate, we might wish for a sociological definition for objectivity; one that successfully provides an unambiguous criteria of when objectivity has actually been achieved, but isn't tied to a particular school of thought within philosophy. Before we attempt such a definition, however, Max Weber's ideas that relate to objectivity are worth a moment's thought, in order to draw on the sociological pioneer's formidable insights on such matters.

The work most useful to us in this regard is 'Objectivity in the Social Sciences and Social Policy' (Weber 1949). The strongest theme in 'Objectivity in the Social Sciences' is the emphasis on the fact-value separation. Put simply, this is the differentiation between "is" statements that state a fact, and "ought" statements that recommend action or express values. Weber is scathing of any sociological or economic tradition that fails to properly differentiate between the two.

Weber also emphasizes the impossibility of a dispassionate, perfectly objective social science. Any
social investigation separates what is to be studied from what is not, because subjective value judgments are always made regarding what is important enough to be looked at. The investigation will further select a certain schema to identify objects of study, again dependent on the motivating values of the investigation. Without values, there is no study, and the nature of the study is always dependent on these framing values of some kind.

In this sense an investigation is the comparison of the discrete 'objects' of study, which are merely mental tools, with an infinitely complex reality. The most important activity for a social scientist is to define clearly and unambiguously the meaning of the terms, or mental tools, that she or he uses, and then make clear separation between all factual and valuative concerns in the investigation.

Weber's proposed method to this is of course the ideal-type. The ideal type is familiar to most sociologists, but Weber's description here is far more detailed here than in his better known *Economy and Society* (1968). The key notion is that ideal types are constructions that must be unambiguously defined via a description of discrete, value-free attributes, though the value-free requirement does not limit the description of the values of other subjects. Though such a construction will be a result of 'subjective' judgments of the individual author, the use of the ideal-type is then clear and uniform across the minds of multiple sociologists – rendering them useful tools in sociological descriptions. The context of this proposed method, that is within a discussion of objectivity, suggests use of ideal-types to act as an imperfect but realistic substitute for the impossible goal of a perfectly objective social science.

Weber's insights now place us in a slightly better position to very tentatively propose an unambiguous sociological definition of objectivity. What follows will be an attempt to create a definition addressing the objectivity of a statement or theory; we won't address the objectivity of
people or empirical investigations.

First of all, we ought to start by suggesting a conceptual structure. I wish to propose objectivity can be thought of not as a binary quality, or a spectrum, but as something like similar to an ideal type. We can do this by defining the qualities of the perfectly objective statement, and then use it as a conceptual yard-stick to compare with any theoretical statement we might wish to examine.

Secondly, we proceed by thinking of objectivity as existing as an assessment of a statement, rather than an intrinsic quality of the statement itself. In this sense, it is akin to stating a theory is 'useful' or 'unknown' or 'important' – the quality exists in its relationship to the viewer. In other words, we identify a statement's objectivity by comparing how different people regard it, rather than looking at the statement itself. A perfect, ideal-type objective statement has been interpreted in an identical way by all humans, but in everyday practice a theory will be interpreted by a subset of humans. The act of comparing a statement to its ideal-type will involve identifying this subset. We can, for now, call this subset the interpreting group. In the context of our ideal-type sociological objectivity, objectivity testing requires an explicit statement of the group. To put it another way, we might test a statement for "psychologist objectivity", or refer to a statement as achieving high levels of "Australian academic objectivity".

Thirdly, to identify the degree that the ideal type objective statement describes the statement being tested, we use a technique, sometimes used in psychology, called transmission chains. In a non-academic context it is a familiar child's game known as "Chinese whispers" or "broken telephone". Mesoudi, Whiten and Dunbar (2006) explain its usage as a tool to examine social bias. Each time a person hears a statement and then reproduces it, they appear to apply a cognitive bias of some kind. For example, Bangerter (2000) used a transmission chain to test a scientific account of human
conception. The distortions in the transmission chain is used to identify social bias. However, in a sociological context we can use a transmission chain as an extreme 'stress test' for objectivity, by transferring the statement along the chain and noting the level of distortion. A perfectly objective statement's meaning, being objective, will remain constant regardless of the reader, and so will not be distorted. Any tested statement can be compared to this ideal type by noting the level of distortion along the transmission chain.

The design of the transmission chain will involve an attempt to provide a representation of the test group. This will be the transmission group. The members of the group are selected to provide a representative sample of the groups. The group is then organized in a chain, with the first and final member linked to the researcher. The researcher then initiates the transmission, each link in the chain receives the theory or statement, then repeats the description of the statement in his or her own words to the next link in the chain. The original statement should be compared to the statement in the final link of the transmission. The similarity in the statements, and the representativeness of the transmission group in the interpreting group, indicates the similarity of the statement to the perfectly objective, ideal-typical statement.

The transmission group and process is obviously vital to the proper assessment of the statement. For this reason, the greatest amount of openness in the process is required. A researcher might describe the methodology of the selection of the transmission group, methods of contact, the medium by which transmission occurs, and the actual 'translation' at each step in the chain. Conceivably verbal transmission would force actual comprehension by the transmission group members by preventing them from simply copying the statement down. In such a case an audio recording of each step might be suitable, though difficult to gather.
I have attempted to summarise some potential advantages and disadvantages of this method.

**Potential advantages**
- Self consistent – the theory of sociological objectivity can be tested for sociological objectivity, but philosophical objectivity is demonstrably not philosophically objective
- Evidence based – evidence can be presented to defend claims of objectivity, and third parties may add to or repeat sections of a body of evidence concerning the objectivity
- Non-partisan – no particular philosophical school is relied upon. Conceivably the test could be defended as compatible with positivist or conventionalist frameworks, for example.

**Potential disadvantages**
- Requires resources – such as time, effort, money and cooperation. Sociologists are not always well known for any of these. Also, even a small number of one-paragraph theoretical statements might take a long time to test.
- Sabotage – the transmission process could be sabotaged by any members with an objection to the statement.

**Summary of the steps to perform a test for sociological objectivity**
- Phrase the statement in a way that is free of value recommendations
- Specify an interpreting group for which objectivity is to be identified
- Select a transmission group which is a subset of and represents the interpreting group
- Transfer the statement along the transmission chain by requesting that each member in the chain listen to the previous link's description of the statement and then repeating the description in their own words to the next link in the chain
- The statement is compared to the ideal-type perfectly objective statement, by observing the difference of the final links in the chain's description in comparison to the original statement. A small difference indicates similarity to a perfectly objective statement.

This method is, of course, not a final word or authoritative answer to the question of objectivity. Rather, it is my hope that it will encourage further discussion on this important topic, and provoke both feedback and criticism. In time, perhaps this will improve and refine this concept to the point where it becomes a useful tool for social scientists and theorists seeking this ever-elusive goal.
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(from 'A theory for the practical testing of sociological objectivity' Steven Cross)

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