IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)
Volume 30, Issue 6, Series 1 (June, 2025) 95-97
e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.
www.iosrjournals.org

"Cognitive Filters, Cultural Frames and the Construct of Objectivity: A Psychological Inquiry"

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Abstract
This research article investigates the psychological theories on objectivity, questioning the common belief that human cognition and perception are untouched by bias. Drawing on various empirical studies and theories from cognitive, biological and sociocultural psychological studies, the article argues that objectivity is not a given variable, a stable entity and external truth but a construct shaped by internal psychological frameworks and social factors. It also explores the role of metacognitive awareness and scientific elements in moderating bias, and concludes that objectivity is an evolving ideal that must be critically evaluated in the light of the mind's limitations.

I. Introduction

Objectivity is often defined and perceived as the base of rational inquiry and behavior, especially in scientific research such as psychology. It is presumed to offer a neutral and unbiased perspective of the world, free from personal emotion, divorced from social prejudice or cognitive error. However, the notion is elusive and anything but so. Psychological research and investigations across domains have proved that the very basis that defines objectivity and fathom reality- perception, memory, reasoning and cultural factors, perpetrate bias within us. This article engages with the notion of objectivity and contends that it is not an innate faculty but just a mental ideal that one strives for. It is constantly negotiated within the mental domains and often constrained by various factors in the human mind.

II. Methodology

One of the key areas that contests the notion of objectivity is seen in our memory recall and interpretation of past incidents. Frederic Bartlett's experimental research on memory in the early part of the 20th century demonstrated that individuals reconstruct memory in accordance to their cultural expectations and personal schemas. [1] In his famous "War of the Ghosts" experiment, the British participants, when asked to recall details of a Native American Red Indian folktale, altered and distorted details, aligning it to their familiar cultural schemas rather than recall the actual facts. They had consciously and selectively omitted details that did not connect to their familiar cultural codes. Hence, the experiment proved that our recall of the past is not an objective recall but a process of reconstruction. It is shaped by individual interpretations and existing schemas. The experiment amply proved that the objective rendering of the story is impeded by subjective filters that dictate memory. Similarly, Peter Wason's experiments, Rule of Discovery on Hypothesis testing [2] again proved the conformation bias. Participants when given mathematical problems did not seek new rules, rather resorted to their existing frameworks of knowledge. Even in a test of mathematical propositions, the participants chose to support their existing assumptions rather than seek new rules. This propensity to perceive empirical facts through familiar known assumptions rather than process or evaluate new facts proves that an objective and dispassionate means of evaluation barely exists. Judgements are informed by internal prevalent beliefs and not by unbiased evaluation of evidence.

On a similar note, Heuristics, too, reinforce cognitive biases. The research of Tversky and Kahneman argues about the presence of cognitive bias while making decisions. Their study clearly proved that the individual's capacity to make judgements is not based on conscious filtering of existing facts but on emotional response to existing examples or stereotypes. [3] Since accidents in the sky are more sensationalised by the media than accidents on the road, strong and passionate responses would prompt people to believe that flights are dangerous. Hence with distorted portrayals of reality, these cognitive tendencies show that even our rational and objective thinking is frequently a result of subjective filters and emotionally salient influences and the idea of objectivity exists in a limbo.

Apart from Cognitive Psychology, biological studies also reinforce the same as it seeks to prove that the brain's structure and its chemical permutations skew perceptions. Visual illusions, such as the Muller-Lyer illusion experiments proved, to persist even when individuals know that they are being deceived, which highlighted the involuntary nature of perpetual processing.[4] Such illusions demonstrate that the brain uses automatic mechanisms to perceive objects. Using two arrows and their fins- both inward and outward- the experiment proved

that the brain perceives the fin inward turned to be of shorter length as opposed to the other, though both are of the same length. Such visual cues distort the perception of objective reality. The brain's perception is not based on the actual reality but governed by subjective interpretation and automatic mechanisms hence proving that perceptions of reality are conditioned by factors other than objectivity. Further, the research by Joseph LeDoux on the amygdala has shown that emotional stimuli, especially those that signal threat, are processed rapidly and often unconsciously, influencing perception and our reactions, before reasoning and rationality come into being. [5] Hence, decisions made in emotional frameworks are a consequence of the brain's biological configuration and not a result of an objective processing of reality.

Even neurochemical states play a major role in cognitive reckoning. Aaron Beck's theory of mood-congruent memory proved that individuals in depressive states of mind are more likely to recall negative experiences. [6] The predominance of neurochemical releases such as dopamine and serotonin determines perceptions thus replacing objective reality with emotional reactions. Even in moments of rational analysis, our conclusions are driven by our brain chemistry.

Sociocultural influences reiterate the same notion of objectivity being just an ideal. Cultural norms, language, and group identities shape what individuals perceive to be formal or rational. John Berry's study on conformity among the Temne of Sierre Leone and the Inuit of Canada revealed that cultural orientation- collectivist versus individualist leanings- has a profound impact on conformity levels.[7] In collectivist cultures, where group harmony and tradition are emphasized, individuals are more likely to refer to collective norms, while in individualist societies, personal autonomy is more highly valued. This finding clearly shows that behavior seen as "rational" or "objective" is often a reflection of culturally internalized norms rather than a universally shared standard.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis further argues that language itself shapes cognition and interpretation of phenomena.[8] Linguistic features, semantic norms define how speakers perceive phenomena, from color to emotion. For instance, some indigenous languages have multiple words for types of snow, enabling finer perpetual distinctions. Consequently, even sensory experience is framed by language, suggesting that what appears to be an objective description of a phenomena, is, in fact, shaped by the limits and affordances of one's language.

Henri Tajfel's research on social identity and in-group bias offers additional support for the argument. Objectivity is compromised by social belonging. [9] His minimal group experiments demonstrated that even trivial group distinctions could produce significant in-group bias, affecting allocation of resources and trust. These experiments underscore that people do not simply process information as isolated individuals – they do so as members of social categories, which shape their interpretations and decisions. Group membership thus introduces another layer of cognitive distortion, deeply embedded in our social functioning.

While all these psychological approaches challenge the notion of objectivity, metacognition- the ability to analyze one's own thinking- offers a contrasting spectrum. Daniel Kahneman's dual-process theory distinguishes between System 1(fast, intuitive) and system 2(slow and analytical) thinking. [10] The latter system allows for critical evaluation and the application of logic, providing a cognitive framework through which individuals might correct the biases of system 1. Mindful practices and cognitive behavioral techniques have been shown to improve metacognitive awareness. For instance, Kiken and Shook found that mindfulness reduces negative bias and promotes more balanced evaluations. [11] These approaches show that though complete objectivity might be a desired ideal, individuals can attain some objectivity by consciously cultivating more reflective and impartial thinking habits.

However, even these are prone to bias and might defy objectivity. The Dunning- Kruger effect exemplifies a meta- cognitive distortion: individuals with low competence often overestimate their abilities and lack of awareness to self-approbation. [12] This phenomenon reveals a paradox in the pursuit of objectivity- we may believe ourselves to be unbiased and unprejudiced even when we are most compromised. Such findings highlight that self-reflection too is not a guarantee of objectivity and must be supported by external feedback and structured critique.

Scientific experiments and approaches, often believed to be the ideals of objectivity, are also susceptible to human bias. For instance, psychological research is often believed to be compromised in data and analysis as these are easily manipulated by the researcher, thus ruling out the possibility of research ever being objective. The intelligence tests conducted during the early part of the 20th century was influenced by socio-political factors. The tests conducted by Binet and Terman on intelligence condoned racial and class discrimination on the pretext of being objective and truthful. By stressing on hereditary as the major determinant of intelligence and ignoring environmental and contextual details, or excluding the varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds of people, the tests were perceived as biased, subjective and compromised. Rosenthal and Jacobson's experiment, "Pygmalion in the Classroom" showed that the teacher's expectations of a student significantly changed the student's performance, thus raising questions of neutrality in empirical research. [13] This clearly suggested that the researcher's perception can alter the data being collected.

Objectivity is not an ideal standard but a construct shaped by our minds, cultures and institutions. However, this does not indicate that striving for objectivity is futile. Rather all the explorations suggest a greater need to strive for objectivity, to accept a more dynamic conception of objectivity- one that acknowledges human limitations, suggests methodological controls and strives for ethical reflections.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, objectivity is not simply a matter of suppressing emotion or applying logic. It is a complex, multilayered process that demands self-awareness, cultural sensitivity and ethical safeguards. Hence by recognizing the limitations of attaining the same, the individual is not completely negating the notion of objectivity being unattainable; rather it sets markers for the human effort to strive for truth while also conscious of fallibility.

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