

## Science of Subjectivity

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*Editor's Note: For OS readers privileged to work in academies, colleges and universities, teaching Q Methodology to our students must rank among our most significant activities. Our students and future students represent the only way knowledge can continue to advance and benefit from the progress we, ourselves, have made in using William Stephenson's principles to understand the science of subjectivity. We judge our progress by observing and admiring the work of our best students, much the way the dancer uses the mirror or videotape to gauge the visual impact of skills in conveying something of the human condition through motion alone. What follows is the response of one Honors student to a final question concluding a semester of inquiry in a seminar on the scientific study of subjectivity. RGM—*

In a world filled with ideologies, no facet of life is immune to their limiting effects. Ideologies are what define the social norms and practices. They help us to determine what is moral, ethical, acceptable and not acceptable. The American Heritage Dictionary (414) defines an ideology as "the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of a group or culture. Although ideologies are, of course, necessary, they often suppress the emergence of new methods. An ideology can be crippling in the sense that people feel threatened to have an idea that may stray from the norm. Many fear changes will bring about a crumbling of the current system rather than a mere improvement.

One ideology that runs rampant in our culture is the belief that objectivity equals truth; that subjectivity clouds truth and is, therefore, irrelevant. However, every thought, action and decision is determined by the subjective. Objectivity is considered the truth, and it is authority that tells us what the truth is. Researchers inform us of the statistical norms and of the best methods to achieve our goals. Scientists share the results of experiments and make predictions about the future based on the results. These data and results are composed based on facts. Facts guarantee the validity of what reality is. However, each person's reality is experienced through the subjective. Therefore, the subjective must be let into or tied to the objective world in order for reality to be truly valid.

The subjective is based on self-reference. Determining what is best for society is done so often that many times, one loses focus of what is really

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important, the individual. When one denies the individual, society's sense of humanity crumbles. Since society is merely the sum of the individuals composing it, when one denies the self, one is ultimately denying society. The only way to hear the individual is through communication.

Every person's subjective experience of the world is different and, thus, the unifying element must be communication and a common language. Communication is the foundation of human society. However, even with the communication, the individual often still is not heard. As stated in *Application of Q-Method to the Measurement of Public Opinion*, "Moreover opinions, to be worth attention, must have a certain persistence and volume. Thompson maintained that in order to merit serious concern, opinions have to be more than sporadic or temporary, and must be diffused into large segments of the public." (Stephenson 1964).

The ideology of objectivity suppresses individual communication of feelings and beliefs. So subjectivity must be tied to the objective for society to listen. This is possible through Q-methodology; "Thought is representing a continuum of feeling. It is not a construction by reasoning and logic, but what the person feels." (Stephenson 1978) The Q-sort works well because the measurement of the subject starts from the same origin for all people because it can be transformed to standard scores. Using the Q-sort (objectivity) and what it measures (subjectivity), a valid connection can be made. Although feeling is placed at the origin of subjectivity, performing a Q-sort proves to be a very difficult task, because it forces a person to analyze the core of their being, to analyze the controls within that govern their every thought.

Wittenborn effectively summarizes the difficulty of the Q-sort, "Some of the most substantial values of Q-methodology lie in the fact that more of us have become increasingly thoughtful about many matters that we had formerly disregarded or postponed." (Wittenborn 1961) The Q-sort must be performed more by "intuiting and feeling than by reasoning." (Stephenson 1978) Finally, society has an objective way to measure subjectivity. The basic human need to seek truth can still be fulfilled, "measurement is the only safeguard there is in the subjective domain that we are not deceiving ourselves, as measurement of change in the outside world is the only safeguard there is of reality there." (Stephenson 1978) The importance of subjectivity is monumental. The subjective streams through every branch of knowledge. The ideology of objectivity often blinds people to the importance of acknowledging the subjective and its powerful influences. Even in the most objective of fields, the subjective still dominates. For example, doctors spend an enormous chunk of their lives studying the objective "facts" of life. Pre-med. Biology majors, for example, focus years of their lives on memorizing and understanding the fundamental procedures and events that must happen to sustain life functions. These classes are very objective and it seems that the subjective is, in fact, arbitrary. However, when one takes a step back and looks at the big picture, one can see that the subjective is, in

fact, the eventual dominating force. After years of being blinded by objectivity, the subjective finally reveals itself as fundamental. A purely objective doctor has lost his or her purpose. Their patients are human beings. The current structure of learning often de-humanizes people into machines with broken parts. Doctors, historically, have been known as healers. However, one cannot merely heal the body. Creature comforts are almost as important. People need to know that someone who cares about how they are feeling and can empathize with those feelings is taking care of them. Without the subjective, patients really do become just "broken bodies."

I have walked away from this course with a reminder of what is really important. As a pre-med. Biology major, I am also a potential victim of dehumanization by the objective focus present in most classes. This course made me realize that the subjective is not irrelevant and should be tied in forever with the objective forces presently held so dear to society.

### Works Cited

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