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Subjectivity in Psychological Science: From Problem to Prospect

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Abstract

The problem of subjectivity within psychological research has long been recognized. The practices of scientific psychology, however, continue to assume that objectivity is desirable, even if not completely possible, and that subjectivity is a source of bias that must be minimized or eliminated. Such a dispassionate stance has offered and continues to offer a range of benefits, not least a tight focus on participants' relevant responses. Nonetheless, in this article, we question the wisdom of always or automatically working to minimize participant and researcher subjectivity, and we invite psychological researchers to consider the benefits of a more, what we term, reflexive scientific attitude. We turn in particular to recent theoretical and methodological innovations within qualitative research in order to help us progress toward a more reflexive psychological science where subjectivity is re-viewed as a resource that can be tapped in order to contextualize and enrich the psychological research process and its products.

Keywords: subjectivity, psychological science, qualitative research, reflexivity, psychosocial

In this article we invite psychological researchers to reconsider the established orientation toward objectivity in favor of a reflexive scientific attitude that encompasses recognizing and working positively with subjectivity in the research process. Our conception of subjectivity is psychosocial, such that individual meaning making is situated within a range of social (interpersonal, group, societal) contexts—a position we elaborate upon below. We are not suggesting that psychological research overlooks subjective data; indeed, we acknowledge various paradigms where participant accounts are explicitly sought, captured, and analyzed. However, we suggest that a more sustained critical engagement with participant and researcher subjectivity (and their interrelationship, or intersubjectivity) can offer benefits in terms of the research experience and production of knowledge (see Finlay & Gough, 2003). Following contributions from social theorists and qualitative researchers

influenced by social constructionism (Burr, 1995), we provide examples of methodological strategies designed to incorporate and exploit subjectivities, discuss some of the complex issues involved in doing so, and reflect on the limits of such research practices. But first we (briefly) summarize some important questions concerning the scientific embrace of objectivity.

Concerns about scientific methods in psychology are not new. Throughout the history of the discipline seminal figures have expressed doubts about the ideal of objectivity, including William James (1890) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1996). In more recent times, various critics have challenged the assumptions and methods of scientific psychology, ranging from social psychologists concerned about the ecological validity of experiments (see Armistead, 1974), to feminist (cf. Harding, 1992; Reinharz, 1992), queer (Butler, 1990; Sedgewick, 1999), and critical race scholars (Gates, 1997; L. Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999)—among others— who argued that psychology had normalized the behavior of particular groups (e.g., White middle-class heterosexual men) under the auspices of objective science.

The effects of experimenter choices and preferences have of course been examined by social psychologists, giving birth to such terms as experimenter effects (Rosenthal, 1976) and demand characteristics (Orne, 1962). In the 1980s sociologists of scientific knowledge (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Woolgar, 1988) highlighted how scientists invoked a contingent repertoire, that is, references to error, subjectivity, and environmental constraints when experiments appear to fail, or when competing research groups obtain different results. Such work draws attention to the centrality of human (inter)subjectivity, particularly unacknowledged investments, in conducting and explaining the outcomes of scientific investigations. Nonetheless, experimenter subjectivity continues to be neglected in psychological science (see Fox-Keller, 1996), while objectivity is endorsed in textbooks (e.g., Davey, 2004), buttressed by various techniques designed to tackle the influence of subjectivity, such as double-blind procedures, standardized instructions, and random allocation of participants to experimental conditions, which are central to the discipline. Similarly, the subjectivity of the research participant is often overlooked—even when participants are invited to generate subjective reports (e.g., descriptions of significant events or memories), the administration of experimenter-designed assorted rating scales (e.g., pleasantness of event) and tests (e.g., later memory recall) dominates proceedings. In questionnaire studies, the respondent is limited to tick-box responses or numbers on a scale, often with no opportunity to qualify or elaborate on their responses. And, as with

experiments, the researcher who has formulated or reproduced the questionnaire(s) remains a remote stranger.

[p. 275] The inclination toward objectivity in psychology can also be gleaned from critiques of qualitative research as overly subjective (e.g., Archer, 2004). Notwithstanding the greater presence of qualitative methods within psychological research in recent years (see Madill & Gough, 2008), the lesser status it is afforded within the discipline generally, indexed by the predominance of experimental methods within prestigious publications and funded research projects (Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002), underscores the scientific discomfort in relation to the issue of subjectivity.

This discomfort with subjectivity clearly makes sense from a psychological science standpoint that emphasizes theoretically driven research and replicability of research procedures and design, and we are not suggesting that researchers utilizing quantitative methods undo or undermine commitment to established research paradigms. What we are proposing is a broader, more inclusive conception of psychological research in which there is room for qualitative and quantitative data, meaning and measurement, and understanding as well as control. In this flexible, pragmatic approach, different aspects of investigation would be variously explicated for different constituencies (e.g., user groups vs. science journals), for different purposes (e.g., practical application of findings vs. contribution to theory; see e.g., Yardley, 2007; Yardley & Bishop, 2007). And as we have argued in a previous article (Madill & Gough, 2008), it would be a mistake to apply simple distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research, as this would overlook commonalities across different methodologies and the very real differences between specific qualitative (and quantitative) methods.

Acknowledging methodological plurality, we invite psychological researchers to consider the benefits of a more reflexive scientific attitude. Such an attitude would involve an active engagement with subjectivities in the research process, deploying strategies to incorporate (rather than avoid) the personal into the design and conduct of research, thereby producing knowledge that is both rich and valid. Of course, definitions and measures of richness and validity will vary according to methodological and theoretical investment; here, we suggest that utilization and/or exploitation of qualitative, reflexive techniques can add depth to findings and help situate the research within relevant social contexts.

There is historical precedent for engagement with subjectivity within quantitative and mixed methods research, even by psychologists working within experimental methodology. For example, Morawski (2005) highlighted three instances of reflexive endeavour in the first

half of the 20th century whereby the experimenter's own cognitions were scrutinized (William James), his (or her) social status and its effects critically examined (Horace Mann Bond), and unconscious processes within the experimental situation identified (Saul Rosenzweig). With these points in mind, in this article we consider some of the concepts (e.g., reflexivity) and strategies (e.g., participant validation) that qualitative researchers have fruitfully deployed so that we can begin to formulate a more reflexive psychological science where subjectivity is re-viewed as a resource that can be tapped in order to contextualize and enrich the research process and its products. Before considering how the subjectivity of research participants and researchers themselves can be mobilized, we first (briefly) consider different conceptions of subjectivity and their implications for designing and conducting psychological research.

Conceptions of Subjectivity

In this section we first outline the dominant models of subjectivity that have and continue to influence psychological science and advocate a psychosocial conception for psychologists. The subject who participates in research studies has been defined in many different ways throughout the history of psychology. Biological notions of instinct-driven creatures gave way to the stimulus–response machine proposed by behaviorists in the early 20th century before the cognitive metaphor of the information processor rose to prominence, albeit now inflected by contemporary neuroscience (see e.g., Kandel & Squire, 2000). Psychologists are aware that people are more complex than theories and experimental techniques often allow, as demonstrated by research on participant reactivity and, indeed, on experimenter effects (see Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). What we are advocating in this article is that the complexities of human subjectivity may be incorporated even more fruitfully into psychological science.

A romantic, experiential subject is often counter-posed to the unitary rational subject sometimes implied by psychological research (Sampson, 1991). For example, a romantic subject was presented in Rogerian client-centered therapy and in the language of self-actualization in the mid-20th century (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951), while Continental thinkers adopted a more existential take on subjectivity, focusing on issues of individual choice, responsibility, and mortality (e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1956). A respect for personal choice and meaning has been embraced in particular by phenomenological researchers interested in exploring individual experience through written and verbal reports (Giorgi, 2009; J. Smith, 2004). One of the most notable examples is work on flow experience by Csikszentmihalyi (1988) whereby accounts of peak or optimal experiences are collected

and analyzed in depth. These can vary widely, ranging from artistic, sporting, and educational endeavors through to work, leisure, and spiritual activities in which the individual is completely absorbed in the situation and is performing at a high level.

Phenomenological and some narrative work (see Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988) in this vein operates an interpretative stance known as a hermeneutics of faith (Ricoeur, 1970), that is, treating the human subject as an expert on their experience and able to provide a transparent window onto their world through interview based accounts (see Josselson, 2004). In most cases, the interview is privileged as the research format where participants can be made to feel sufficiently comfortable and respected in order to offer up meanings that are personally salient (see Kvale, 1996). However, experiential–phenomenological theory and research has been critiqued for downplaying the social contexts in which individuals are situated and that shape and constrain their responses (see I. Parker, 2005). Other approaches, influenced by social constructionism and the linguistic turn in social theory, view the subject and their accounts as located in social, political, and cultural contexts.

There are many different social perspectives on subjectivity, and a concomitant array of theoretical terms, such as relational, situated, and distributed (Gergen, 2009; Stevens, 1996; Wetherell & Maybin, 1996). In these perspectives, the individual is inextricably linked to other people and tied to sets of social, cultural, and political contexts that influence and often constrain human action. The individual and the social are thus interconnected, with different theorists specifying different levels of human agency. For [p.376] example, those influenced by the philosopher Michel Foucault focus on the oppressive operations of dominant ideologies, or discourses, whereby individuals are classified, diagnosed, and institutionalized in various ways (e.g., relating to prevailing norms about madness, sexuality, and crime; see I. Parker, 2002). Others, such as discursive psychologists (Potter, 2007), suggest that the individual can be proactive, creative, and flexible in positioning the self in favorable ways when interacting with others and notwithstanding wider social constraints. Still others maintain that individual choices and actions are influenced and limited by early childhood experiences and associated desires, disappointments, and defenses (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Indeed there is much debate in U.K. social psychology and psychosocial studies on the nature and interpretation of subjectivity (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2005, plus commentaries; Walkerdine, 2008).

In Ricoeur's (1970) terms, theory-driven interpretations of personal accounts, whether emanating from psychoanalytic, discursive, or other traditions, operate under a hermeneutics of suspicion. In this approach, participant narratives are not taken at face value since

individuals are considered to be subjected to forces (e.g., unconscious desires, ideological regimes) beyond their awareness or which they simply take for granted (see Johnson, 1999). It is therefore the job of the researcher to decipher or decode those meanings that are hidden to the individual by invoking theoretical constructs and persuading others of the plausibility of the analytic interpretation. When done well, theoretically informed interpretations can enrich our understanding of phenomena and are appropriately "owned" by the researcher who takes responsibility for arguing the rationale for, and benefits of, applying a particular theoretical lens. On the other hand, such research risks estranging research participants in a process that might be experienced as scholarly colonization (see Josselson, 1996).

So, defining subjectivity is a difficult task amidst ongoing discussions and disagreements. At the very least, we can say that the dominant contemporary view (albeit outside mainstream psychology) is that subjectivity is complex, fluid, and constructed in relation to prevailing personal, interpersonal, and social contexts. With these features in mind, we now turn to the main purpose of the article—promoting methods of working positively with human subjectivity within psychological research.

How to Accommodate Participant Subjectivity Within Psychological Research

What should be done with participant subjectivity in practice? One approach is to do nothing, that is, to simply conduct research as intended without encouraging participants to comment further on their research experience or the phenomenon under investigation. Many qualitative researchers, however, prefer to promote greater participant involvement in their research (see Finlay & Gough, 2003, for examples). The precise form of participant involvement will depend on one's theoretical stance, including assumptions about the psychological subject.

We recognize that subjectivity is factored into much mainstream research in psychology. Many psychological studies use a range of self-report and personality measures designed to discriminate between individuals and to predict the influence of self-variable x (e.g., extroversion, locus of control, self-efficacy) on outcome variable y (e.g., alcohol consumption, aggression, quality of life). In cognitive psychology, for example, thinking aloud protocols are elicited from participants in order to elucidate thought processes and strategies and, although the topic and task are preordained by the researcher, the individual is encouraged to speak freely about their salient cognitions (Ericsson & Simon, 1980). In social psychology, we also acknowledge that many research projects incorporate a subjective dimension, including classic studies such as the Stanford prison experiment (SPE; Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). Here, as well as completing various rating scales and being

observed, guards and prisoners were interviewed during and after the study, and prisoner–guard interactions in the yard were recorded. Moreover, some interview extracts (termed representative personal statements) are offered in the published article and introduced thus:

> Much of the flavor and impact of this prison experience is unavoidably lost in the relatively formal, objective analyses outlined in this article. The following quotations taken from interviews, conversations and questionnaires provide a more personal view of what it was like to be a prisoner or guard. (Haney et al., 1973, p. 87)

This is surely an enthusiastic rationale for deploying qualitative methods as a complement to quantitative research so that insights into important experiences can be gleaned. We recognize and commend such research where individual accounts, especially pertaining to subjectively important experiences as defined by research participants, are elicited. But we do think that in such cases the often rich data collected could be exploited and examined further. For example, in the SPE article (Haney et al., 1973), selected qualitative data extracts are presented without any researcher commentary drawing attention to key constructs, as if the data speak for themselves.

The benefits of a more sustained orientation to subjectivity in quantitative psychology research can be illustrated with reference to the rich body of work on autobiographical memory. In many studies in [p.377] this area, research participants are asked to generate accounts of previous or current experiences (see Bohn & Berntsen, 2007). The instructions may vary on the nature of accounts to be produced, ranging from relatively open-ended invitations to those where certain canonical dimensions must be covered (e.g., location, activity, time), and often participants are asked to complete rating scales on relevant variables (e.g., vividness of memory, confidence, intensity). Typically, following a predetermined time interval, participants will be asked to generate a second account of the experience(s) in question, again accompanied by particular instructions and rating scales. The accuracy of the second account is then usually checked against the first account (presumed to be the master record), with specific errors highlighted. The (in)accuracy of later accounts can be scored and interrater reliability calculated. The predictive utility of nominated independent variables (e.g., vividness) for accuracy may then be determined.

Such studies rely heavily on the subjective accounts of participants, who are often encouraged to choose personally salient events and asked to describe these in detail. Research reports will frequently present extracts from participants' accounts, for example contrasting the original with the second account to highlight the nature and number of errors. As mentioned, the level of (in)accuracy is measured using a scheme devised by the researchers,

so qualitative and quantitative data are regarded as complementary, mutually reinforcing. There are examples of studies this area, however, where participant involvement is more pronounced and where outcomes are significant and fascinating. For our illustration here we focus on a quite famous experiment by Neisser and Harsch (1992) on phantom flashbulb memories. Briefly, the study revolved around the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle disaster, with 106 students given a questionnaire enquiring: "How did you first hear the news of the Challenger disaster?" less than 24 hr after the event. The questionnaire also contained other items pertaining to emotionality, vividness, confidence, and so forth. Some 2.5 years later, 44 of the original 106-person sample were administered a similar questionnaire, and when the extent of inaccuracy was noted, 40 of the participants were invited to a follow-up interview some months later. Each participant was interviewed for 45 min, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis—as per many qualitative interview studies. During the interview another description of the Challenger event was elicited, and another series of rating scales administered verbally. Participants were presented with a number of retrieval cues designed to recover the original account. Finally, at the end of the interview, participants were shown their original accounts in their own handwriting, a revelation that prompted great surprise for participants and the interviewer (who had not seen the original reports before). Discrepancies between current and original accounts were then discussed with each participant, and each was asked which version they preferred and believed most.

Clearly, this study prioritized the subjective recollections of participants, generating three different accounts of the same phenomenon, two written and one verbal. Moreover, the interview method gave participants scope to reflect on differences between accounts, with individual preferences and judgments also encouraged. Apart from the deployment of retrieval cues and ratings, this interview format has much in common with typical semistructured interviews used in much qualitative research in psychology. The book chapter in which the findings are reported also reproduces extracts from the written and verbal accounts (e.g., two accounts from the same participant) alongside accuracy scores, with the qualitative and quantitative data supporting the same conclusions. Other findings relating to emotion, vividness, and confidence ratings and their relation to accuracy are also presented. The most striking finding, as the authors noted, is that participants continued to insist on the veracity of their contemporary (event-distant) accounts over the original (event-near) versions—despite being cued to retrieve the original accounts and despite actually being shown these initial accounts. This finding arises from the interview format and is vividly conveyed by selected quotes ("I mean like I told you, I have no recollection of it at all"; "I

still think of it as the other way around"; Neisser & Harsch, 1992, p. 21). As the authors concluded, "As far as we can tell, the original memories are just gone" (Neisser & Harsch, 1992, p. 21).

This example demonstrates that quantitative research can be enhanced by placing greater value on participant subjectivity and maximizing opportunities for its expression within the format of the study. And while we applaud the Neisser and Harsch (1992) study, qualitative psychologists would propose further subjective elaborations. For example, researchers themselves may have provided accounts of the Challenger disaster and then reflexively discussed the discrepancies between their own accounts. As well, interviews could have been used at all stages of the research and participants invited to talk about the personal meaning of the inn, quality of life). It is possible, for example, that some participants adopted an anti-National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) stance and that this would have impacted their accounts; indeed, research on the fading affect bias suggest that a public event construed as negative fades faster in memory compared with a positive construal (see Bohn and Berntsen's 2007 article relating to the fall of the Berlin Wall).

More generally, quantitative content analysis of qualitative data, whereby the data are segmented and allocated to a predetermined coding scheme, could be supplemented by inductive, bottom-up qualitative analysis of the data set whereupon categories not anticipated by the research hypotheses may emerge and could inform further hypothesis generation and testing.

In some qualitative research projects, participant subjectivity and involvement is progressed when investigators seek participant feedback on research documents such as interview transcripts and draft analyses (sometimes termed participant validation; see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This may take the form of a second interview that is recorded, transcribed, and, itself, analyzed. Participants may be invited to record diary entries about their experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, which may include reflections on the experience of being a research participant. For example, returning to autobiographical memory research, participants may be asked to reflect on the experience of participating in the study in terms of writing the diaries and the later tasks around recognition and recall, an exercise that could well recommend refinements and improvements in study content and design.

Some phenomenological research has gone further in presenting interviewees with extracts from earlier interviews and inviting their reflections on what they said (J. Smith, 2003)—which in some respects recalls the Neisser and Harsch (1992) interview regarding

Challenger shuttle flashbulb memories where participants were presented with their earlier accounts for comparison with their latest versions. Indeed, some forms of qualitative research explicitly recruit participants as co-researchers from the start of a project. Such participatory action research projects (Fine & Sirin, 2007) clearly challenge the boundaries between researcher and researched and disrupt the classic position of the psychologist researcher as expert (McFadden & McCamley, 2003).

Participatory action research involves deliberately challenging pure scientific principles in order to develop a lay or community centered approach to knowledge production and dissemination (Brydon-Miller, 2004). Within this type of collaborative project, both researcher(s) and community members share common goals, usually in the form of generating new knowledge in order to facilitate social change for a particular marginalized group. The scientist is passionately engaged rather than dispassionate and detached, and research design is informed as much by team concerns and objectives as scientific know-how. The development of questionnaires, interview schedules, interventions, and so forth is a joint enterprise, and community members are at the forefront of data collection, analysis, and dissemination— both within the locale and to the wider scientific constituency.

A nice example here is described by Merrifield (1993). Residents from Yellow Creek, Kentucky, who were concerned about the health effects of toxins that had entered the water supply, formed an action group that enlisted the support of researchers from Vanderbilt University in order to develop a survey. The survey was then distributed to almost 300 households, a [p.378] resulting analysis identified raised levels of kidney and gastrointestinal problems. This initial survey thus provided evidence to substantiate community concerns, which then led to further qualitative data collection and analysis and empowered group members to seek intervention from the authorities. Some tension was reported between community activists and academic researchers, underlining the importance of clear and careful negotiation regarding ownership of the project.

The popularity of this type of research is increasing in some quarters. For example, expert patients and lay people are increasingly being asked to inform the design and progress of health related research (see Donaldson, 2003). A project on coping with diabetes, for example, might enlist the contribution of patients in terms of aims, recruitment methods, and practical applications. For further examples, there are now several journals that publish such research, including the American Journal of Community Psychology and the Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology.

While any undermining of the researcher's authority could prove threatening—for both researcher and participant—it can be argued that the benefits of a more democratic research encounter in the form of richer, contextualized knowledge outweigh any loss of status or power. Even if resources will not allow for full-blown participatory action research projects, the principle of participant engagement is attractive because even limited opportunities for reflection may yield new insights as participants mull over their contributions to the research and encourage researchers to revise and refine their interpretations. For most research projects, whether qualitative or quantitative, it would cost little to make provision for the expression of participant subjectivity within project designs. A questionnaire study, for example, need only include a section at the end where respondents are invited explicitly to elaborate on responses already indicated and to outline relevant factors not included in the survey. Such opportunities may well offer up valuable information to researchers, a hitherto unanticipated theme or hypothesis perhaps, or suggestions for developing a more participant-friendly study, in both cases providing ideas for further research.

Taking things a little further, one can imagine questionnaires that are entirely qualitative, thereby maximizing the potential for participant-centered accounts (see Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). In this way the researcher provides a predesigned tool informed by variables deemed relevant to the research question(s), while the participant enjoys freedom to respond in ways that are personally interesting and significant. It is likely that participants will introduce information unanticipated by the researcher. Rather than fearing this as a loss of control or source of bias, it could be regarded as opening up potentially fruitful avenues of investigation hitherto unexplored.

Another strategy for encouraging participant comment is to conduct interviews with a subset of participants in which they have the chance to expand on their contributions to the research and to comment on what it was like to be a participant in the project. It is possible that such a face-to-face encounter with a researcher could prove intimidating for some participants, thereby undermining the usefulness of the session. This is not an insurmountable barrier, and techniques used in interview research (e.g., Madill, 2012) can facilitate dialogue. For example, if interviews are conducted away from the research laboratory in a familiar, informal environment and participants are reassured that they are not being tested then useful feedback may emerge. Such feedback could be audio recorded for review. If a detailed analysis is warranted, a transcription of the interview may be required. Transcription can be time consuming, but a small sample and short interviews may yield valuable information

such as potential confounds in experimental design when viewed from the participants' perspective.

Information technologies may facilitate the development of user-friendly opportunities for the promotion of participant subjectivity, such as e-mail and text requests for reflections on the study and/or elaborations on data already provided. For example, an exchange of e-mails between researcher and each willing participant would function as a form of interview, albeit asynchronous and at a distance, and may well remove some of the conventional asymmetries found in face-to-face research interviews and so enable high quality feedback to be elicited. Such an exchange may well take place over days or even weeks, but time invested by both parties allows the researcher to follow up on issues raised in prior e-mails and the participant to reflect further on their experience (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). Other technologies may be deployed here to good effect, such as instant messaging (IM) programs, where researcher and participant communicate in real time while located in different environments (Stieger & Göritz, 2006). The immediacy and convenience of this form of conversation is attractive, and the time taken to think about then type responses makes for a degree of reflection, although clearly both researcher and target sample would need to be familiar with the IM program adopted, and again many groups in society may not be aware of or use such technologies or have Internet access.

In sum, building in an opportunity for research participants to comment further on the variables and research questions under investigation, whether packaged as part of the project or as a voluntary add-on, has the potential to complement, contextualize, and extend the findings from the main study or studies. Indeed, there is an increasing tendency toward mixed methods research within psychological science whereby quantitative results are complemented by qualitative—although the precise balance between quantitative and qualitative, and issues around epistemology and research goals, does vary greatly (see Madill & Gough, 2008; Todd, Nerlich, McKeown, & Clark, 2004).

While not denigrating their usefulness, we note now that the practices outlined above designed to potentiate participant subjectivity imply an uncomplicated conception of the psychological subject. In other words, it is assumed that a research participant can reach inside themselves and extract their experiences, which are then conveyed unproblematically using language. This experiential view, whereby participants "tell it like it is," has been criticized (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). For example, a social constructionist would argue that, rather than revealing experience, accounts are co-constructed, context bound, and performative (i.e., action oriented; see Burr, 1995). Paying attention to the setup and

dynamics of any researcher–participant feedback session is therefore important in order to make sense of what is being said in context and allows us to think through issues such as transferability across situations. For example, recall of significant life events may well vary according to who is inviting the participant to remember (researcher, best friend, teacher), where the recall is taking place (lab, home, school), how the recall is elicited (face-to-face interview, questionnaire, telephone conversation), and so forth. Imagining or recording participant responses in other con [p.379] texts may alert us to the boundedness of the data in our research projects.

More radically, this constructionist stance raises questions about how our research methods and researcher hypotheses influence and constrain the nature of the data we collect and analyze (see e.g., Hugh-Jones & Madill, 2009). Indeed, there has been much debate over the years within social psychology around the validity of classic studies such as the SPE (Haney et al., 1973). For example, far from acting naturally it has been established that the prison guards were operating under fairly clear instructions from the researcher (see Baron, 1984) and that the mock prison environment did not match many features associated with an actual prison (Banuazizi & Movahedi, 1975). In an imaginative part replication of the SPE, Reicher and Haslam (2006) explicitly addressed the influence of the special context created for the study, for example, thinking through the impact of participants' knowledge that they were being filmed at all times.

Instead of trying to simplify or simulate real-life situations, there are arguments that psychologists and social researchers should "go where the action is," that is, observe, record, and analyze phenomena as they occur naturally (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2005). While one could dispute the meaning and reach of the term "naturalistic" (see Speer, 2002), researchers might benefit from considering how their topic of interest might be played out in "real life." For example, how is national identity invoked in bars, homes, and workplaces as well as in group-based psychology experiments or interviews with a researcher? Such thinking pushes us as researchers to recognize the limits of our paradigms and may well prompt us to refine and extend our methods or incorporate naturalistic elements in our research design.

Beyond the relevance of social contexts, some psychosocial and narrative researchers argue that the participants' biographies be incorporated into the design of research studies. For example, if the research focus is on crime, then participants may be invited to recall and recount early experiences as opposed to (or as well as) asking about perceptions of currently salient crimes or researcher generated vignettes (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Typically, such life-history research would pursue an extended engagement with research participants: a

second interview, for example, or a follow-up questionnaire. In a second interview, the participant may be asked to clarify or to expand on original responses, but this is also an opportunity to encourage the participant to free associate, to meander away from the original research topic. These accounts can be linked with the participant's biography but also the social context(s) in which they are embedded, including the research context. For example, in one of Hollway's examples (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), she speculated that an interaction with one participant was informed by a mother– daughter dynamic influenced by that participant's—and her own—familial experiences (see also below). In other words, it is the participant's agenda that is prioritized, whether or not this matches the ostensible research topic. Such a stance requires an open-minded researcher who is not wedded to specific topics and who does not intervene too much in the research encounter. This stance will not be an attractive option for researchers with very specific hypotheses and research goals, but even in the most tightly controlled experiment paying attention to ostensibly nonrelevant participant input may bear fruit. For example, participant off-the-record comments noticed before, during, or after a study may yield insights into motivations for participation (e.g., a personal problem associated with the research topic), participant expectations (e.g., apprehension about being assessed by a psychologist), and evaluations (e.g., "that experiment was so boring")—all information that helps contextualize the research and that may well point to important psychological variables at work.

Psychosocial approaches do not regard the research participant as an expert on his or her experience. In fact, it is the researcher who is implicitly positioned as the expert, scrutinizing and dissecting participant claims and linking these to, say, (unconscious) memories, emotions, and defenses (e.g., Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). At the same time, it is anticipated here that interactions with research participants may prompt identifications, dynamics, and feelings in the researcher that need to be thought through and reflected on (discussed below under researcher reflexivity).

The above discussion has tended to focus on participant subjectivity. Researchers are also psychological subjects whose subjectivity might be divided usefully into scientific and human versions, with the scientific holding sway in most research encounters: that is, professionally self-disciplined and removed from the world of social interaction (Fox-Keller, 1996). So let us now turn our attention toward understanding how researcher subjectivity has been conceptualized and used by qualitative researchers.

Reflexivity: Working With Researcher Subjectivity

The conventional focus of psychological research is on the participants and the data they provide, which makes perfect sense. The experimenter, the questionnaire author, the interviewer, and all the other research psychologist roles, are not generally foregrounded. This (semi)detached stance works to preserve the integrity of the research and to produce data that are clean, precise, and valid. There are checks and balances to maximize objectivity, such as controlling for possible biases through the reliability check of multiple coders in both quantitative and post-positivist forms of qualitative research (such as grounded theory; see Madill, 2011). The researcher's part in designing the project, the differential interactions with participants, and any bias in data analysis are issues that are not normally dwelled upon. Reflexivity, however, is widely understood to entail a commitment to identifying and contextualizing the researcher's personal agenda, though in practice this often amounts to a statement about the researcher's motivation and experience concerning the topic to be studied (Finlay & Gough, 2003). [Footnote 1: Reflexivity was originally formulated to distinguish between natural and human sciences: Psychologists are subject to the same psychological phenomena as the nonpsychologists who participate in psychological research, while physicists as humans are not meaningfully influenced by, say, electromagnetic fields (see Bourdieu, 1992; Flanagan, 1981).]

At a basic level, a researcher studying the topic of first-time fatherhood might allude to their own parental status and interests. For example, the researcher may have recently become or is in the process of becoming a new father and thus declare a personal as well as academic interest in finding out about other men's experiences. This position may well lead them to divulge their parenthood status and even share experiences in research interviews with participants. A researcher who presents as a mother or mother to-be might declare an interest in how male partners experience the [p.380] transition to parenthood and might consider the role of gender (difference) in her investigation. Whatever position one is coming from, the divulging of a personal dimension may work to relax some of the potential barriers between researcher and participant and facilitate recruitment and rapport during data collection, with ensuing positive impact on the quality of the data. Such a personal approach might even be deemed strategic, that is, intentionally deployed to engender the extraction of better data. Whatever the chosen research methodology, researchers of all persuasions may find it fruitful to present such a personal face at different stages of the research process. Clearly, a balance needs to be struck between conducting rigorous research and the judicious deployment of researcher subjectivity, and this balance will vary according to one's commitment to particular research traditions and practices.

This commitment to and display of the researcher's personal agenda implies a straightforward position on subjectivity. It assumes, for example, that the researcher has access to their subjective motivations for doing a particular research project. A constructionist view of subjectivity, as discussed above, problematizes the notion that people are transparent to themselves and can accurately report their inner thoughts and feelings. Within this point of view, such claims and reflexive practices should themselves be subjected to analysis as accounts that perform certain functions, such as facilitating reciprocal disclosure in research participants.

Thus it may be fruitful to critically analyze one's own subjective interventions in the research process as well as the participants' data so that the research findings are properly situated. For example, Gough (2003b) drew attention to the salient identities and power relations that pertain in a focus group study with men on the topic of masculinities, which mostly favor the researcher (e.g., as expert interrogator) but which at times indicate participant power and researcher vulnerability, as when participants suddenly depart from the script and direct difficult questions to the researcher. He identified the ways in which he positioned himself, and was positioned by other speakers, as a man rather than a researcher, and proceeded to discuss the consequences of these interactions for the data and the research more generally. Similarly, Hollway (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) identified and reflected on her (unconscious) positioning of herself as maternal during an interview with a younger woman, offering sympathetic responses to the participant's tales of hardship and distress while also orienting to the participant's child, who was present during the interview, in a (grand)motherly way. Again, such researcher subjectivity was used, albeit unconsciously, to enhance the research encounter and later critically discussed to highlight the context-boundedness of the data.

All researchers, whether qualitative or quantitative, can engagein critical thinking about such instances where normative research practices are disturbed, or even subverted, as further insights about the conduct of research and about the topic of interest may be forthcoming. The work of Horace Mann Bond (1927) on race and IQ is pertinent here, and Morawski (2005) discussed how his studies illuminated various sources of bias in the design, practice, and reporting of psychological research in this area. For example, he showed how the race of the researcher directly influenced test results, as well as pointing to tacit researcher assumptions about the nature of intelligence (as innate) and about negro (sic) children's intelligence (as inferior to White children's). Returning to the SPE (Haney et al., 1973), Zimbardo, a participant observer in the study (the superintendent) who, along with

other team members, maintained informal diaries during the process, admitted that "the experimenters became more personally involved in the transaction and were not as distant and objective as they could have been" (p. 78). From a qualitative standpoint, the apologetic tone is not required here. Researcher involvement, however unplanned or unanticipated, presents opportunities for reflexive analysis, and here Zimbardo and colleagues may have reflected on their influence on the guards' behavior, for example. Over time they have, to some extent, reflected on their role in facilitating the events that unfolded and admitted to some guilt in allowing abusive practices by the guards to proceed unchecked until a junior team member insisted on halting the study. Zimbardo also came to question the ethics of placing people in such challenging and potentially explosive situations in the pursuit of knowledge, and much debate on ethical issues ensued (e.g., S. S. Smith & Richardson, 1983).

Researcher interventions may also invoke personal history as well as the social identities taken up and resisted during the research encounter. The psychosocial stance on subjectivity explicitly invites researchers to engage with their own biographies where relevant. For example, Jefferson (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) found an interviewee's account of his childhood overly positive based on the researcher's recollections of his own upbringing in similar circumstances. This reflexivity, together with other evidence (e.g., accounts of other family members) led him to the analytic insight that the interviewee's account served a defensive function. In this case the researcher's own recollections of early experiences are used as a resource to inform the interpretation of participant accounts. Of course, as Jefferson acknowledged, one need not take such researcher-generated accounts at face value. As stated earlier, the reflexive contributions of researchers should themselves be subject to critical scrutiny.

The applicability and transferability of reflexive practices that draw upon the researcher's own psychological history is perhaps limited to research projects and methodologies in which boundaries between researcher and participant are explicitly porous, as in participatory action projects for example, or forms of community research (Fine & Sirin, 2007). Nonetheless, the principle of interrogating one's own personal and social identities, histories, and research practices is sound enough and can be taken on board in many research projects, including psychology experiments. For example, the work of Rosenzweig (1933) on unconscious dynamics within the experimental situation, as cited in Morawski (2005), draws attention to errors of personality influence and suggestion by virtue of the experimenter's unacknowledged orientations and unintended practices.

More broadly, reflexivity can also involve signaling one's location within methodological, disciplinary, and ideological traditions (Wilkinson, 1988). This more political dimension of reflexivity is endorsed by feminist and critical researchers interested in challenging the findings of conventional social science research (Stainton-Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson, & Stainton-Rogers, 1995). For example, work by Gill (1993) on indirect sexism challenges the liberal humanist approach that views prejudice as individual pathology rather than social practice promoted by dominant institutions and reproduced in everyday talk. Similarly, critical psychologists working from an anti-psychiatry stance might seek to critique biomedical discourses around mental illness with a view to [p.381] prioritizing patient perspectives and practices (I. Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin, & Stowell Smith, 1995).

There is evidence of such stances in quantitative work that entails a political commitment of one shape or form that, of course, at one level undermines the scientific ideal of impartiality (see Stainton-Rogers et al., 1995). For example, much social psychological research on prejudice displays a concern, either implicitly or explicitly, with reducing prejudice, for example, through investigating the contact hypothesis, where members of different groups are brought together under certain conditions in order to improve relations between the two groups (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). Less ideologically, psychology researchers of various methodological traditions recognize that any data can be generated in different ways and that any given data set can be analyzed using diverse methods, whether employing distinct factor analytic techniques, regression models, or modes of qualitative data analysis. Registering one's attachment to a particular methodological approach or epistemological position, while acknowledging alternative or complementary techniques and perspectives, is an important step in situating the research project.

But reflexivity need not be straightforward. The task of accessing, divulging, and critically analyzing one's personal, methodological, and/or ideological values as a researcher may be convoluted, even painful. Time and effort are required to reflect on one's possible motivations, agendas, and goals as a researcher. Moreover, one's research ambitions may shift and mutate over time and according to context. More profoundly, the notion of reflexivity, itself, can be deconstructed to show how it can be used strategically to enhance the status of research. For example, the claim to share common experiences and identities with participants and thus to generate valuable insider insights may be, although not untrue, recognized also as a ploy (see Seale, 1999). In order to disrupt simplistic and self-serving uses of reflexivity, some researchers have been moved to explore alternative forms of writing

(e.g., poetry or dramatic dialogue) to demonstrate multiple interpretations of a phenomenon (see e.g., Ashmore, 1989; MacMillan, 2003; Richardson, 1992). These creative forms of reflexivity have been, in turn, critiqued as indulgent and narcissistic, straying too far from the topic in question and into "navel-gazing" territory (see Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Gough, 2003a).

Ultimately, the manner in which reflexivity is defined and practiced will depend on theoretical and, possibly, ideological predilection, but the common goal of reflexive analysis is to help contextualize and illuminate the researcher's relationship with the phenomenon under investigation (see Alvesson et al., 2008). At the same time, researchers might, in a further turn, reflexively analyze the strategic functions of their declared allegiances. It is, ideally, a [p.382] reflexive engagement and can be regarded as an indicator of research quality (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

Conclusion

We have concentrated on subjectivity because it is a concept that preoccupies both qualitative and quantitative researchers in psychology alike. We have suggested that subjectivity should not always be eschewed in (quantitative) psychological science. Rather, as psychological researchers (both quantitative and qualitative) have sometimes demonstrated, subjectivity within the research process may be seen as a valuable resource that can be tapped to illuminate both the phenomenon under investigation and to situate research design and practices more generally.

In moving from "problem to prospect," we suggest that psychologists consider the following questions during the process of designing, conducting, and analyzing research, and we provide guidance in Table 1 on how techniques and methods discussed in this article might be used to facilitate meaningful engagement with subjectivity. Resource constraints and pressures to complete and publish psychological research will mean that active engagement with subjectivity will be difficult if not impossible on many projects. However, many strategies highlighted in Table 1 do not require huge investment and could yield real benefits (e.g., attending to informal comments from participants, discussing subjectivity at research team meetings, using participant extracts in research reports). And incorporating subjectivity into research procedures and reports need not undermine the quest for generalizable findings. A reflexive scientific attitude where both researchers and participants take subjectivity seriously does not preclude the pursuit of the general; rather, in attending to context-bound (inter) subjective processes and reports, our claims about generalities can be more informed, refined, and persuasive. To conclude, we have hopefully indicated that a

questioning of the discourse and practice of eliminating "bias" may well open up opportunities for doing research that is informed by, while also informing, human subjectivity and progress toward a more reflexive psychological science. 1 Reflexivity was originally formulated to distinguish between natural and human sciences: Psychologists are subject to the same psychological phenomena as the nonpsychologists who participate in psychological research, while physicists as humans are not meaningfully influenced by, say, electromagnetic fields (see Bourdieu, 1992; Flanagan, 1981).

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Table 1 [p.381]

Tasks and Strategies Concerning Subjectivity in Psychological Research

Task	Possible strategies
How may research participants be facilitated to elaborate on their responses?	Provide space for open-ended responses on questionnaires; build in opportunities for verbal contributions before, during, and after the study; consider post- or follow-up interviews with participants.
How should "additional" participant responses be incorporated into the research?	An initial, data-led inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967); a second analytic stage linking derived themes to prevailing theory, perhaps leading to conceptual refinements.
How should apparently "irrelevant" participant data be managed?	Do not ignore "off topic" accounts—consider their relevance to literature outside of current research focus and the possibility of new research questions and investigations.
How should participant accounts be incorporated into research reports?	Present verbatim participant extracts accompanied by researcher analysis specifically orienting to the fit with other data and relevant theory; make transparent the methods of eliciting and analyzing the accounts.
What is it like to be a research participant?	Imagine yourself as a research participant and complete some or all of the tasks asked of the participants, recording your thoughts and feelings in the process; contrast your experience as a participant (of sorts) with that of researcher, and use these reflections to inform research design and content.
In what ways can researcher subjectivity be monitored?	Become familiar with the concept and practice of reflexivity (e.g., Finlay, 2002); write a research journal documenting reflections on, reactions to, and adjustments made during the research (e.g., topic choice, theoretical preference, interpersonal dynamics).
How can a reflexive	Awareness of subjective preferences and their impact on research

attitude improve research practice?	can be mobilized to enhance rapport building with participants, monitor and control researcher interventions and omissions, and enrich data analyses (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).
How would the study change if owned and designed by the relevant population?	Consider adopting elements of participatory action research (e.g., Fine & Sirin, 2007) where participants are involved in conceiving, designing, and developing the study, and think through the benefits and challenges of doing so.
How does the research fit with psychological science?	Reflect on implicit theories that influence research practices (e.g., methodological orientation, preference for pure vs. applied research, attitude to other disciplines/collaboration with nonpsychologists, etc.).