

SUBJECTIVITY

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SUBJECTIVITY

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Epistemology, Psychology, Research Methodology

1. Core Definition and Distinction

Subjectivity fundamentally refers to the state or quality of being dependent on the conscious awareness, experiences, beliefs, and feelings of an individual. It is the intrinsic capacity for interpreting external data or forming judgments based upon internal states, rather than relying solely on external, verifiable facts. This concept posits that knowledge and understanding are filtered through the unique perspective of the observer, meaning that what is perceived or judged is inherently influenced by personal history, emotional state, cultural background, and individual cognitive framework. In this sense, subjectivity defines the realm of private experience--that which is only accessible to the experiencing self (the subject)--and contrasts sharply with the notion of Objectivity, which seeks truth independent of the observer's mind.

The initial motivation for focusing on **subjectivity** often arises in academic and empirical contexts where achieving true, unbiased objectivity proves elusive or impossible. The source content explicitly notes that subjectivity is employed in empirical research "because of the failure to get the proper objectivity and standards." This highlights its role not merely as a description of mental life, but as a methodological necessity or alternative, particularly within the social sciences, humanities, and qualitative research paradigms. When phenomena are too complex, deeply contextual, or internally driven (such as pain, identity, or emotional response), relying on objective, external measurements fails to capture the richness of the human experience.

The subjective perspective is crucial for grasping phenomena that are inherently experiential. For example, two individuals witnessing the same event may interpret its meaning, significance, and emotional impact entirely differently, based on their pre-existing belief systems and emotional frameworks. This interpretive ability--the capacity for using **experience**, **beliefs**, and **feeling** to construct meaning--is the hallmark of subjectivity. It establishes the individual as an active agent in the construction of reality, rather than a passive receptacle of objective data.

2. Philosophical Foundations and Development

The philosophical roots of modern **subjectivity** are deeply intertwined with the Enlightenment project and the shift toward prioritizing individual consciousness. René Descartes, with his famous dictum, *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), cemented the position of the thinking subject as the foundational starting point for all knowledge. By doubting everything external, Descartes found certainty only in the fact of his own consciousness, establishing the 'self' as the primary epistemological locus. This Cartesian tradition established the subject as an autonomous, unitary,

and rational entity, capable of independent judgment, setting the stage for subsequent explorations into the limits and capabilities of internal experience.

Later philosophical developments, particularly those associated with Immanuel Kant, redefined the role of **subjectivity**, moving it beyond mere individual opinion toward a structured, universal mode of apprehension. Kant argued that while we cannot access the world-in-itself (the noumenal realm), our phenomenal experience (the world as we perceive it) is shaped by necessary, universal subjective structures--the categories of understanding (e.g., causality, time, space). For Kant, subjectivity was not just personal bias but the necessary framework provided by the human mind that makes coherent experience and, crucially, objective knowledge possible in the first place. This transcendental subjectivity offered a middle ground between pure skepticism and naive realism.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the concept further explored and radicalized by thinkers in existentialism and phenomenology. Existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized the burden and freedom of radical **subjectivity**, asserting that existence precedes essence and that individuals are entirely responsible for defining their own values and meanings in an indifferent universe. This view highlights the emotional, ethical, and personal intensity of subjective reality, moving away from the rationalist subject toward the embodied, feeling subject grappling with anxiety and choice.

3. Subjectivity in Psychology and Phenomenology

In psychological science, **subjectivity** is essential for understanding concepts such as self-identity, motivation, and consciousness. While early behaviorism sought to eliminate subjective reports in favor of observable behaviors, subsequent movements, particularly humanistic and cognitive psychology, recognized the necessity of incorporating internal experience. Subjective experience is often measured through self-report mechanisms, introspective analysis, and qualitative interviews, providing direct access to the individual's mental and emotional landscape, which external observation cannot fully capture.

The philosophical and psychological school of Phenomenology, pioneered by Edmund Husserl, explicitly places **subjectivity** at the center of inquiry. Phenomenology seeks to describe the structures of experience as they appear to consciousness, without making assumptions about external reality. The core principle involves studying intentionality--the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something--thereby grounding knowledge in the immediate, lived experience of the subject. This methodological approach treats subjective reports not as flawed or biased data, but as the primary source of truth regarding the individual's reality.

Furthermore, clinical psychology heavily relies on subjective interpretation. Therapeutic success often hinges on the therapist's ability to understand the client's subjective world--their narrative, internal conflicts, beliefs about self, and emotional associations. The meaning derived from a

traumatic event, for instance, is inherently subjective; it is the client's unique interpretive framework, based on their **feelings** and **experience**, that guides the healing process, rather than an objective description of the event itself.

4. Epistemological Implications

From an epistemological standpoint, **subjectivity** challenges the traditional view of knowledge as a mirror reflecting an external, objective world. If knowledge is inherently filtered and constructed by the individual observer, then universal, absolute truth becomes problematic. This realization led to constructivist and relativist theories, which argue that all knowledge systems, including scientific facts, are socially or individually constructed through subjective lenses.

The introduction of **subjectivity** into the research methodology compels scientists and scholars to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. Positionality refers to the set of perspectives and biases that the researcher brings to the study based on their identity, culture, and social location. Acknowledging this subjective filter is crucial for achieving rigorous, transparent research, especially in qualitative studies where the interaction between the researcher and the participant fundamentally shapes the data collected. Instead of striving for unattainable objectivity, the goal becomes achieving reflexivity--the process of continuously examining how one's own subjective lens influences the research outcomes.

Moreover, the tension between **subjectivity** and objectivity defines much of modern scientific debate. While the hard sciences often seek to minimize subjective variables through controlled experiments and quantifiable metrics, the realization persists that even the framing of a research question, the choice of methodology, and the interpretation of statistical data involve inherently subjective decisions based on the researcher's background knowledge, theoretical adherence, and institutional constraints. Epistemological humility, therefore, requires accepting that all knowledge is, at some level, mediated by the subject.

5. Methodological Role in Research

In research design, **subjectivity** plays a pivotal, though often disputed, role. In quantitative studies, subjectivity is typically viewed as a source of error (bias) that must be rigorously controlled or eliminated to ensure the reliability and validity of findings. Methods such as blinding, standardized procedures, and statistical controls are mechanisms designed to reduce the influence of researcher expectations or participant **beliefs** on the measured outcome.

Conversely, qualitative research paradigms--such as ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative analysis--embrace **subjectivity** as a central resource. These methods seek *verstehen* (understanding) rather than mere explanation, requiring the researcher to immerse themselves in the subjective world of the participants. The data collected (personal narratives, lived experiences,

interpretations) is fundamentally subjective, and its value lies precisely in capturing the unique perspective of the informant. Here, the researcher's **experience** and interpretive skills are necessary tools for generating meaningful analysis.

The integration of subjective methodology has led to the development of rigorous standards appropriate for non-positivist research. Criteria such as credibility (similar to internal validity but focused on the truth of the subjective experience), transferability (applicability to other contexts), and confirmability (neutrality of interpretation) replace traditional measures of objectivity. This legitimizes the use of interpretive judgments, providing a framework where the researcher's interpretation--based on careful engagement with the data--is a valid form of empirical evidence, even if it cannot be replicated identically by another observer.

6. Key Characteristics

The concept of **subjectivity** can be broken down into several defining characteristics that distinguish it from objective reality:

Perspective Dependence: Subjective reality is entirely dependent on the individual viewpoint (the subject). There is no "view from nowhere" within the subjective realm.

Qualitative Experience (Qualia): Subjectivity includes the qualitative, non-reducible aspects of consciousness, often referred to as qualia (e.g., the specific redness of red, the taste of coffee). These are inherently private and cannot be objectively measured or fully communicated.

Intentionality: Subjective consciousness is always directed toward an object, meaning thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are about something. This directedness shapes how the external world is perceived and understood.

Incommunicability: While subjective experiences can be shared through language or art, the full depth and specificity of the internal experience often remain locked within the individual, leading to what is sometimes termed the "hard problem of consciousness."

Influence of Preconceptions: Interpretation of new information is filtered through pre-existing frameworks, including established **beliefs**, cultural norms, and personal history, ensuring that no perception is truly neutral.

7. Criticisms and Post-Structuralist Debates

Despite its necessity, **subjectivity** has faced significant critique, particularly from post-structuralist and post-modern theorists who question the very notion of an autonomous, unified subject. This critique argues that the 'subject' is not a fixed, independent entity but rather an effect of linguistic structures, power dynamics, and social discourse. Thinkers like Michel Foucault demonstrated how

societal institutions and historical discourses construct the identities and experiences deemed "subjective," suggesting that personal feelings and beliefs are often internalized forms of societal control.

The traditional assumption that subjectivity offers a realm of freedom and unique perspective is challenged by the recognition that an individual's **beliefs** and experiences are heavily mediated by language and culture. For example, the way an individual feels about justice is not purely internal but is shaped by the legal, political, and cultural discourses available to them. Thus, what appears to be radical individualism may actually be the internalization of collective norms, leading to the concept of the "decentered subject."

Furthermore, the practical challenge noted in the source content--where a researcher's reliance on subjective research was questioned and required repetition--underscores a persistent methodological critique: unchecked **subjectivity** can lead to bias, lack of generalizability, and findings that are solely idiosyncratic. While qualitative methods have developed rigorous ways to manage this, the potential for personal bias to skew results remains a primary point of contention in arguments favoring strict adherence to objective standards.

Further Reading

[Subjectivity \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Subjectivity \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Phenomenology](#)