

Review of: "The End of Objectivity and Subjectivity in Education Sciences"

Paul Dowling¹

¹ University College London, University of London

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The first thing to say here is that I am not a philosopher, so I don't feel qualified to provide a review, as such, of the article, though I will write a response. I have read much of the work in English that is referenced by the paper, though not for some time in many cases. In this respect, the summaries in the article supply a reminder of some of the most important work in this area. However, I feel that there are also some notable absences that seem to be signalled by Silva (sometimes in citations) for example (no page numbers):

... there is a reality (or, at least, an invariant) that is independent of people's perceptions ...

... knowledge that we can aspire to know and the methodologies we use to do so are dependent on the characteristics of reality.

These references to 'the real' will be recognised by many as an invitation to Roy Bhaskar, the author of critical realism, who was employed at the Institute of Education for a while and who certainly had an influence on a number of my colleagues in the field of education studies (I wouldn't use the expression 'education *science*'), though not on myself and, I suspect, on few if any education practitioners (teachers). Bhaskar, as I understand his work, distinguished between three domains: the '*real*', comprising structures and mechanisms in the 'natural world', and relations in the 'social world'; giving rise to the '*actual*' consisting of events (natural) and behaviours (social), each generating experiences in the *empirical*. Neither the real nor the actual are, in Bhaskar's vision, directly accessible to empirical experience, which is indeed constituted by our methods. Bhaskar's solution is methodological *triangulation*. This is a metaphor that presumes the 'real' to be sending out messages via the 'actual', but that are corrupted by methodological distortion, thus challenging the possibility of objectivity in any absolute sense.

I am not impressed by Bhaskar's argument whose faith in the existence of the 'real' (and indeed the 'actual') seems to me to be precisely that. Nevertheless, Bhaskar's work has been influential in education studies, the authors of which may have a better grasp of it than I do. He certainly merits a mention in Silva's article.

How about this?

Here, it is necessary to consider that an agent should not be understood as a person, but as a set of something capable of interacting and influencing others. Thus, social groups, associations, and research centers are agents. But so are ideas, visions and desires.

And, possibly, artefacts? A second apparently invited guest, explicitly uninvited in Silva's text, is Bruno Latour and so other (post) Actor/Actant Network Theorists for whom that which is constituted as real (the Koch bacillus that is thought to cause tuberculosis, and Louis Pasteur's 'germs'; that eventually replaced Felix Pouchet's 'spontaneous generation' is contingent on the coexistence of the apparatus (discursive, material and educational) that constructs/constructed it. So the objects of science should not be considered to be considered to be eternal, to have existed forever and to exist forever:

When a phenomenon "definitely" exists this does not mean that it exists forever, or independently of all practice and discipline, but that it has been entrenched in a costly and massive institution that has to be monitored and protected with great care ... (Latour, B. (2000). On the Partial Existence of Existing and Nonexisting Objects. *Biographies of Scientific Objects*. L. Daston. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. P. 255)

The anthology from which this extract is taken contains histories of scientific objects from a range of disciplines that have come and gone, so wherefore 'objectivity'?

The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1963; sociologically interpreted by Alfred Schutz, 1967, and later George Psathos, 1968; and Carlos Belvedere, 1922) supplies a plausible answer in the 'natural attitude' of groups, thus:

... the phenomenological sociologist does not deal with the phenomenological epoché practiced by the philosopher ... but with the natural epoché already performed by the members of a given group. In other words, he does not perform this epoché on his own but rather finds it already performed and imposed on him as a group member—that is, as an insider—through the system of relevances characteristic to the group he belongs to." (Belvedere, 1922; p. 89)

In general, then, within the natural attitude, we do not question the fundamentals of our cultures and, in particular, the 'reality' of our social worlds. So much for 'objectivity' in the sense that seems to be invoked in Silva's article. 'Subjectivity', however, is a different matter, which is productively discussed by some of the authors he cites, particularly, perhaps, Sandra Harding, who also sees 'strong objectivity' as starting from women's lives, though personally I see the introduction of the term 'objectivity' as a distraction from my preferred position, which is, 'this is where I stand', in terms of the output (or even the inputs) of research, 'suppose you look at it like this!' I don't sense the need to import an imaginary God into my writing (all Gods are imaginary, even those of Roy Bhaskar), simply invitations'.

I want also to question the easy distinction that Silva makes between 'complex' and ordered' systems:

In complex systems, once agents are able to self-organize, surprises often emerge. Therefore, there is no future that can be anticipated.

On the contrary, in ordered systems (we can think of a factory), it is relatively easy to predict the future, because agents are constrained to a known set of interactions and to causal and linear relationships: the actions they take systematically lead to the same results.

The introduction of an example (a factory) without offering any evidence is always going to be risky. I worked for a while in

a factory—an aluminium foundry as it happens—and was personally responsible for one ‘surprise’, which resulted in the factory being shut down for half an hour or so whilst the ‘surprise’ was fixed. I wonder which factories Silva has in mind. Not only do unintended events occur in ‘ordered systems’, but ‘agents are [also] able to self-organize’: recall the Matchgirls’ strike of 1888 or the Dagenham women’s action nearly a century later, both in ‘factories’ and both English examples (apologies for my ignorance of Portuguese industrial action).

Rather than thinking of objectivity/subjectivity and ordered/complex as pairs of alternative states, I prefer to see them as strategies, for example:

	Position	
System	objectivity	subjectivity
ordered		
complex		

I haven’t named the four strategies (ordered objectivity; ordered subjectivity; complex objectivity; complex subjectivity), but may do if the scheme turns out to be useful; we’ll see.

References

- Belvedere, C. (2022). *A Treatise in Phenomenological Sociology; Object, method, findings, and applications*. London, Lexington Books.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008 (1978, 1975)). *A Realist Theory of Science*. London, Verso.
- Daston, L. (2000). *The Coming into Being of Scientific Objects. Biographies of Scientific Objects* L. Daston. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Book 1* The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff.
- Psathas, G. (1968). ‘Ethnomethods and phenomenology.’ *Social Research* **35**(3): 500-520.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston, Il., Northwestern University Press.