Subjectivity and Political Science:
Subjective Elements of Political Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper introduces a modern definition of objectivity and the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in political science and detects the subjective elements of political knowledge. It argues that political knowledge is the combination of objective elements and subjective elements and that there have been several cognitive and methodological barriers to investigate subjective elements in political studies, although subjectivity is one of the basic traits of human enterprise, not only in domestic politics but also in international relations. Furthermore, this study conveys some methodological implications and suggests new research questions about subjectivity that is the important factor of political phenomena, especially in East Asia.

Keyword: political science, subjectivity, objectivity, scientific knowledge

1. Introduction[1]

Since Second World War, modern political science has developed tremendously in terms of research methods. This methodological development can be described as a process of the settlement of logical positivism. In the 1950's, in order to meet the needs of the times, the main subject of political studies was normative political philosophy focusing on totalitarianism (Popper 2003; Arendt 1951; Friedrich and Brezezinski 1956). In the 1960's, a methodologism appeared that tried to remove 'politics' from 'political science'. Especially, there were methodological solipsists, leading the research trend of political studies, who were having inquiries into the methodology itself. Therefore, *political science,* which was pursuing scientific credentials, began to enter the domain investigating the disciplines of politics.[2] After

[1] Among various definitions of *science* in philosophy of science (Brodbeck 1968), in this study, science means the systemic pursuits of knowledge including all types of scientific fields having academic principles. For the similar definition, "science is the production of systematic explanations, based on empirical data joined logically to form regular patterns" (Eugene 1965). *Scientific knowledge* indicates the products of scientific enterprise following rigorous methodological and theoretical conventions. *A scientist community* is a society sharing specific conventions and academic cultures.

[2] There were several criticisms to the withdrawal of *politics* from *political science*. For example, Hans Morgenthau argued that "politics is an art and not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman… The age has tried to make politics a science. By doing so, it has demonstrated its intellectual confusion, moral blindness, and political decay."

the 1960's, political scientists began paying attention to political issues rather than methodological debates (Barber 2006, 540).

Following this trend, research methods diversified and research techniques have become more sophisticated. For example, statistical packages such as Stata, SPSS, SAS, and R have been used very often in political analysis, and various statistical methods; such as maximum likelihood estimation, time series analysis, Bayesian modeling, multilevel modeling, network analysis, etc.; have been developed to inform the course of political studies.[3] In addition, the frequency of applying an experiment, which originated from the natural science research, has increased continuously (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski and Lupia 2006, 628). Due to the development of research methods, the power to explain and predict political events has been improved.

Under the academic development of logical positivism,[4] it is desirable for researchers to eliminate their subjective emotions, thoughts, characteristics and attitudes in the course of knowledge production, so that they could achieve scientifically credible research results. In other words, the intentional distinction between researchers and their research objects has become one of the ethical virtues of scientific enterprise.[5]

However, is there any kind of scientific knowledge irrelevant to subjective matters? If there is not, at what points are subjective elements operating in the research process? How could the knowledge of international relations be scientifically better by acknowledging the subjective traits of knowledge? To answer the questions, Chapter 2 introduces the current definitions of objectivity and the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity in political science. It argues that the meanings of objectivity and subjectivity has been changed over time and socially and culturally embedded. Chapter 3 explores the subjective elements of scientific knowledge in general and Chapter 4 elucidates three subjective elements of political knowledge. The methodological implications for the knowledge of international relations and the research puzzles for future studies are discussed in Chapter 5.

(Morgenthau 1957, 10)

[3] For the details, check *ICPSR*, Summer Program in Quantitative Methods of Social Research 2016 courses (ICPSR Homepage).

[4] Logical positivism is a tradition of philosophy starting in 1920's. It is rooted in positivism which Auguste Comte formed the philosophical foundation in 19C and the discourse is continued by John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, etc. The essential positions of logical positivism are that knowledge has to be based on empirical observations and that a research method and procedure of natural science can be applied to the social science research. For explaining social phenomenon, logical positivists emphasize that they need universal laws connecting different empirical phenomena or connecting different aspects of an empirical phenomenon (Hempel 1966, 54; Oh 2010, 22).

[5] René Descartes thought that a human mind is cutting off from the rest of the world. A person who has this perspective is called a mind-world dualist. Whereas a person who thinks that a man is a constitutive part of the world is called a mind-world monist (Jackson 2011, vii).

2. Disjunction between Objectivity and Subjectivity

The definition of objectivity has changed over time and became embedded both in cultural and social situations. Disregarding and transcending the history of the word, some philosophers suggest that the conception of objectivity is unchangeable. However, the usage of 'objectivity' has also changed as other linguistic changes of terms.

In the scholastic philosophy, 'the objective' was not related to the objects of the external world, but related to the objects of the thoughts. In the medieval age, 'the objective' was the ontological term rather than the epistemological term. The truly real objects were the idea of divine minds. In the early modern age, René Descartes argued about the degree of 'objective reality' that includes various ideas. In the nineteenth century, by accepting the philosophical association with the physical objects of the external world and the juristic meanings of impartiality, the ontological penumbra of the scholastic philosophy was remained. Immanuel Kant started to use 'objectivity' as a technical term. For him, 'the objective validity' is not related to the external object, but pertained to the relational categories such as space, time, and causality that are the preconditions of experiences. However, after Kant, Samuel Coleridge misunderstood Kant's studies. He misled the meanings of objectivity and subjectivity; 'the objective' implies the *nature* without consciousness, while 'the subjective' refers to the *self or intelligence* with consciousness (Daston 1992, 600-601). In the twentieth century, Karl Popper insisted that "the objectivity of scientific statements lies in the fact that they can be *inter-subjectively tested*" and that "a subjective experience, or a feeling of conviction, can never justify a scientific statement (Popper 2002, 22, 24)."

The current definitions of 'objectivity' shared in the scientific communities are as follows; the empirical (or the factual); empirically reliable knowledge; removing the researcher's own self uniformly and cold-blooded controlling their emotions thoroughly; the forced agreement from rational minds; the 'really-real' objects which are independent from every minds except the mind of God (Daston 1992, 597-598).

Following the current definitions of objectivity, the fundamental feature of science is *an ideal for objectivity* that means the promise that objectivity controls the scientific statements. That is, all scientific statements are the objects of inspections ruled by independent and impartial criteria. In the realm of cognition, no authority of persons contributes any pressure to the process of knowledge production. Those who make the cognitive claims using rational minds; scientists, historians, philosophers, mathematicians, and the public; are characterized by *the ideal for objectivity* (Scheffler 1982, 1-2). In the scientific communities where *the ideal for objectivity* dominates, there is also *the legend of objectivity*. It means that objectivity functions as an identification of scientific knowledge (Shapin 2011, 172). Furthermore, the general public has *a reverence for science,* which includes a solid belief in the objective nature of science (Longino 1990, 170).

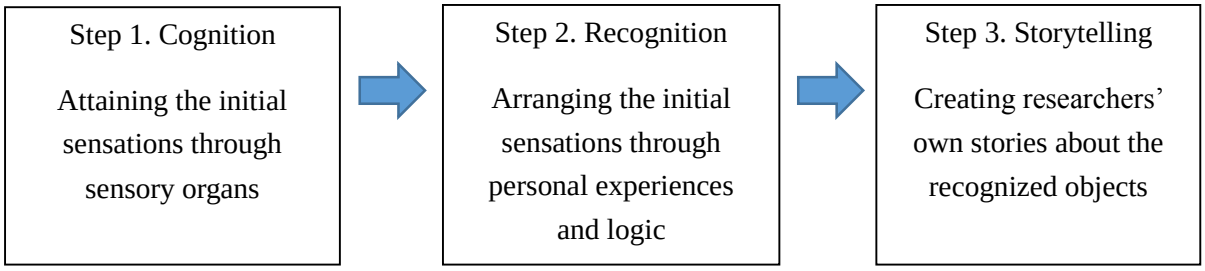
Subjectivity has been treated as a heterogeneous substance in the objective stories a so-called 'trash conception'. Subjectivity is something that we are sadly stuck with it, if we would not be aware of it. Whereas, objectivity is something ideal using the facts. In the process of knowledge production, subjective elements are not logical and stable; instead, they are incomplete, vague and endlessly variant. In addition, subjectivity is described as something individual and lonely, while objectivity is portrayed as something collective and delightful (Daston 1992, 610). That is, subjectivity has been treated as an irritating substance reducing and hiding objectivity of scientific knowledge (Shapin 2011, 170-172; Daston 1992, 610). In this context, Michael Polanyi argues,

> Yet the prevailing conception of science, based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, seeks-and must seek at all costs-to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play. (Polanyi 1962, 15-16)

3. Subjective Elements in the Basic Process of Knowing

A human being has an inherent desire to know and identify himself/herself.[6] To fulfill this desire, people seek to attain knowledge about the external world as well as knowledge about the self. This is because the very beginning of the process of knowing is understanding the distinction between you and me. The disjunction between the subject and the object is the initial and fundamental form of human experience. The concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are formulized in the course of this disjunction (Mulaik, 1995, 297). The basic process of knowing consists of three steps: cognition, recognition and storytelling. All of the basic steps of knowing contain subjective elements. This process of knowing operates in both the natural sciences and social sciences. Researchers might feel that splitting the knowing process into three steps is somewhat artificial because these steps often happen in an instant.

Figure 1. Basic Steps for Knowing



[6] "Being human means being conscious of having a self and the nature of the self is central to what it means to be human" (Lewis 1990).

The first step of knowing is *cognition*, attaining the initial sensations through five sensory organs: the organs of sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Researchers gain sense (or sensations) of their performances and occurrences of the external world through cognitive systems installed in sensory organs (Gibson 1966, 32). The sensory organs are very individual, which means that the sensations taken by sensory organs are intransmissible and impenetrable (Poincaré 1958, 274). When researchers examine the same object, they attain different initial sensations using their own sensory organs.

The second step is *recognition*; arranging the initial sensations through personal experiences and logic. After researchers collect several sensations on the same object, researchers arrange the data in different ways based on their experiences and logic. Experiences and logic develop from the course of socialization and self-learning. Even if researchers have similar experiences and logic, each researcher applies them to the sensations using their own judgements.

The last step of knowing is *storytelling*; creating researchers' own stories about the recognized objects. Each researcher develops stories containing the researchers' own subjective perception, preferences, characteristics, valuations, perspectives and so on. That is, the stories reflect the researchers' own thoughts, feelings and the way they live their lives.

Take for example the process of understanding snow in the natural world. A researcher uses his/her sensory organs to attain information about snow. The researcher can feel snow through the skin, listen to the sound of walking on snow, look at snow, taste snow, and smell snow through their sensory organs and get the initial sensations of snow. The sensory organs are working in the indirect process of knowing snow as well. The researchers who are not experiencing snow directly can understand sensations of snow by reading articles and watching videos about snow. Because the sensory organs are individual, sensations of snow cannot be transited to other researchers. In the next step, the researcher arranges the initial sensations. For example, 'snow is cold,' 'snow is white,' 'snow smells nothing' etc. In the final step, researchers make stories about snow such as the amount of snowfall, the chemical compositions of snow, and the cause and effect of falling snow. The stories are based on researchers' priorities, feelings, worldviews and so on.

In the social world, consider the example of understanding physical violence. Any physical violence, which is one of the social objects, can also be sensed through researchers' sensory organs. A researcher could feel physical pain through the skin, see the violent scene, listen to the sound of beating and screaming, etc. After the step of cognition, the researcher arranges the sensations and recognizes physical violence based on his/her experiences and logic; 'physical violence gives a sufferer bruises on the skin,' 'physical violence makes someone scream,' and 'physical violence brings mental problems'. The researcher gains resources for making stories about physical violence. He/she can talk about the types of physical violence, the cause and effect of physical violence, the structural conditions of physical violence, the

prevention of physical violence, etc. The stories include the researchers' prior values, preferences, and academic and social backgrounds.

For another example of social phenomena, we consider the process of understanding a political election. When a researcher faces a political election for the first time, he/she senses it through their sensory organs; they listen to the sound of campaign and related news, look at campaign posters, and read articles and rumors. With the sensations, the researcher gets to understand what the political election is. 'An election offers an opportunity to choose political leaders to voters,' 'candidates try to introduce themselves and announce their policy directions to voters,' 'the each candidates belong to political parties and the parties have representative colors,' and so on. After the recognition, researchers create stories about the election depending on their subjective perceptions. The stories might deal with the pattern of voting behaviors, the strategy and its effect of the election campaigns, the policy differences among candidates for the certain issues, and the relationship among the administrative government, civil society, assembly, etc.

4. Subjective Elements in the Research Process of Political Science

4.1. Research Objects

In the research process of political studies, subjective elements are focused on three points. The first point is related to research objects. The research objects in political science are inherently subjective. Political science, the so-called 'King's science', deals with governance, political institutions, political behaviors, political processes, political cultures and so on. We know that political actors are subjective beings and their political behaviors are the results of subjective choices as well. There are no persons or groups not having priorities, preferences, tendencies, and cultural backgrounds.

Meanwhile, it is difficult to explore the subjective elements of the research objects. The first reason is that subjective elements are unobservable and instable, and the second reason is that the measurements to detect them are unreliable (Schedler 2012, 23). To work out a solution, political scientists have been trying to carry subjectivity out of political actors' minds and behaviors by visualizing and objectifying unobservable elements. Researchers make an effort to bring subjective elements under control and change them to be describable and predictable intentionally and unintentionally. For example, a survey method is one of the useful methods to convert subjective elements of research objects to be objective. World Value Survey(WVS), one of the premier survey databases in the social sciences, examines the values of people in almost 100 countries and their impact on political and societal life. [7] Another qualified survey database in political science is the American National Election Studies(ANES).

[7] *World Value Survey* Homepage.

It provides datasets for voting, public opinions, and political participations in American politics.[8]

However, the subjective elements-emotions, valuations, expectations-are not easily made objective (Diesing 1972, 151). Objectivity is not something we can be against, but something we have specifications to manage (Shapin 2011, 170). Although the survey method has upgraded comprehensively for decades, there is an inherent gap between the real substance and the objectified research objects that cannot be overcome (Diesing 1972, 151-153). In the process of transferring subjective elements into objective scales, there must be the unavoidable losses of real substances. When a researcher makes survey questions and selects types of scales, the researcher simplifies respondents' subjective perceptions by taking researchers' subjective judgements.

4.2. Selection of Research Methods and Statistical Criteria

The second point at which subjective elements are focused is in the selection of their research methods and acceptance of statistical criteria. The selection of the research methods is influenced by the personal traits of the researchers and the academic trend of scientific communities. Research methods influence philosophical and theoretical characteristics and researchers choose the most suitable research method regarding the purpose of their research. Research methods shed light on the different sides of the research objects and researchers focus on understanding the different sides of the research objects. In other words, the selection of the research methods is as crucial as the selection of research objects to develop stories. It is evident that the boundaries of research objects have been stretched due to the development of research methods over time.

In the case of political studies using statistical methods, subjective elements are inevitably operating in the course of accepting the statistical criteria. There have been numbers of debates concerning the non-objective traits of statistics in the philosophy of science. The statistical results do not function to judge the truth of a statement, but to tell whether it is 'rejected' or 'not rejected'. The true statement points out 'truthfulness' not a 'truth'. For example, if a p-value[9] was less than 0.05 under the condition of significant level 0.05, the hypothesis would not be rejected. It means that the hypothesis is not rejected in less than five sample groups among 100 sample groups. If the p-value was more than 0.05 under the same condition, the hypothesis would be rejected. It means that the hypothesis is rejected in more than five sample groups among 100 sample groups (Agresti 2009, 146). The criterion, number

[8] *American National Election Studies* Homepage.

[9] "The P-value is the probability that the test statistic equals the observed value or a value even more extreme in the direction predicted by H_a(alternative hypothesis). It is calculated by presuming that H_o(null hypothesis) is true." (Agresti 2009, 145)

five, cannot tell anything about the truthfulness of the statements.

Furthermore, several researchers who focus on *statistical and methodological myths*. Researchers who are captured by myths have a belief that statistically significant results tell the truthfulness of statements (Vandenberg 2006, 194). However, statistical criteria itself is not a true and absolute guideline, but a product of consensus among researchers. Milos Taliga argues,

> …the truth of T[theory] cannot be *proved* conclusively but "only" *supported* by evidence. From the point of view of deductive logic, if T passes a test, or even millions of tests, it does not follow that T is true but only that T can be either true or false, *these possibilities being equal*. So, although the fact that T passed tests cannot provide good reasons in favor of T's truth, perhaps it can influence a scientist S to *believe* in T, and thus to involve S in *invalid reasoning*. In that case, S would reason invalidly from (T→p) and p to T, and end up with *believing*, not *knowing*, that T is true. (Taliga 2016, 4)

The myth seems to be the result of blind trust on the quantitative methods. Of course, numbers give information about the self or the world and make information communicable, comparable and storable (Daston 1992, 610), but they are not able to provide any information about the truthfulness of the research objects.

4.3. Researchers

The third point, which suggests that subjective elements are working in political studies, involves the researchers who are conducting the studies. Political scientists are subjective actors with personal characteristics who can be influenced by structural environments where researchers are posited. As Ernest Nagel points out that, because social scientists are active participants joining in the societal process, they understand the internal meanings of societal behaviors reflecting their subjective experiences on the social phenomena. Social scientists try to impute subjective perceptions to understand the research objects. As an empiricist, Nagel insists that the imputation of subjective elements should be supported by objective evidences for political knowledge to be scientific. That is, it is a vain hope to meet the genuine objectivity or totally behavioristic political knowledge (Nagel 1961, 35-44).

In the same context, Max Weber argues that social science studies cannot be independent from a certain point of view. This is because social science studies have transcendent purposes over a genuine formal treatment to regulate the legal and traditional norms. In addition, objective analysis on political events is meaningless because political events are not exactly dominated by social laws, and because knowledge about social laws is not actually knowledge about the social realities. Knowledge should be understood in certain

contexts and it is impossible to consider knowledge without any peculiarities. In other words, knowledge can only help researchers' minds to get the end (Weber 1949, 85, 91). Weber argues,

> There is simply no "objective" scientific analysis of cultural life-or, put perhaps somewhat more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes-of a "social phenomenon" independent of special and "one sided" points of view, according to which-explicitly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously-they are selected, analyzed, and representationally organized as an object of research. (Weber 1949, 85)

5. Conclusion

This paper argues that political knowledge is the combination of objective and subjective elements and that there are cognitive and methodological barriers to have inquiries into subjective elements in political science. The definition of objectivity has changed over time and become socially and culturally embedded. In the current scientist communities, objectivity is counted as a sign for the scientific statements, while subjectivity is treated as an irritating substance diminishing objectivity. However, the general process of knowing consists of three steps: cognition, recognition, and storytelling, which contain subjective elements for each step. In addition, in the research process of political studies, subjective elements are crucial at three points; a research object, a selection of research method and statistical criteria, and a researcher himself/herself.

The first methodological implication is that, in the process of knowledge production, denying or eliminating subjective elements is destructing the holistic understanding of research objects. A researcher has to consider subjective elements as well as objective elements. Especially, in political studies, it is important to admit the subjective elements of research objects and research process rather than to banish them. Polanyi argues,

> For, as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a center lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity. (Polanyi 1962, 3)

The second methodological implication extracted from the research is that the genuine objectivity of research process or scientific knowledge is an ideological rhetoric.[10] This

[10] "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion. This is the function of no other art, for each of the others is instructive and persuasive about its own subject."

rhetoric includes a speaker's beliefs, moral judgments, and intentions to motivate others. Some researchers are trying to strengthen their power through their rhetoric. Their rhetoric is formed and maintained, not only by individuals making the words, but also by groups sharing the same ideas. In the case of the rhetoric of genuine objectivity, it provides a sense of psychological stability to researchers. This is because once the genuine objectivity is obtained; researchers do not worry about the uncertainty and ambiguity of the results. Some researchers realize that is just the rhetoric, but others do not recognize the illusion. Shortly, we can say that genuine objectivity is the product of psychological dynamics and that there are cognitive and methodological barriers to study on subjectivity in political science.

For the further studies, investigating the subjective elements of the research procedure and political knowledge might give overall understanding of the research objects. In addition, scrutinizing the mechanisms of the formation and maintenance of the methodological rhetoric, *genuine objectivity*, might provide information of the power distributions and the political dynamics in the academia. Especially, it would be fruitful to have inquiries on the international relations in East Asia because the research could bring several emotional and judgmental issues; i.e., the territorial disputes between Korea and Japan, and China and Japan, the problem of Korean comfort women who were enslaved in the Japanese colonial period, the distortion of history, etc.

(Aristotle 2007, 37-38)

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World Value Survey Homepage. (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp)