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Interobjectivity and Culture

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Abstract The wide-ranging review by Coelho and Figueiredo (2003) serves as a useful point of departure for highlighting two major limitations of discussions on intersubjectivity: first, rifts between different specialized groups; second, reductionism. As an albeit modest step forward, I suggest, first, stronger links between groups of specialists exploring intersubjectivity. Second, responding to the reductionist nature of the concept of intersubjectivity, I introduce the concept of *interobjectivity*, the understandings that are shared within and between cultures about social reality. I propose that intersubjectivity arises out of interobjectivity, and that the concept of interobjectivity leads researchers to pay more attention to collective and inter-group processes. Groups have unequal levels of influence on shaping interobjectivity, with majority groups enjoying greatest influence.

Key Words culture, duties, interobjectivity, intersubjectivity, rights

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Interobjectivity and Culture

I take *intersubjectivity* to mean that different individuals can and often do have different understandings of the world (including things, events and people), and in order to communicate with other individuals, they collaboratively construct an understanding that is to some extent shared. Contemporary discussions of intersubjectivity have been influenced by increasing specialization, which is leading to wider gaps between different 'islands' of researchers (Moghaddam, 1997), each working with their own assumptions about intersubjectivity. After elaborating on this point in the first section, I argue in the second section that the focus on intersubjectivity needs to be balanced with attention to what I term *interobjectivity*, the understandings that are shared within and between cultures about social reality.

Interobjectivity is particularly important in contexts where members of different majority and minority groups interact. I argue that the dominant focus on intersubjectivity, and the neglect of interobjectivity, reflects reductionist, individualistic biases in traditional research arising out of western culture. Finally, I propose that the concept of interobjectivity leads to a focus on collaboratively constructed objectifications of

the world to different degrees shared within and between cultures, out of which arises intersubjectivity.

Increasing Specialization and Scholarship on Intersubjectivity

In a well-crafted discussion, Coelho and Figueiredo (2003) categorize approaches to intersubjectivity, with special focus on the recognition of otherness through the formulation and construction of the self. Relative to many specialized discussions, the assessment by Coelho and Figueiredo covers a broad range of ideas from various authors, including sociologists, phenomenologists, psychoanalysts and psychologists. However, it is striking that three important and active lines of research directly on intersubjectivity are not given attention: first, experimental research on infants (e.g. Meltzoff & Moore, 1995; Trevarthen, 1993); second, empirical research on animals (e.g. Bard & Russell, 1999); third, conceptual analysis in the tradition of Vygotsky (1978) and Wittgenstein (1998). This neglect is striking and requires some explanation. Increasing specialization and professionalization of the academy is leading researchers to address the same questions with little attention to 'outside specialists', and to move ahead on the basis of local assumptions (Moghaddam, 1997).

One line of research applicable to intersubjectivity concerns so-called 'imitation' behavior among infants (see Nadel & Butterworth, 1999). Experimental evidence shows that infants only a few minutes old can 'react to' a human act by repeating it (Meltzoff & Moore, 1983). Fundamental questions remain about the interpretation of experimental results in this area. For example, if an infant pokes her tongue out when she sees an adult poke her tongue out, is this necessarily imitation or could it be a simple reaction? While the interpretation of such 'simple' behavior is debatable, Meltzoff and others have argued that more complex infant behaviors, such as the infant correcting her behavior to match the seen behavior of others and 'imitation' that is deferred, demonstrate that genuine imitation is involved soon after birth. Indeed, imitation is viewed as an innate capacity. Moreover, following Piaget (1962), imitation has been assumed to involve cognitive processes.

A number of researchers have made the leap from assumed neonatal imitation to innate intersubjectivity, or at least to claiming that some types of intersubjectivity are innate (Nadel & Butterworth, 1999). For example, Trevarthen (Trevarthen, Kokkinaki, & Fiamenghi, 1999) distinguishes between *Primary Intersubjectivity*, 'where the motivation is

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focused on immediate regulation of communication itself' (p. 152) and *Secondary Intersubjectivity*, where the infant 'accepts information from gesture and vocalisation about an incomplete intended action, and he or she is eager to complete it' (p. 154). According to Trevarthen, Primary Intersubjectivity is innate, but Secondary Intersubjectivity is learned.

Certain challenges persist in the interpretation of research on 'imitation' among infants, and particularly the leap from assumed 'imitation' (and not just 'reaction') to intersubjectivity. Infants do not have language skills (although they do have protoconversations), and so if they are shown to have developed a 'theory of mind', conceptions of the other, and all the other possible requirements for intersubjectivity, it must have happened prior to having language skills. But yet again, chimpanzees do not have language skills (at least not complex ones, by comparison with human language performance), and they are also assumed to have imitation as infants (Myowa, 1996). Should 'imitation' among infant chimpanzees lead to the conclusion that they have intersubjectivity? Or, should we assume that language is a prerequisite for intersubjectivity? If this is the case, what Trevarthen refers to as Primary Intersubjectivity would be interpreted as mere 'reactivity'. Human infants would be assumed to develop intersubjectivity only through the acquisition of linguistic skills.

One highly constructive way forward on this issue, following Vygotsky, is to focus on the intentional individual in the process of interactions with others (see Bruner, 1996; Wertsch, 1998). In this case 'reflexive' or 'reactive' behavior, such as a human or animal infant mimicking an adult facial expression, does not count as true imitation. Rather, the focus is on joint action, such as when an infant collaborates to complete a task. For instance, the mother points and the infant, instead of looking at the mother's hand, has learned to look to where the hand is pointing. Thus, mother and infant collaborate to attend to the same target.

A danger is that when we look at human infant behavior, we may interpret that behavior as true imitation and assume all kinds of cognitive underpinnings, even though the same behavior manifested by an animal would be interpreted without making the same assumptions. In other words, the same behavior by a human infant might lead to assumptions about higher mental processes being involved, whereas that behavior manifested by an animal would be interpreted as mimicking, 'reaction' or some simpler behavior not associated with higher mental processes. This problem is more likely be overcome through closer ties between groups of specialists, so that experimental studies

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would also be closely assessed by those (e.g. Coelho and Figueiredo, 2003) engaged in conceptual/phenomenological investigations of intersubjectivity.

Thus, in assessing discussions on intersubjectivity, a first proposal is that more attention needs to be given to building bridges across the different specialist groups examining intersubjectivity, and particularly bridging experimental research on humans and animals with more theoretical, phenomenological explorations. A second critical point concerns two of the major limitations of the concept of intersubjectivity: it is *reductionist*, and it *does not incorporate power inequalities*. With respect to reductionism, intersubjectivity is focused on individualistic rather than inter-group processes, leading us to examine inter-personal and intra-personal experiences, and not collective ones. As regards power, examinations of intersubjectivity implicitly assume that the interactions being studied involve individuals who enjoy equal power. The experiences of minorities, who by definition have less power, are not a focus. Research on social relations (see Moghaddam, 2002) suggests that both at the interpersonal and inter-group levels, those who have more power are often able to 'help' shape understandings of the world held by those who have less power.

I argue that these reductionist biases reflect individualistic western models of human behavior, which purport to be politically neutral. As a modest step toward achieving more balance, I introduce the concept of interobjectivity. This concept facilitates the understanding of inter-group and collective processes, particularly those relations characterized by power inequalities.

Interobjectivity

How do different individuals come to have understandings of objective reality to a great extent shared within their ingroups, and to some extent shared between ingroups and outgroups? How do individuals come to see the positions of ingroups and outgroups within this assumed objective reality? Such questions lead us to consider the *processes* of inter-group relations, rather than just the outcomes. As a first tentative step, we can gain some insights into these processes through the major theories of inter-group relations (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994), as well as through empirical research on how human groups collaboratively construct and uphold particular views of the world (even though most of this theory and research continues to be concerned with outcome rather than process). Such objectifications are tapped in research on social representations (Deaux & Philogène, 2001),

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as well as anthropological field research exploring belief systems in important areas such as marriage (e.g. Levine, 1988).

Objectifications of the world held by group members depend in large part on the location or situation of a group in the process of competition for power, and the type of inter-group relations in which a group is involved. Simply put, how powerful is a group relative to other groups, and is the status of the group improving or declining? Power and status will determine the extent to which a group achieves interobjectivity that reflects its own true group interests. Below I discuss four basic types of inter-group relations in this process: limited inter-group contact, minority subjugation, collective mobilization and revolution, and new majority group consolidation.

Limited Inter-group Contact

Under certain conditions group members may have very limited contact with outgroups. This may arise because a group chooses to remain apart, for religious reasons, for example. This occurs even in the context of the 21st-century United States. For example, the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania have limited their contact with outgroups as a way of preserving their traditional culture (Hostetler, 1980). Historically, geographical isolation has been a major factor limiting contact. For example, the Tasmanians and the Tiwi both lived in geographical isolation on different islands off the shore of Australia, until they were discovered by western explorers. Their objectifications of the world evolved in relative isolation from other groups. But geographical isolation can also arise on land: the Tibetan Nyinba have lived in isolated villages in the high valleys of the Himalayan Mountains of the Tibetan plateau, while the isolation of the Yanomamo was possible because of their dense Amazon jungle environment in Brazil and Venezuela.

Limited contact with outgroups enables a group to develop and maintain objectifications of the world that differ, often fundamentally, from those of mainstream western society. For example, the Old Order Amish of Pennsylvania shun electricity, cars and modern technology (Hostetler, 1980), Tibetan Nyinba practice fraternal polyandry (women marry several husbands who are brothers—Levine, 1988), the traditional Tiwi believed that babies are created (in the bodies of women) by spirits (Hart, Pilling, & Goodale, 2001). Numerous other examples are evident in the lives of the Tasmanians (Ryan, 1981), the Yanomamo (Chagnon, 1992) and other groups who have lived for long periods in isolation.

In many cases there are functional reasons for the particular objectifications of the world developed by a group with limited outside

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contacts. For example, from a western perspective fraternal polyandry appears 'challenging' (for both males and females), but in the ecological context of the Tibetan Nyinba it has adaptive features. In the region of the Himalayan Mountains serving as home to this group, arable land is extremely scarce. If land is passed on to the next generation by dividing it up among sons, the land-holdings would become smaller and smaller, and unable to sustain a family. But when all the brothers in a family marry the same woman, all their land is passed on intact to their sons, born to this same wife. Their sons, in turn, marry the same woman. Thus the land does not get divided up as it is passed on from generation to generation.

Having limited contact with outgroups means that a group does not have exposure to objectifications of the world that are different from its own. More broadly, such an isolated group does not have opportunities to develop a different interobjectivity through social interactions with outgroups, because there is no outgroup with which to develop shared understandings. Such opportunities only arise through inter-group contact.

Minority Subjegation

Interobjectivity tends to change shape through inter-group contact, but typically such contact involves groups with unequal power. Contacts between majority groups, who by definition have more power, and minority groups, who have less power, historically have led to majority groups having relatively high influence on the objectifications of minority groups. In some cases, minority groups have little impact on the objectifications of majority groups, and indeed do not even survive for long after contact in order to enjoy the opportunity to have influence. For example, between 1642, when the island of Tasmania was first discovered by Europeans, and 1876, when the last Tasmanian died, Tasmanians had very little influence on how the European settlers saw the world. In this roughly two-hundred-year period the entire Tasmanian population was wiped out by the Europeans, with most of the killing taking place between 1800 and the 1830s (Ryan, 1981).

Because of power disparities, interobjectivity typically involves the minority group appropriating at least parts of the worldview of the majority group. A consequence is that minority groups perceive the world in terms not of their own interests, but of the interests of the majority group. This theme has been extensively discussed in the social sciences in relation to the concept of false consciousness, and the distinction between groups that accurately perceive their own interests and those who misperceive such interests (e.g. see the distinction

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between groups-for-themselves and groups-in-themselves—Billig, 1976). Although in the Marxist tradition the concept of false consciousness has developed specifically in relation to social class and economic interests (Marx & Engels, 1964), this concept has influenced the worldviews of ethnic minorities, feminists and others. For example, since the pioneering research of the Clarks (Clark & Clark, 1939), the misidentification of minority group members and their misperceptions of their group characteristics and interests has been a research focus.

The major theories of inter-group relations provide insights into the conditions that lead to shifts in interobjectivity in association with the collective mobilization of a minority group (see reviews in Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). For example, social identity theory proposes that collective mobilization is more likely to take place in association with a perception that the current inter-group relationship is illegitimate and unstable, and the possibility does not exist for individuals to exit from the minority group and try to join the majority group to improve their situation. Theories in the conflict tradition, including realistic conflict theory, assume that continued inter-group conflict over competing material interests will lead to shifts in interobjectivity, so that minority and majority groups will come to have less of a shared worldview. In particular, this shift in interobjectivity concerns justice and conceptions of rights and duties.

Collective Mobilization and Revolution

The histories of different societies show patterns of rise and fall of powers, so that majority groups enjoy supremacy for a period and then are overtaken by other groups (which previously had minority status). This seemingly universal cyclical pattern led Pareto (1935) to postulate that all societies are governed by elites, and that revolutions merely replace one elite with another without changing the structure of society; this is in marked contrast to the Marxist prediction that societies undergo structural transformations toward a classless society. Irrespective of the assumptions made about historical development of societies, most agree that collective mobilization and revolution are reoccurring themes in human history. In order to achieve collective mobilization and to challenge existing majority groups, minorities must develop objectifications of the world that, initially at least, are *not* shared by majority groups.

Consider, for example, the collective mobilization of African-Americans and feminists, particularly in the late 1960s. These minority groups learned to challenge traditional objectifications of the world,

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reflected in stereotypes of African-Americans and women. In order to arrive at an interobjectivity associated with justice and equal opportunities, these minorities had to reject interobjectivity as passed on to them. That is, they had to reject the shared understandings they had in common with majority groups, because in general such understandings served to justify existing inequalities.

The new objectifications held by minority and majority groups, developed in the context of collective mobilization and inter-group competition and conflict, necessarily diverge on the issue of justice, and particularly rights and duties. At least prior to the reform of 'black-letter law' and the formal legal system, minority groups typically find it strategically to their advantage to emphasize rights, whereas majority groups find it strategically to their advantage to emphasize duties (Moghaddam, Slocum, Finkel, Mor, & Harré, 2000). Thus, for example, prior to the equal rights legislation in the United States, ethnic minorities marched under a banner of 'equal rights for all'. After formal law has been reformed, minority rights can highlight the duties of the majority group to abide by the law of the land. That is, those in positions of power are reminded that they have a duty to put the law into effect and to provide equal opportunities for all.

The different emphasis placed on rights and duties by children and parents is also of interest here (Moghaddam & Riley, in press). Children, who can be thought of as a minority in terms of power, typically emphasize rights, quickly declaring 'But that's not fair!' when they feel that they are being denied their rights (as in, 'That's not fair, my friends are going to the cinema, so I should be allowed to go too'). Parents, on the other hand, emphasize duties (as in, 'It's perfectly fair, because you have to finish your homework before you play'). When children grow up and become parents themselves, they too emphasize the duties of children, while their children in turn highlight personal rights. Thus, interobjectivity involving parents and children typically is limited by the different power positions of the parties, which leads to differences in objectifications of the world.

New Majority Group Consolidation

Changes in inter-group power relations are associated with changes in interobjectivity. When a minority group gains power and either joins or becomes the majority group, it develops objectifications of the world that are in line with its new power position. At the individual level I gave the example of children becoming parents and shifting from an emphasis on rights to duties in parent–child relationships, but important examples are also available at the inter-group level. Consider, for

example, the typical process of events before and after revolutions (Moghaddam, 2002, ch. 2; Moghaddam et al., 2000). During the pre-revolution phase, revolutionary leaders attempt to mobilize support by focusing on the rights that have been denied. Typical slogans in this era are 'equal rights', 'the right to vote', 'the right to free speech', 'the right to form a political opposition' and 'the right to protest'. Other slogans typical of this pre-revolution era are concerned with 'bread and butter' issues, such as 'the right to work', 'the right to housing', 'the right to health care', and so on.

But after a revolution has taken place, the new majority group is no longer trying to overturn the system; rather, the majority group is now concerned with achieving stability and consolidating power. The new majority group now emphasizes the duties of all individuals to abide by laws, to obey and conform rather than to disobey and rebel, to enhance the harmony of society rather than to exaggerate conflict. Thus, from the great French revolution (1789) to modern revolutions, including the 1917 communist revolution in Russia and the 'quiet' revolutions that brought an end to the Soviet empire in the late 1980s, a shift is evident in the rhetoric of revolutionaries from an emphasis on rights prior to the revolution, to an emphasis on duties after the revolution. Pareto (1935) has argued that this shift in rhetoric reflects the cyclical nature of inter-group relations: revolutions simply bring to power new elites, who perpetuate the same inequalities but often under a different guise.

In summary, then, I have argued that the majority/minority status of groups in large part shapes their objectifications of the world, but that there are fundamental differences between majority and minority groups in that objectifications held by majority groups tend to reflect their true material interests, whereas those held by minority groups can, and often do, mis-represent their own interests. Using the example of human rights and duties, I have shown that the majority/minority status of a group in important ways shapes how it views justice issues: minority groups typically emphasize rights, particularly when they are engaged in collective action (as occurred during the civil rights movement of the late 1960s, for example), while majority groups typi-cally emphasize duties. Through their greater power, majority groups generally attempt to influence minority group perceptions, so that they not only dominate the nature of interobjectivity but also use it to perpetuate their power advantages. On the other hand, minority groups seeking greater power attempt to change interobjectivity, so that they can arrive at a view of the world less like that of the majority group.

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Concluding Comment

The concept of interobjectivity leads us to focus on the collaboratively constructed world outside individuals, and to view subjective understandings as arising out of participation in collective processes. This, in turn, leads to a different perspective on what received wisdom tells us are puzzles concerning intersubjectivity (e.g. How do we know that the awareness, feelings, and so on, that we have are our own and not those of others? How can we be sure that we understand the understandings of others, and that they understand our understandings? In sum, how is it possible to know another consciousness?). A 'common-sense' answer to these questions, in the spirit of Thomas Reid, is that practical experiences lead us to recognize that because of collaboratively constructed and shared objectifications, for much of the time it is possible to understand others, and for them to understand us, with enough accuracy to get through the various collaborative tasks we all have to undertake in private and professional life.

As I undertake my tasks as a family member, a mentor to students, a member of a local community, a novice in a sports group, the chair of a selection committee, and so on, it is obvious that others do have a basic understanding of my intentions, ideas, values, and the like, as I have of theirs. Even when I leave familiar territory and enter into the arena of a different cultural group, as typically does happen when I conduct field research, I still am able to communicate effectively enough to carry out basic tasks: finding a place to stay at night, locating key people in a community, identifying issues important to the host culture, and so on. Consequently, at least at the level of common sense and everyday functioning, intersubjectivity does not raise insurmountable problems or questions. My 'common-sense reaction', then, is to agree with those who, as Coelho and Figueiredo point out, see intersubjectivity as a 'false problem' (p. 197). Arguably the greater challenge, one that is directly entangled with issues of peace, conflict, war, genocide and most of the historic inter-group problems facing humankind, concerns interobjectivity.

I have also proposed that interobjectivity should be given priority because of a more fundamental reason: intersubjectivity arises out of interobjectivity. It is through participation in a collaboratively constructed and collectively upheld social life that people come to have understandings of individual others. The priority of interobjectivity becomes manifest when we consider understandings of individual others within and between cultures. Interobjectivity enables individuals from different groups to achieve intersubjectivity. When there

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is no real interobjectivity, as between Western Europeans and the ill-fated natives of Tasmania whom they 'discovered', intersubjectivity between individuals from the different groups is also severely limited. As another example, lack of developed interobjectivity between Westerners and Tibetan Nyinba who practice fraternal polyandry means that intersubjectivity is easier to achieve between the members of the same group than between the members of the two different groups. For both practical and theoretical reasons, then, more attention needs to be given to interobjectivity.

Acknowledgements

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Biography

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