

The Relativity of Psychological Phenomena

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A principle of relativity concerning psychological phenomena is proposed. It states, first, that an individual's perspective is that of which the person is directly, or immediately, aware. Second, the fundamental structure of perspective is the individual's direct, or immediate, awareness of self in the substantive world in which other individuals exist and with which this person can communicate this awareness through the use of language. The principle allows for knowledge of psychological phenomena to be developed from the objective as well as from the subjective viewpoint. The principle provides the manner in which these viewpoints are related. Thus, the relativity principle provides a unified framework for psychology; it is elegant in that it has widespread application and is parsimonious in nature.

Frames of Reference

The genius of Einstein (1905/1952) was that he was able to supersede the classical transformation laws of Newtonian mechanics and adhere to and promote the principle of relativity. The classical transformation laws allow for the relation of inertial frames of reference (i.e., those in which the laws of nature are valid) in uniform motion (i.e., constant velocity) relative to one another in an absolute time and space. Einstein proposed an alternative to the maintenance of an absolute time and space for such frames of reference. He proposed that one assume that the laws of nature (including Newtonian mechanics) hold or are completely valid in each inertial frame of reference moving in a uniform manner relative to one another and that one use a constant of both frames of reference (i.e., the speed of light) to relate events considered from both frames of reference. Thus, if Einstein's propositions are assumed, an event involving motion will result in one particular amount of time elapsed and distance traveled in one frame of reference and a different time elapsed and a different distance traveled in the other frame of reference. The time and distance in each frame of reference are related to one another by using the uniform motion of one frame of reference relative to the other (i.e., the constant velocity of one system relative to the other) and the constant of the speed of light that exists in both frames of reference. The manner of their relation is given mathematically by the Lorentz transformation.

The basis of Einstein's genius laid in his courage to question the very foundation of classical mechanics (the absoluteness of time and space for all

frames of reference) and to acknowledge the important factors of the frames of reference from which physical events are observed with regard to the understanding and description of these events. An observer in one frame of reference has a view with regard to understanding a physical event that is different from the understanding of this same physical event for another observer in a different frame of reference. Einstein did not propose that an observer in one frame of reference could actually observe some event concerning motion in the same manner as another observer in another frame of reference observing the same event. He only proposed a way for these observers' considerations of time and space to be related to one another.

Perspective and the Objective Viewpoint

I have been concerned with a similar form of questioning in critiquing the objective view that is the very foundation of contemporary psychology (Snyder, 1978, 1982a, 1982b). Further, I have proposed that the perspective of the experiencing individual is central to understanding psychological phenomena (Snyder, 1982a, 1982b). Perspective refers to the individual's direct experience of the world in which he or she exists. The individual's direct experience of the world involves the immediate reference of this person to the world. This experience is in some way particular to the person. This direct and immediate experience provides the foundation for the adoption of the objective view by an individual. The objective view is based upon the premise of an independently existing world uninfluenced in its development by the experiencing individual. This objective view has been the predominant framework for psychology since psychology's inception as an independent discipline in the latter 1800s. The positivist view in psychology, a view that those such as the radical behaviorists adhere to, is at base one particular manifestation of the objective view. The objective view is clearly exemplified in Kerlinger's (1973) influential book *Foundations of Behavioral Research* wherein he states:

In measurement, the question must be asked: Is the measurement game we are playing tied to "reality"? Do the measurement procedures being used have some rational and empirical correspondence to "reality" The ultimate question to be asked of any measurement procedure is: Is the measurement procedure isomorphic to reality? (p. 431)

Kerlinger assumed a single reality uninfluenced in its development by the experiencing individual. For Kerlinger, the goal of psychological work is to employ the proper measurement tool to gauge this reality. The independently existing world is given to a person studying psychological phenomena in a mediated manner through the measurement tool utilized.

Freud (1938/1978) also made this point regarding psychoanalysis in one of his last works:

In our science as in the others the problem is the same: behind the attributes (qualities) of the object under examination which are presented directly to our perception, we have to discover something else which is more independent of the particular receptive capacity of our sense organs and which approximates more closely to what may be supposed to be the real state of affairs . . . It is as though we were to say in physics: 'If we could see clearly enough we should find that what appears to be a solid body is made up of particles of such and such a shape and size and occupying such and such relative positions.' (p. 53)

The "real state of affairs" exists independently of and is uninfluenced in its development by the experiencing individual. The goal of psychoanalytic work is to gain the greatest clarity on this "real state of affairs." The independently existing world is given to a person doing psychoanalytic work through the analytic constructs used.

The objective view provides a model of the world in which psychological phenomena are seen in the same manner as physical phenomena (i.e., as enclosed within themselves). In addition, the objective view promotes a neutralization of one's own psychological experience. This neutralization has as its goal what is termed unbiased observation. The psychological phenomena studied within an objective view are essentially those of others and not those of the individual doing the studying (Snyder, 1978).

Each psychological school since psychology's inception as a distinct discipline in Germany in the latter 1800s has adopted the objective view in some fashion. Psychological schools such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and psychoanalysis have clearly embraced this view (Bower and Hilgard, 1981). Moreover, those schools that attempted to focus on the structure of experience have also embraced the objective view to a large degree. Introspectionism surely attempted an unbiased observation of the structure of experience. The act psychologists Brentano and Stumpf incorporated aspects of the objective view of psychological phenomena in their theories (Boring, 1950; Brentano, 1972; Spiegelberg, 1982). The Gestalt psychologists Wertheimer, Koffka, and Köhler noted a physiological base for their psychological concepts (Boring, 1950). The recent humanistic school has often employed statistical research models based upon the objective view as well.

A Principle Concerning Psychological Phenomena

The following two points comprise a principle of relativity concerning psychological phenomena. This principle accounts for subjectivity as well as objectivity in psychological phenomena. It also allows for a relation between these two frameworks.

- (1) The perspective of an individual is that of which this person is directly, or immediately, aware.
- (2) The fundamental structure of the perspective of an individual is this person's direct, or immediate, awareness of him or herself in the substantive world in which others exist and with which this individual can communicate this awareness through the use of language.

The *adoption* of the objective view by an individual as his or her perspective is this person's mode of *direct* awareness of him or herself in the world.

The proposed relativity principle allows for the introduction of the subjective viewpoint into psychology through the development of perspective. The features of the subjective viewpoint presented here must be strictly adhered to. If this adherence does not occur, the subjective view becomes simply an appendage of the objective view. It becomes another enclosed phenomenon experienced indirectly by the individual and understood in ways suitable to the objective view.

For example, phenomenologists since Husserl (1931) seem to have been concerned with direct experience. But it has in general been a characteristic of phenomenology since Husserl to be concerned with the development of a single, independently existing truth regarding the phenomenon under investigation. In phenomenological research, the influence of the individual on that which this same individual is experiencing is surpassed in the attainment of an independently founded truth. Phenomenology has in this central way remained faithful to the objective view. Direct experience does not support the phenomenological conception of truth. Within the subjective view presented in the relativity principle, truth never surpasses the influence of the individual on that in the world which this person is experiencing.

Situation and the Relation of Objective and Subjective Views

The perspectival view gives rise to the occurrence of situations. These situations are temporally structured in terms of:

- (1) The commitment of the individual to a particular realm of phenomena in the world.
- (2) The purpose of the individual for his or her commitment in this manner. This purpose is concerned with the particular possibilities in the future regarding the individual's direct relation to the world.
- (3) The historical background of the person in the world. This past provides the basis for the development of the individual's purpose and his or her commitment to a particular realm of phenomena.

As previously noted, the relativity principle allows for both subjective and objective viewpoints to be used with regard to psychological phenomena. Further, the principle allows for a unified framework to accommodate these views. This unified framework is possible only when a clear distinction is

made between subjective and objective views in the manner discussed. The subjective view becomes the encompassing framework for the development of psychological knowledge. The objective view maintains its status as one source of psychological knowledge. Further, the adoption of the objective view occurs on the subjective level. The adoption of this view may be explicitly understood in terms of the individual's situation, and this understanding may be carefully described.

For example, consider that a psychologist employs a true experimental design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) in the investigation of psychological phenomena (for example, the influence of anxiety level on task performance). Such a design and the accompanying statistical method used to evaluate the data collected are clearly concerned with the development of objective knowledge. The employment of this design as well as the evaluation of results obtained with this design may be understood from the subjective view.

The conduct of the investigation in the particular manner noted is the psychologist's situation. A preliminary outline of the structure of this situation consists of the following points.

- (1) The commitment of the psychologist to a particular realm of psychological phenomena. This commitment incorporates the adoption of the objective view as it is expressed in the specific design and statistical method used. The commitment also includes background assumptions regarding the nature of anxiety (e.g., whether anxiety is a covert response indicated by overt behavioral cues or simply consists of these overt cues).
- (2) The psychologist's purpose for his or her commitment to this specific realm of psychological phenomena. This purpose is concerned with the particular possibilities regarding the psychologist's relation to this realm of phenomena when the study is over. For example, does the psychologist expect a certain conclusion to be drawn from the research? What possible application does this individual foresee stemming from the research? Or how does the psychologist see his or her possible conclusions being integrated with objective knowledge regarding other psychological phenomena? One aspect of the psychologist's purpose incorporates the premise that whatever objective knowledge is uncovered in the study carries the possibility of being demonstrated again in an exact replication of the original study.
- (3) The historical background of the psychologist in terms of academic training and professional experience as regards the individual's relation to this realm of phenomena. This background provides the psychologist with the information to develop the specific approach to studying the phenomena at hand and the study's possible significance. For example, what previous research known by the psychologist led this individual to surmise that the study is of possible significance?

Though presented in outline format, it can be seen that the psychologist's objective study thus becomes part of this individual's situation.

Conclusion

The relativity principle for psychological phenomena is elegant in its widespread application and its parsimonious nature. The principle super-

sedes, and yet encompasses, the absolute, real world of psychological phenomena. It allows for the objective view—as well as the subjective view—of psychological phenomena, and it provides a manner for their relation through the individual's situation. Thus, the principle supplies a unified framework for psychology. The principle itself is concise and explicit.

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