THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCHER: EITHER ABSENT OR UNSCIENTIFIC?

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ABSTRACT

Various institutions of higher education, as well as editorial boards of scientific journals, advise prospective authors to avoid the first person. In this article we argue against the uncritical avoidance of the first person and try to analyse the reasons why such weak style is prescribed. We show that the avoidance of the first person is probably motivated by an outdated positivism, that the avoidance of the first person is not necessary for objectivity, and that the avoidance of the first person may be based on conceptual confusion. Scientists are persons, and persons are subjects. Objectivity lies in the methods applied by researchers. The strength of some of the qualitative research methods is their ability to utilise the researcher's subjectivity in the process of gaining objective and rational knowledge. No reason could be found to believe that an impersonal writing style promotes objectivity. Using the first person means accepting responsibility for what you write.

INTRODUCTION

This article is an argument against a rigid prohibition of the first person (I, we and their declensions) in scientific writing. When researchers prepare their research reports for publication in a scientific journal, it is customary to give attention to the style required by the particular journal. Various institutions of higher education and supervisors of postgraduate work as well as editorial boards of scientific journals provide prescriptions or guidelines for writing dissertations, scientific reports, papers and articles. In many cases, these guidelines advise prospective authors to

- "avoid first person ('I' or 'we'), because it shouldn't matter what you think or do as an individual" (University of North Carolina 1998), or
- limit "your use of first person construction..." (Bates College 2002).

We will refer to this as the *avoidance of the first person*. Authors are expected to refer to themselves in the third person (as Julius Caesar did in his *De bello Gallico*), or to use the impersonal passive construction.

It is also not unusual for reviewers of articles to comment that "your author writes in the first person singular instead of the conventional neutral objective way. The author's constant use of 'I believe' constitutes a flaunting of his/her subjectiveness ... . It is, however, rather foreign to our reading and interpretation of science and scientific writing" (Personal 2003). In a recently published article by one of us, the use of the first person was edited away – not always leading to good reading (Wessels 2004).

These examples are certainly not rare exceptions. On the Internet alone, numerous guides for writing scientific reports and papers are available. Of these, a considerable number similarly advise their readers against the use of the first person. However, the opposite advice also exists, for example:

- "In your claim you should use the personal pronoun 'I' (or 'we' if you aren't the sole author). The word 'I' tells people where common knowledge runs out and your ideas begin..." (Claerbout 1995)
- "There are places where the first person is acceptable. An example would be 'I do not believe the generally accepted interpretation is correct because...'. This is a statement of personal belief on the part of the scientist, about to be supported by facts or logic" (James Madison University 2004)

A review of the last four volumes of *Politeia,* a South African accredited journal for Public Administration and Political Sciences, shows that nearly all the articles are in an impersonal style of writing. This is unlike the findings of a review of Volume 23 of the international journal *Administrative Theory & Praxis,* where it is common for authors to use the first person, for example:

- "This article begins with an overview of rational economic theory, the standard in the world today and increasingly the base for most public administration decision making. **I then discuss** [our emphasis] the weaknesses of rational theory and identify notable failures and irrational outcomes" (Timney 2001:26)
- "At this point, **I believe** [our emphasis] biocentric public administration runs into a number of problems that are as yet unresolved" (Freemuth 2001: 53-54)

One of the standard ways in avoiding the first person is to use the passive voice: "*the cultures were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde* rather than *I/we fixed the culture* [etc.]" (Birchfield 1998:576). Although this standard manual on style accepts the use of the passive in scientific writing as a fact of life, it is not generally in favour of the impersonal passive. It agrees with Gowers as quoted by Birchfield that it often amounts to a pusillanimous shrinking from responsibility: " ... it is better to begin by identifying the person or group who feel, think, believe, have decided, etc" (Birchfield 1998:578). Gowers writes further: "The use of the impersonal passive, with its formal unsympathetic phrases such as 'it is felt', 'it is regretted', 'it is appreciated' is a sure sign that the wrong note has been struck. It gives the reader the impression that he is dealing with robots rather than human beings".

The language tools in two of the most used word processing programs, MSWord and WordPerfect, usually advise against the use of the passive. The passive voice is thus often identified as stylistically undesirable. We agree that the use of the passive can border on dishonesty. Authors may write "It is believed that ..." when they should have written "It is my unsubstantiated view that ...".

Although there are opposing trends and practices, it is evident that a considerable number of scholars and scholarly institutions seem to regard the use of the first person in scientific publications as unscientific or at the least undesirable. Why should something that is more or less stylistically undesirable be preferred?

In this article we argue against the uncritical avoidance of the first person and try to analyse the reasons why weak style is prescribed. We will show that the avoidance of the first person is probably motivated by an outdated positivism, that the avoidance of the first person is not necessary for objectivity, and that the avoidance of the first person may be based on conceptual confusion.

THE POSITIVISTIC LEGACY

Many reasons for the avoidance of the first person may be given, the most important of which may probably be the positivistic tradition in science. We understand "positivism" to refer to a view that empirical science provides a reliable picture of reality provided that nonfactual (including subjective) elements are barred and the rules of logic are followed; and that for every element of science a corresponding element of reality exists. Under this view, the scientist is basically a recorder and "deducer". Facts are recorded as they are, and the laws of nature are deduced from the facts by means of inductive reasoning. Therefore, the individual researcher is neither here nor there – another scientific observer would make the same observations and deductions – and fixing the attention on himself or herself by using the first person is unnecessary and disturbing. It seems to us that the effect of this tradition and the examples already mentioned is that the personal value preferences, beliefs and insights of the researcher must be avoided. Using the first person in a report on research findings is seen as bringing the researcher to the fore and endangering the objectivity of the research report.

These reasons appear to suggest that there is a tension between the subjectivity of scientists as human beings with a personal point of view and reasons for making their own scientific judgements on the one hand, and objectivity on the other, at least, objectivity as it has been misconstrued in positivism as one of the foundations of scientific enquiry. The logic of the criticism against the use of the first person seems to be that there are two mutually exclusive types of people working in the scientific sphere, namely the *selfless* scientist and the *unscientific* author (person). Selfless scientists are believed to be objective and consequently scientific. Persons in concrete situations are believed to be subjective and therefore unscientific. According to this position, by using the first person in scientific writing the researcher exposes his or her subjectiveness and "unscientificness".

Positivism as a philosophy of science has not been influential for several decades. It is so outdated that anti-positivism may be regarded as the cornerstone of much of current

philosophy of science. Our references are consequently embarrassingly dated. Perhaps it is the proponents of avoiding the first person that should be embarrassed.

The publication of Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* in 1962 fell on fertile ground. It showed that scientists work within historically situated "paradigms" to which they are committed, with a commitment that can be compared to religious faith. This is true for the natural sciences as much as the human sciences. Kuhn came to this conclusion on the strength of his research into the history of Physics. One reason why this approach was so readily accepted by intellectuals is that it can easily be demonstrated that research cannot proceed without certain background assumptions. These assumptions are not the result of the recording of facts. They relate to the personal belief system of the researcher. Alwin W Gouldner and an associate did empirical research into what they called "domain assumptions" of sociologists. They found that "domain assumptions are in fact consequential for, or at least very importantly related to, a great variety of other professional and theoretical beliefs held by sociologists, despite there being no sense in which they rest on 'evidence'" (Gouldner 1971:36). It is interesting that Gouldner, who does not mention Kuhn in his book, employs the concept of *domain assumptions*, which is close to Kuhn's concept of *paradigm*.

Another voice from the same period is that of Michael Polanyi. In 1969 he published *Personal knowledge*. The book shows that scientific knowledge is the result of the application of intellectual skills and therefore based on the life experience of the scientist. To quote from the notes on the cover: "Even in the exact sciences knowing is an art, in which the skill of the knower guided by his passionate sense of increasing contact with reality, forms a logically necessary part... The urge to make knowledge impersonal in our culture has split fact from value, science from humanity" (Polanyi 1969:cover).

Researchers select problems and empirical domains to investigate. These are choices, choices made by people in historical contexts. In Public Administration, researchers worked on different problem complexes in different periods. The "juridical approach", the "politics-administration dichotomy", the "machine approach", the "management approach", Easton's "system approach" and "New Public Management" are names of approaches that are well known to most of our readers. It is clear that each approach "produces" different facts because of the difference in focus of the Public Administrationists in their research. In the same vein, critical theorists, Africanists and feminists have made much of class, culture and gender interests underlying research in the human sciences (Mouton 1999: 269-290).

It can further be demonstrated that science cannot have a logical foundation that is factual. The search for such a foundation has also been thoroughly discredited. Anti-foundationalism is one of the few relatively certain results of philosophy (Pauw 1983: 64-70).

Positivism is rejected by current intellectuals because it holds out an ideal for science that cannot be achieved. We cannot be pure recorders because recording presupposes a structure and a position in terms of which recording takes place. Recording presupposes a kind of robot that no researcher can simulate. Recording presupposes a researcher with no interest (in both senses of the word: *a personal stake* and: *fascination -- belangstelling* and *belang*) in his work. Recording of the kind that pure positivism requires is not possible.

Rigid demands for its stylistic counterparts, the impersonal passive and the Caesarean third person, are unrealistic. The first person cannot be wished away.

The crucial question is, of course, whether choosing against positivism implies choosing against objectivity. We are not choosing for relativism in this article. We would not go as far as many postmodernists do. It seems, then, that the meaning of the concept *objectivity* is the bone of contention. Hence, one purpose of this article is to find pointers towards answers for the following questions: "What constitutes objectivity in science?" and "Is an im*personal* writing style a necessary condition for objectivity in science?"

AVOIDING THE FIRST PERSON IS NOT NECESSARY FOR OBJECTIVITY

The reason researchers are sometimes treated as nonexistent human beings, or as absent from the scene like Bob Dylan's Jack of Hearts, is that it is feared that their presence as persons will endanger the objectivity of the research. Objectivity together with rationality are commonly regarded as foundational values for scientific inquiry.

What do we understand by the concept *objective*? Babbie and Mouton (2001:12) illustrate that *objective* has a variety of meanings, all of which may be relevant to this discussion:

- unbiased sampling
- stable and consistent measurements (in other words: reliable)
- systematic and nonarbitrary observations
- the appropriate/proper design
- critical engagement and participation

From the orthodox positivistic point of view, however, objectivity implies the application of methods based on the separation of the researcher from the research object. The central assumption in the positivist interpretation of objectivity is that research can only be valid and reliable if all subjective variables, such as presuppositions, preconceived notions and values, are bracketed. Accordingly, there is a distance between the scientist and the object of research in the sense that no involvement between them should be allowed, since such involvement could lead to biased and prejudiced research (Mouton 1990: 40). Thus, distance seems to be a necessary condition for objectivity. In contrast, our arguments above imply that maintaining this separation is impossible.

However, not all scholars have positivist scruples. Palmer (1988:35), for example, is of the opinion that scientists should learn to stop pretending that they are objective observers and recognise that, in order to look at anything, they have to be standing somewhere to get a perspective. He suggests that there is more than one position of observation – Gallagher (1982:44) refers to it as a point of departure. The concept of *point of departure* or *position of observation* opens the way to the appreciation of the role and significance of other viewpoints, perspectives and visions. (Again, this does not amount to relativism, but rather flows from an epistemological position termed "contextualism" (Pauw 1983: 51-59).)

From these viewpoints, perspectives and beliefs spring the actions and contemplation of researchers (Palmer 1988:11). It is thus difficult to see how researchers can use an imper-

sonal writing style to explain their own core beliefs about the world, its purpose, and how or where they fit into all of this. It is also difficult to see how they can caution their readers about their own subjective point of departure if they as persons are not supposed to exist.

Many of the views on objectivity in the human or social sciences have originated in discourses dealing with the natural sciences. The natural scientist observes and explains from the outside. It is possible to understand human behaviour from within. The result is that the potential for objectivity in these disciplines is severely limited. The human scientist can understand from the inside because to understand any human act always means that, in principle at least, the one doing the understanding should be able to participate in that particular form of life because he knows the rules or joins in the language game. This is precisely the difference between human science and natural science (Pauw 1993:80-81).

Ratner (2002:8) states that there is no need to choose between objective knowledge and subjectivity. He points out that objectivism integrates subjectivity and objectivity, because it argues that objective knowledge requires active and sophisticated subjective processes. It is these subjective processes, such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction and the distinction of essences from appearances, that can enhance the comprehension of the world.

We agree with the above list by Babbie and Mouton of the various meanings of "objective" in that the emphasis should be on the research methods and techniques, and not on the supposed objectivity of the researcher. They write that the "systematic and rigorous search for objective evidence – using objective methods and techniques – increases the likelihood of making rational judgements in the process of scientific inquiry" (Babbie & Mouton 2001:12).

Objectivity is even possible, as the above list indicates, through critical engagement and participation. An example of such research methods is the participatory action methods, which demand that the social scientist and the researched subject be equal partners in the planning and implementation of a research project (Bless & Higgson-Smith 1995:56). The main feature of these methods is the intention to involve the observed or researched subjects in the research process as co-researchers for evidence needed to address a specific issue. One of the fundamental principles of this paradigm is the acceptance that "knowledge about the social world can only arise from active involvement in it on the part of the ... researcher" (Barbüro lu & Ravn 1992:25).

Following Polanyi (1958), the next point is that some judgements can only be objective if they are personal. We are referring here to expertise and connoisseurship. Judging a musical performance or a diving event at the Olympic Games or diagnosing a mental condition are all examples where only a person, who is an expert, can usually deliver an objective opinion. A recording machine cannot. Therefore objectivity and personal knowledge are not antagonistic.

THE RESEARCHER AS A PERSON

Central to this deliberation on the question of objectivity in scientific enquiry and reporting is the researcher. Is it not the researcher who does not know, who wants to know, and who eventually knows? Is it not the researcher who is supposed to be

absent from the *impersonal* report on his or her research process and research findings? (To us, it is like a father spending a lot of money on his child's Christmas present and Father Christmas getting all the credit!)

It seems to us that those so strongly in favour of impersonal reporting are underestimating the role of the researcher as a rational person in the research process. It is interesting to note the difference in meaning between the words *personal* and *impersonal*. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1975), the word *personal* means "one's own, individual, private" and *impersonal* means "having no personality or personal reference or tone". Is it possible for an author (researcher) to have no personal reference when reporting on research findings?

The etymological root of the concept "person" is the Latin word *persona*, meaning "mask". It is ironic that the impersonal writing style can be a mask of subjectivity in the negative sense of the word. In course of time, the meaning of *persona* has been broadened to include "actor", "role", and "character" as well. At present the consensual meaning of *person* is "the individual human being ..." (Jansz 1991:57-58.)

Strawson (Jansz 1991:58-64) describes the following nine features of this concept *person*:

- an **embodiment** which is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of being a person
- a **rational being**
- **intentionality** – the person is intrinsically interconnected with the world
- **agency** – an individual human being making choices that fit in with the activities as planned
- for something to count as a person depends in some way on an **attitude taken** towards it, a stance adopted with respect to it; being a person does not depend solely upon having established the concept of the person as a cognitive operation, but on **being treated as such** in an interpersonal context
- to be a person is to **treat others as persons**
- **communication**
- **connecting of personhood with selfhood**, leading the individual to reflect on him- or herself as a person
- **morality**

The question we have to answer is: how do we regard the person who is the researcher and the author of scientific publications? Is this person no more than an impersonal part of a huge machine? Or does this person have a distinct stance and point of view on the object of scientific observation and reflection? Can the researcher be regarded as a person with a necessary embodiment, rationality, interconnected with the world, making life plans, being treated as a human being, treating others as such as well, communicating, reflecting on him- or herself as a person, and with morality? If so, we should perhaps be willing to listen to that human being's distinct voice.

The fact that Strawson includes being rational in his conceptual analysis of *person* is pertinent to our topic. It denotes the fact that persons can think, reason and give account of their thoughts and actions. Consequently, it is persons, in the first place, that can be rational or irrational. Further, beliefs and belief systems, decisions and processes

or procedures can be rational or rational. Reality can hardly be said to be rational, *pace* the logical atomists of the early 20th century. An exact copy of something that cannot be rational or irrational in itself is never rational or irrational. Therefore, if research were a question of accurate recording, it could never be rational. Therefore, the exclusion of the person of the research cannot contribute to the rationality of science.

Is it possible for a researcher not to be a (first) person? Bearing Strawson's nine features of a person in mind, it seems that a person's human nature (eg embodiment and intentionality) makes a researcher subjective (being a subject) by nature. Is it then possible for a person to participate in an objective and rational process aiming at the production of valid research findings? We believe the answer is yes, if the research process is objective and meets the criteria of validity. We agree with Mouton (1990:50) that *objectivity* is first and foremost a methodological criterion, in the sense that it refers to a specific quality of the manner in which research is done.

That is also why a sound research design is especially crucial when qualitative methods are used because the researcher's subjectivity is intimately involved in this type of research. Ratner (2002:1) observes that subjectivity guides everything, from the choice of topic to be studied to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methods and interpreting data. In qualitative methods, researchers are encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives they bring to their research and how these affect the research project (Ratner 2002:1).

Ratner (2002:7) argues further that qualitative methods also have an objectivist strand which can enable the researcher to accurately comprehend the world as it exists in itself. Naturally, subjectivity can bias the researcher and preclude objectively understanding a subject's psychological reality. One of the advantages of recognising subjectivity arises from reflecting on whether it facilitates or impedes objective comprehension. Distorting values can then be replaced by ones that enhance objectivity (Ratner 2002:7).

CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION

We have shown that *objective* is not the same as *impersonal*. Authors and editors who insist on the avoidance of the first person are conflating at least three conceptual distinctions, namely the distinction *impersonal* versus *personal*, the distinction *objective* versus *subjective* and the distinction *unbiased* versus *biased*.

Science and scholarship are always personal. Researchers are personally involved and hopefully committed to their research. The social world does not give up its truths to those who only stand and wait. *Passive research* is a contradiction in terms. Somebody *does* research.

Subjective versus *objective* is a distinction we use to differentiate between the ability to take a stance away from your own position (to stand outside yourself and see yourself as others see you) and the inability to do this. Subjective persons typically do not realise that their views can be determined or coloured by factors that are unique to them and their situation and would not carry general acceptance. Subjective persons in this sense of the word have no doubts of their own objectivity. Persons can only be truly objective if they realise, acknowledge and reveal to their reader their own uniqueness as subjects.

Positivists are unrealistic about science because they disregard the valid role of the researcher as a person in the scientific process. The opposite mistake is also possible. Those who absolutise the scientist as person are unrealistic by denying the role of reality in science. They deny what Mouton has termed the epistemic imperative (Mouton 1999:270) and Popper's idea of verisimilitude (Popper 1972: 233). Science is characterised by a strong drive towards attaining truth and by theories with an increasing "likeness or similarity to truth" (Popper 1972: 233). We have already stated that our argument against the avoidance of the first person is not a plea for unrestricted subjectivism. It is therefore our view that the first person should sometimes be avoided. It should be avoided where its unrestricted use could be interpreted as licence to write just what you like.

We will now deal with the third distinction mentioned above: *biased* versus *unbiased*. Researchers, certainly, must avoid bias, where bias is understood as ignoring, manipulating or skewing evidence in order to promote conclusions that are dear to the researcher. Further, researchers must base their conclusions on facts and reasoning – but not mechanistically.

If the use of the first person denotes making conclusions without evidence or reasoning, or against evidence or reasoning, it is unscientific, contrary to the epistemic imperative and will not bring us closer to truth. Therefore, although the use of the first person cannot be proscribed, it should be used in the service of the truth by showing which elements of the research are personal – that is, assumptions, guesses, hypotheses, as well as relevant facts about the aims, genesis and process of the research. The more readers can discern the role of the researcher, the better able they would be to compare the findings with other research results and their own experience.

The irony in Public Administration is that where there is a bias towards avoiding the first person in South African journals in the field, subjectiveness in the form of political correctness is rampant. How can a community of researchers claim the title of scientists if the collective never makes anything known that could be interpreted as a critique of the administrative *status quo*?

CONCLUSION

The question that this article addresses is: "What constitutes objectivity in science, and is an im*personal* writing style an essential condition for objectivity in science?" In answering this question, we showed that scientists are, in essence, subjective as a result of their inherent nature as human beings. Their objectivity is shown when, as in the case of qualitative research, they unveil their subjectiveness to the readers to be accounted for as part of their assessment of the research findings.

We have argued that objectivity lies in the methods applied by the various researchers. The strength of some macromethods, like the qualitative research methods, is their ability to utilise the researcher's subjectivity in the process of gaining objective and rational knowledge. The process should be objective, though.

The so-called scientific writing style, specifically with regard to avoiding the first person, seems to be a convention without substance. No reason could be found to believe

that an impersonal writing style promotes objectivity. Although an impersonal writing style is may well be a scientific author's personal choice, it is not an essential condition for objectivity in science. Using the first person, on the other hand, means accepting responsibility for what you write.

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