

# The Yoke of Objectivity in Public Administration (and Beyond)

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## ABSTRACT

Objective research has become an institution, one born out of the Enlightenment, and one that continues to burden public administration scholarship (and, we suspect, much scholarship in the social sciences). As we show, objectivity is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that commands its normative status through dominant philosophies of science. We problematize objectivity, focusing on the dimension of objectivity that suggests research can and *should* be value-free. Many scholars have contested this notion of objectivity, especially those arguing that research claiming to be value-neutral has done real harm to marginalized groups and undermined social equity. From this basis, we invite public administration scholars to remove the yoke of objectivity for a more honest, conscientious, and forthright field where scholars incorporate greater reflexivity into and take greater responsibility for the social impact of their work.

“One of the conventions of dominant scholarship is the use of “they” or “them” to denote Blacks as a subject group. Implicit in such references is a silent “we” which carries the appearance of objectivity but actually presumes a dominant group perspective”

(Crenshaw 1988, 32).

“No science is value-free, for all scientific activity (because it is an activity, a human activity) presupposes some framework of meaning or values in terms of which it is judged meaningful, worthwhile, or useful”

(Goddard 1973, 1).

The quest for objective knowledge, by which we mean independent and value-neutral facts, is an artifact of the Enlightenment that has become sacred in the social sciences (Burge 2010; Harding 1995). The norm of research objectivity confines scholarship to “true” knowing and demands an impersonal, removed researcher vested in uncovering truth irrespective of values and experience (John 2021). The bulk of public administration (PA) and social science research today operates on the basis of this norm (Raadschelders and Lee 2011; Riccucci 2010; Steinmetz 2005) despite challenges to its existence and value (Bhaskar 1998; Putnam 2004; Waldo 2006; Weber 1949).

Scholars of all creeds have forewarned of the limits and hazards of objectivity (John 2021). Notably, intellectual traditions that center social equity and justice reject objectivity (Collins 1992). From critical race theorists to feminists and their intersections, all reject the notion of objectivity (Harding 1977; Zuberi 2001). These scholars spotlight the ways that objectivity has contributed to inequities and how

it continues to legitimize knowledge that marginalizes certain groups of people. A concrete example of how claims to objective research findings have caused harm to people of color, for example, comes from policymakers’ espousal of the research on standardized tests in education, which were long deemed objective measures (Gillborn and Youdell 2001; Haney 1984). However, their use has led to material and symbolic harms, as well as negative outcomes for students and teachers, especially the most marginalized (Altshuler and Schmautz 2006; Au 2013; Berliner 2011; Knoester and Au 2017; Moon et al. 2007; Segool et al. 2013; Townsend 2002).

History is fraught with such examples. The attribution of objectivity to research practices is clouded by the “normal science” paradigm of the time (Kuhn 1962), and many such research practices have later been deemed erroneous and harmful. For instance, Gould (1981) documents the historical “mismeasure of man” in which, in any given time period, scholarship has assessed intelligence and morality “objectively” based on skull size, physical reaction time, and “correct” answers to riddles. That these tests could measure intelligence may seem ridiculous to us now, but then they were considered objective facts founded by leading research. Unfortunately, these tests were used to “prove” the inferiority of groups like Black people, Indigenous people, women, and sex workers and fueled the eugenics movement (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Scholars today would be remiss to claim objectivity in research that could have similar potential for harm to marginalized groups.

This article builds on the work of scholars who question the existence, possibility, and utility of objectivity and contends that the scholarly fixation on objectivity is a yoke that bridles us to historically accumulated baggage of inequality and

oppression. More concretely, this article aims to problematize objectivity for the sake of advancing the field of PA generally but especially to unlock greater progress in living up to PA's pillar of social equity. We consciously avoid falling into a discussion that merely pits qualitative and quantitative preferences against one another. We recognize that the tensions we present are not new, but by bringing diverse ideas together, we aim to rekindle intellectual discourse within PA. For us to do so authentically and reflexively, we must be honest about our own philosophical commitments. Please see [Online Supplementary Appendix A](#) for brief statements from each author describing the ways in which our positionality informs our work.

Our argument is organized as follows: (I) We locate the institution of objectivity in PA. We define the term conceptually and trace it historically. As we shall see, objectivity is a multi-dimensional concept with varied meanings that are contingently applied to research by way of the researcher's philosophy of science. (II) Recognizing the plurality of approaches to knowledge production, we turn toward understanding philosophies of science using a multidimensional framework that situates objectivity and subjectivity on a variety of spectra. (III) From this point forward, we focus narrowly on one particular facet of objectivity, the objective axiological assumption that research can and should be value-neutral. Zeroing in on the axiological dimension of objectivity, we consider evidence and arguments contesting value-free axiology from various perspectives, including PA's social equity scholars, critical race theorists, and feminists. (IV) We conclude by arguing for a more conscientious, honest, and forthright PA—one where scholars recognize the potential harm of claiming value-free objectivity, engage in reflexive practice to address subjectivity, and are honest with the public about the nature of knowledge.

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZED NORM OF OBJECTIVITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Objectivity is considered a virtue within PA and beyond ([Hildebrand 2008](#)). It commands normative status in our field as well as the social sciences and society generally ([Janack 2002](#); [John 2021](#)). Norms dictate that only objective information should be shared with the public, and decisions should be made objectively. For instance, as constituents, we hope juries, judges, teachers, journalists, and public administrators convey objective information and make decisions objectively. As teachers, we are expected to teach material objectively and grade students objectively; as researchers, we are expected to generate objective knowledge. However, the meaning of objectivity is ambiguous, partly because it has multiple meanings that are rarely disentangled ([Janack 2002](#)).

### Defining Objectivity

There is a lack of scholarly consensus on the definition of objectivity ([John 2021](#)). [Daston and Galison \(2010, 17\)](#) describe it this way:

“To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving.”

This description of objectivity focuses on the absence of bias, but deeper explorations have led to the chronicling of multiple senses of the term ([John 2021](#)). For instance, [Janack \(2002\)](#) identifies 13 uses. In a more simplified typology, [Fleetwood \(2004\)](#) provides four interpretations, all of them contrasted against the implicit opposite term *subjective*:

1. Objective as value-neutral; subjective as value-laden.
2. Objective as fact; subjective as opinion.
3. Objective as referring to objects; subjective as referring to subjects.
4. Objective as material; subjective as abstract.

Although objectivity is often invoked in research, typically implicitly but sometimes explicitly, there is no formal definition of objectivity to be found in any of the academic disciplines. It is curious that a norm so engrained in the field defies precise definition and begs for more conscious attention.

### The Historical Inheritance of Objectivity

From the fifteenth century on, a steady series of discoveries were made in astronomy and physics based on observation rather than armchair philosophizing. The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who also held public office, lived during that time and became convinced that knowledge should be based on inductive reasoning (in contrast to the deductive reasoning of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, holding that theory preceded the understanding of reality). Arguably, the most influential ideas about how one could study social reality are those of the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776). He echoed the sentiments of Bacon, arguing that any system of reasoning should be rejected unless built upon fact and observation. Hume established two distinctions of note that prefaced the idea of objectivity: one between synthetic and analytic knowledge and the other between what is and what ought to be. Hume's contrast between analytic and synthetic knowledge distinguished claims that can be justified *a priori*, independent of experience, and claims that can only be justified *a posteriori*, through sensory perception (respectively). This distinction provided the basis for his philosophy of causal inference. Hume also made a distinction between that which is (i.e., a fact) and that which ought to be (i.e., a normative desire), reminiscent of the distinction between facts and values. He argued that one cannot use mere reason to move from that which is to that which ought to be.

In the study of PA, Herbert Simon followed Hume, arguing that only factual premises can be the basis of an administrative science ([Simon 1947](#)). In this way, Simon was among the early adherents of a positivist approach that rests upon the claim that an objective reality exists that can be accessed by the unbiased researcher. Simon fastidiously taught his pupils to portray sufficient distance between themselves (as researchers) and the researched through the use of passive verbs in academic essays, effectively removing themselves from their research ([Raadschelders 2011](#)). This practice, which remains commonplace, signals to readers that objectivity is possible. This historical trajectory has profoundly influenced contemporary PA scholars' subscription to a positivist approach to studying government. To be sure, objectivity confers its normative legitimacy through this dominant philosophy of science.

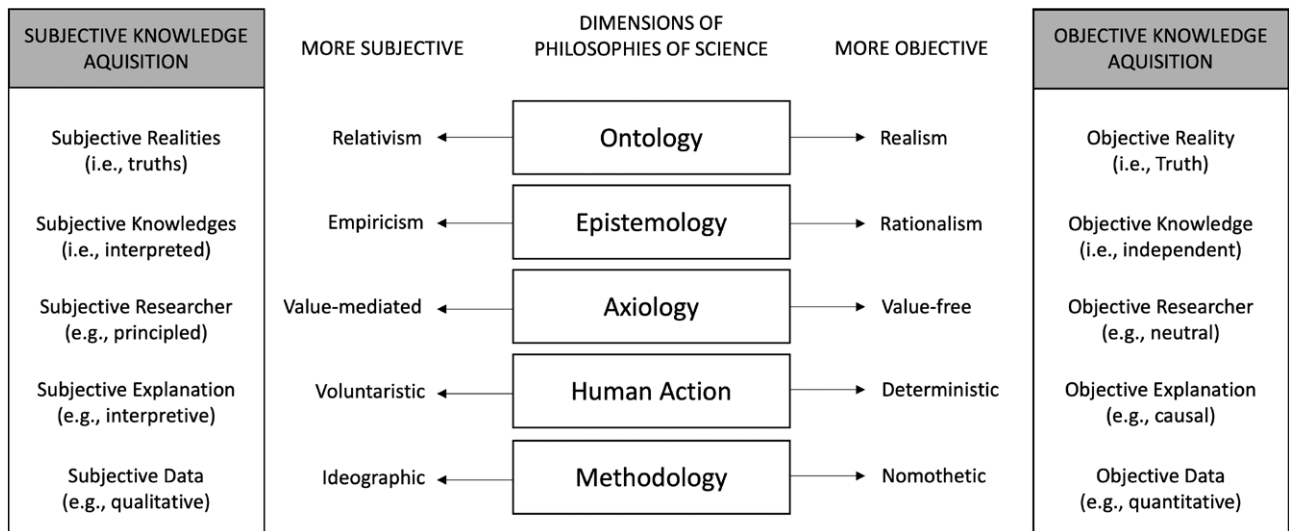


Figure 1: Assumptions Underlying Philosophies of Science

### PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE AS THE TROJAN HORSE FOR OBJECTIVITY

A discussion of philosophy of science is imperative because this is where we locate the roots objectivity has planted within academia and PA. Objectivity has maintained legitimacy because it is a core feature of the dominant philosophy of science. Philosophy of science is a branch of inquiry that aims to answer questions about what constitutes science and knowledge. Underlying every piece of research is a spoken or unspoken philosophy of science. Few scholars, if any, will argue that the philosophy of science is unimportant. At the same time, it seems to be taken-for-granted and philosophical commitments are often received from advisors and professors rather than chosen, which is unfortunate given the significance (Bechara and Van de Ven 2010). Instead, academic articles rarely name their philosophy of science (save some qualitative studies), and doctoral programs and advisors pass along their espoused philosophy of science rather than presenting the options and allowing students to come into their own.

### Philosophy of Science is Consequential

Our philosophy of science influences the very definition of what we believe constitutes scientific knowledge. Well into the eighteenth century, science was understood broadly as an organized body of knowledge, captured in the concept of *Wissenschaft*, which is best translated as “branch of knowledge.” Science in the Latin languages (e.g., French, Italian, and Spanish) is still understood in this broad sense. However, in the English language, the concept of science has since been limited to being a body of knowledge acquired through specific procedures (i.e., methods). Consequently, what we can know and study (the epistemological question) becomes intricately related to how we can know (the methodological question). This version of science is closely tied to the natural sciences that study the physical world using standardized methods. In this narrow sense, science aspires to be objective and draws upon a positivist philosophy of science (Lundberg 1939). Despite its origins in the natural sciences, the positivist philosophy of science remains dominant within much of the social sciences (Steinmetz 2005).

In science broadly defined, compared to narrowly defined, there are many approaches to acquiring knowledge. Some call this view “pluralist” (Farmer 2008). Science, broadly defined, can be positivist, but it can also take up an alternative philosophy of science, such as interpretivism. Unlike positivist scholars, interpretivist scholars do not believe that objective or *a priori* knowledge exists. Instead, knowledge can only be gained *a posteriori* through subjective experience (Husserl 1999). Within this view, the social world is not a single thing out there waiting to be discovered in the same way as the physical world; instead, the social world is continually being constructed and reconstructed through human interaction and interpretation. Metaphysical assumptions such as these profoundly impact every aspect of research. The philosophy of science embraced cannot but affect our research (research questions, methodology, interpretation of results), teaching (what, as well as how, we choose to teach), and the way we engage with practitioners and communities (if at all).

### Objectivity and Subjectivity are Core to Philosophies of Science

There are many philosophies of science; in the space of this article, we cannot adequately address them all (for excellent descriptions of philosophies of science in PA see: Bechara and Van de Ven 2010; Riccucci 2010). Instead of attempting to summarize the varied philosophies of science, we focus on their underlying assumptions.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) position philosophies of science on a series of dimensions, from objective to subjective. Their focus on the objective-subjective spectrum highlights the importance of objectivity in some philosophies of science. Consistent with the multi-definitional nature of objectivity/subjectivity, philosophies of science can be more objective or subjective across multiple dimensions. Five primary dimensions deemed relevant to the philosophy of science are: ontology, epistemology, axiology, human action, and methodology (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Guba and Lincoln 2005). The framework in Figure 1 draws on a variety of sources (Bechara and Van de Ven 2010; Burrell and Morgan 1979; Frazer 2020; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Raadschelders 2012;

Riccucci 2010) to demonstrate how the objective/subjective spectrum applies across the five dimensions of philosophy of science.

*Ontology* is the study of what is (i.e., the nature of reality). Social ontology (Searle 1995), the focus of the social sciences, can operate on a spectrum from realism to relativism (Guba and Lincoln 2005). The realist assumes there is a single, objective social world out there to be studied (i.e., capital “T” truth). In contrast, relativists assume there is not one but multiple subjective social realities (i.e., lowercase “t” truths), none more real than the other. *Epistemology* is the branch of philosophy that studies how we can know things and operates on a spectrum from rationalism to empiricism (Bechara and Van de Ven 2010). Scholars taking a rationalist epistemology seek independent and objective knowledge. Scholars taking an empiricist epistemology do not believe that humans can acquire knowledge unmediated by interpretation and instead seek subjective knowledge. *Axiology* is the study of values and what is valuable. An objective-oriented axiology takes the view that researchers can and should remain value-free lest the research be invalidated by pre-existing assumptions. A subjective-oriented axiology takes the view that researchers cannot be separated from their lived experience and that all knowledge is value-mediated (Guba and Lincoln 2005). Philosophy of *Human Action* examines the human capacity to act and offers a spectrum from deterministic to voluntaristic. A deterministic perspective regards human action as determined by the environment, so this research explains action based on determinants or causes. A voluntaristic perspective regards human action as autonomous free will, so this research explains actions based on human interpretation and meaning (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Frazer 2020). *Methodology* provides the tools with which we can create knowledge. A nomothetic approach to social science involves using objective, standardized tools and measures of phenomena to gain knowledge, most often associated with quantitative approaches. An ideographic approach involves using subjective, lived experience and symbolism and is most associated with qualitative approaches (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

These five dimensions illustrate the multiple meanings of objectivity that we alluded to as we discussed the definition of objectivity above. This framework also usefully helps us to characterize philosophies of science since different philosophies of science have unique profiles across these dimensions. A positivist philosophy of science is high on the objective spectrum across dimensions, while an interpretive philosophy is high on the subjective spectrum across dimensions. A post-positivist philosophy adopts similar assumptions as a positivist philosophy except in epistemology, where it assumes that individuals are incapable of objectivity but that objective knowledge can be created through a process of agreement across researchers (i.e., intersubjectivity). A critical realist philosophy of science assumes an objective ontology but subjective epistemology and axiology. It embraces a dualism of structure and agency and is open to both nomothetic and ideographic methodologies as long as they surface causal relationships or mechanisms. Other philosophies of social science (e.g., pragmatism, feminist standpoint, and post-structuralism) could similarly be described using these dimensions.

Post-positivism has dominated PA since the 1960s (Kuhn 1962; Popper 1963), as it has in much of the social sciences (Raadschelders 2011; Raadschelders and Lee 2011; Riccucci

2010; Steinmetz 2005). Though objectivist assumptions continue to prevail in PA research, a turn has been made toward the inclusion of alternative perspectives, and a small cadre of researchers take more subjectivist philosophies of science (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018; Riccucci 2010). PA scholars have now written expertly on the value of interpretivist approaches to research in the field (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005; Feldman et al. 2004; Haverland and Yanow 2012; Ospina and Dodge 2005). These scholars have expressed a desire for greater pluralism, and the field has begun to take steps toward it (Farmer 2008; Schwartz-Shea 2021).

In summary, philosophy of science, which stipulates a broad or narrow view of science and the extent to which objectivity is pursued in research, has profound and often overlooked influences on scholarly work. Philosophy of science is highly consequential for research as it affects our very definition of scientific knowledge and every aspect of our research. The most dominant philosophies of science in the social sciences draw heavily upon objectivity, so objectivity has become an implicit norm in the field. Objectivity maintains its legitimacy despite a wide array of arguments against it. Before following the norm of objectivity, it's important to understand the grounds upon which it has been challenged.

## CHALLENGES TO OBJECTIVITY

A robust discourse questions the merits of objectivity in ways directly relevant to the study of PA (John 2021). We cannot address all the critiques in the space of this article, so we focus on one of the five dimensions of objectivity, the axiological dimension that attends to values. We focus on the axiological dimension of objectivity because PA relies heavily upon public values (Nabatchi 2018), so the axiological choices PA researchers make are salient for our field. We highlight how contributions across disciplines, including social equity and critical scholars, have provided compelling arguments against objective axiology. We emphasize that claims to objective axiology limit our understanding of social equity specifically and the social world generally.

### Challenges to Objective Axiology from Dominant Discourse

An objective axiology calls for the researcher to remove all traces of themselves from their findings, especially any preconceived values. Since the eighteenth century, quite a few scholars have believed that real science is objective when grounded in facts and claim that these facts were established without any influence. However, Hume's claim of the separation of fact and value has been vigorously contested. What have we learned about the ability to separate the object of knowledge (i.e., that which we study) from the subject of knowledge (i.e., the scholar, observer)? Key thinkers from Max Weber and C. Wright Mills to Hilary Putnam all accepted that fact and value could not be separated (Goddard 1973; Mills 2000; Putnam 2004; Weber 1949). For a long time, this was considered a conundrum for the social sciences and much less—if at all—relevant to the natural sciences. However, even in the natural sciences, it is now accepted that observation influences the outcome of a natural experiment and that scientific agreement about the meaning of various observations is influenced by intersubjective judgment (Latour and Woolgar 1986).

Indeed, scientific belief “is the product of an interaction between our psychological capacities, our social organization, and the structure of the world” (Godfrey-Smith 2003, 229). As this quote suggests, our knowledge is a complex interplay between our individual cognition, the social world around us, and what the physical world shows us. Scientists are as vulnerable to the power of the narrative as anyone (Taleb 2010, 63–64). The many experiments by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have unambiguously shown the influence of heuristics and biases in human thinking. Kahneman also demonstrated that intuitive responses to external stimuli dominate rationality. These limits make objectivity an impossibility. Indeed, as Bhaskar (1998, 409), originator of the critical realist philosophy of science, argues: “Social science is non-neutral in a double respect; it always consists in a practical intervention in social life and it sometimes logically entails value and practical judgments.” Hence, scholars from multiple scholarly disciplines have concluded that fact and value are inseparable. If fact and value cannot be separated, then value-free knowledge is at least inaccessible, if not nonexistent.

### Challenges to Objective Axiology from Social Equity Scholars

Like the scholarship outlined above, a core of PA scholars has also argued that fact and value cannot be separated. Two political scientists, Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo, had field-defining debates regarding the axiological dimension of objectivity (Waldo 1952, 1952). On the one hand, Simon (1947) argued for logical positivism. He said that values, including how administrators make meaning of problems or otherwise weigh information, are noise and irrelevant to positivist methods measuring decision-making. On the other hand, Waldo (2006), an early social equity scholar (Gooden and Portillo 2011), vigorously insisted that values are inseparable from the study of PA. He argued PA is not wholly represented in research without appropriate infusions of democratic values and a recognition of bureaucrats who value the principles of democracy. Today, PA research pursues a combination of values that include economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and social equity (Norman-Major 2011), often as implicit or explicit motivations for our work (Gooden et al. 2023).

Waldo’s perspective sparked several streams of values-driven PA research (e.g., Nabatchi 2018), including that on social equity. Frederickson (1990) and others facilitated the addition of social equity as a pillar of the field, defined as “the fair, just, and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract, and the fair, justice and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy” (Yu, McCandless, and Rauhaus 2023, 440). The Minnowbrook conferences have advanced an active effort among some scholars to examine, explain, and embed social equity in PA research (e.g., Berry-James et al. 2021; Blessett et al. 2019; Guy and Williams 2023; McCandless et al. 2022). Like Waldo, these scholars argue that PA is deficient without values; “Social equity is not a value-free endeavor” (Wooldridge and Gooden 2009, 23), so if we reject values, we also reject equity. Indeed, a social equity orientation explicitly embraces values in PA and sees justice and intersectionality

as just as important, if not more important than, independent fact (Blessett 2020; Gooden and Portillo 2011). Thus, social equity scholars argue value-free objectivity is undesirable, regardless of whether it exists, because we must incorporate democratic and public values into our research. In sum, a subjective axiological position is necessary to conduct research consistent with PA’s principles.

### Challenges to Objective Axiology from Critical Scholars

Scholars from critical perspectives—those that center power and pursue the emancipation of marginalized groups—have also contested objectivity. Indeed, many of these scholars reject objectivity outright, making impassioned calls for overturning the norm. Scholars from marginalized groups have been making these arguments for years (see, e.g., Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1988; hooks 2003). However, they are rarely cited in PA-scholarship (Blessett 2023; Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Ricucci 2021; Stivers 2002).

We draw on a subset of critical theoretical and scholarly traditions, focusing on critical race scholarship, feminism, and their intersections. Like Weber, Mills, and Putnam, scholars from these perspectives argue that fact and value cannot be separated, and, like Waldo and PA social equity scholars, they highlight the desirability of values in research. However, critical scholars go further to argue that value-free objectivity is a disingenuous claim that obscures, legitimizes, and even reifies racism and sexism, doing ongoing harm to already marginalized groups.

Both feminist and critical race theorists express deep suspicion of anyone or anything that claims to be objective, unbiased, neutral, or value-free (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014; Collins 2017; Harding 1977). A central tenet of critical race theory is that racism, the tendency of individuals or society to value some races above others, is pervasive (Bell 2018). As such, critical race theory contests the concept of objectivity, arguing that all research is subjective and that the assumption of objectivity can give racist interpretations credibility (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018); for instance, the way ostensibly objective tests have historically cast people of color as less intelligent (Gould 1981).

For critical race scholars, even numbers are not neutral (Castillo and Gillborn 2023; Gillborn 2010). We cannot ignore that early social statistics were created for the purposes of eugenics, and today’s traditional modes of quantitative inquiry still tend to follow a “white logic” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Therefore, statistics must be deracialized (Zuberi 2001). One way to deracialize statistics is by putting them in context using counter-storytelling (Garcia, López, and Vélez 2018). Counter-storytelling provides alternative narratives—typically based on lived experiences—that contradict dominant myths about marginalized groups because “the presentation of truth in new forms provokes resistance” (Bell 2018, 143).

Critical race scholars have also maintained that the misguided belief in objectivity has led white people to adopt “colorblind” policies (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Colorblind policies appear neutral on their face, meaning they purport to value no race above another, but they ultimately serve white interests (e.g., Knoester and Au 2017). Research has uncovered how colorblind racism shows up in PA (Heckler 2017), organizations broadly (Ray 2019), and in policy and society,

for example, as it did during the pandemic (Bonilla-Silva 2022). A key problem with colorblindness is that it conceals racism from view, allowing people to think we live in a post-racial world when we do not (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Critical race theorists argue that we need not neutrality and objectivity but race consciousness (Warmington 2009). Race consciousness also applies to the social sciences, whereby race is not regarded as a biological trait but as a meaningful social construct. Race is a human-imagined concept, yet it bears the power to cast harmful stereotypes across a large swath of people. Indeed, it deserves to be treated with more care than merely as a binary “control” in research models (Gillborn 2010; Hunter 2002; Zuberi 2001).

Given how subjectivity (the opposite of objectivity) has been so closely associated with femininity (Stivers 2002; Westmarland 2001), it is natural that feminists would also contest and complicate the notion of objectivity (Harding 1977, 1993). Donna Haraway (2013) referred to objectivity as the “God-trick,” whereby researchers can see everything from nowhere. Those researchers performing the God-trick disappear their identity and values in the name of validity and replicability. This is a luxury that women do not have given their socialized directive to deeply consider their social context with demonstrations of care for others (Blair, Brown, and Baxter 1994; Guy and Newman 2004). Moreover, as feminists have long argued, for women, everything is political (including their research and bodies) because society politicizes gender (Eisenstein 1977), making it impossible to remain “apolitical.”

Feminists have characterized objectivity as part of a male paradigm that enables male domination. When René Descartes wrote his famous first principle of philosophy—*cogito, ergo sum* (i.e., “I think, therefore I am”)—who was considered an objective, rational thinker was attributed to the primarily White male scholars working in Western universities who drew on the narrow view of science (Grosfoguel 2013). Historically, Western thought ignored (and continues to ignore) how Western masculine and patriarchal values shaped that which social science construes as Truth (Haraway 1988). As Harding (1991, 143) explains, “the conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate *only* those social values and interests that differ among the researchers.” She argues that when women and people of color are systematically excluded from the cadre of competent judges, the dominant group is left to perpetuate their own values without question. As Patricia Hill Collins (2002, 5) also explains, “suppressing the knowledge produced by an oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization.” The downgrading of research outside of a narrow view of science as “not objective” overvalues the contributions of those who dominate (Pandey et al. 2022). Objectivity serves as a mechanism to uplift the dominant male discourse and silence other perspectives as unobjective.

Objectivity is often used as a discreet mechanism to suppress work from socially situated perspectives. Claiming a philosophy of science that represents anything other than being the all-knowing, objective “Cartesian man” is risky (aside from being both opaque and impossible; Lloyd 2015) and leaves woman scholars wondering if they “must grow a pair of balls” to get published (Cunliffe 2022). In light of

research norms calling for objectivity, Black scholars have been systematically excluded, and their work minimized when asked questions like did being Black introduce bias into your study?—a question white scholars are never asked (Hendrix 2002). Feminist and critical race scholars are infrequently cited, dismissed entirely, or treated as an afterthought (Delgado 1992). Even more complicated is the tendency to characterize work done by marginalized groups as “me-search”—the pejorative designation ascribed to racial minorities who study the communities of which they are a part (Harris 2021). The opening quote from Kimberlé Crenshaw regarding the way in which mainstream scholarship is written points out how the mandate to separate the scholar from the social groups they are constructed within poses the impossible choice of sacrificing scholarly legitimacy or risking cultural exclusion (Crenshaw 1988). These forms of epistemological injustice have prompted some to point out that women and people of color “also know stuff” (Beaulieu et al. 2017; Casarez, Osorio, and Rush 2020).

As previously discussed, the harm of objectivity extends beyond academic marginalization. Researchers who draw upon an objective axiology as part of their philosophy of science imply that their data and findings are incontrovertible. To illustrate, we can return to our earlier example of standardized testing, which is a “colorblind” policy that does the God-trick of assigning a number to learning independent of race, gender, and other factors. Specifically, we might consider a Spanish-speaking student. The student scores poorly on the test because English is her second language and because successful test-taking relies heavily on guessing, which counters cultural norms (Altshuler and Schmautz 2006). The student’s teacher may offer a counter-narrative, explaining that the student is quite intelligent. However, she is dubbed irrational; the test results are irrefutably supported by objective research. The school decides to place the student in remedial classes or hold her back a grade (Altshuler and Schmautz 2006; Townsend 2002). Most harmful of all, the test measure goes unsituated and unquestioned, continuously applied to all students thereafter. As administrative data is increasingly collected and deemed “objective,” it becomes easier for policymakers and bureaucrats to reject the experiences of historically marginalized people because their perceptions do not match “reality.”

The list of critical scholarly voices rejecting objectivity could go on to include indigenous researchers (Smith 2013) and queer scholars (Browne and Nash 2010), among many others, but the point is made. These scholars see struggles for justice outside the academy as fundamentally linked to ways of knowing within the academy (hooks 2003). Claims to objectivity are a source of power (Fletcher 1992) that erase marginalized voices and lived experiences as unobjective outliers. As a result, scholars from marginalized groups spend much time contesting the “objective” knowledge of the inner academic circle (Collins 1992). As Audre Lorde (1984) famously said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” and claims of objectivity are among the master’s most powerful tools.

## TOWARD SOLUTIONS FOR THE SAKE OF SOCIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

So far, we have argued that objectivity is a norm that pervades PA, the social sciences, and society generally. The assumption of objectivity is embedded in the vast majority of PA research

through the historical inheritance of a particular philosophy of science. Focusing on the axiological dimension of objectivity, we problematized the concept by presenting evidence contesting the possibility and desirability of an objective axiology. Many scholars have questioned value-free objectivity, but the most striking objections are lodged by scholars who center social equity and justice.

Core to American democracy is the promise of justice for all, a mantle that PA takes up through the principle of social equity (Johnson and Svava 2015; Stivers et al. 2023). However, the “long road” to social equity (McCandless et al. 2022) has been paved by a mix of progress, backlash, and recommitment of scholarly efforts (e.g., Gooden and Portillo 2011; Guy and Williams 2023; Pandey et al. 2022). Social equity scholars have rightfully attributed mixed progress to the “ready, aim, study more” process (Gooden 2008) and to a lack of attention to social justice (Stivers et al. 2023; Wright II 2023). We join these scholars by surfacing an additional issue that hampers our ability to more deeply embed social equity within PA (Blessett et al. 2019). We argue that the unwavering commitment to an objective axiology is preventing us from seeing the whole picture. If PA scholars are serious about social equity, we must join those who understand oppression and marginalization best and reject value-free objectivity.

The core implication of our argument is the necessity of lifting the yoke of objective axiology by shifting our research (as well as our teaching and service) practices. To elucidate what such a shift would look like, we turn to actionable recommendations. In what follows, we call for the pursuit of more conscientious, honest, and forthright scholarship in PA.

### Conscientious Discourse Through Pluralism and Responsibility

We argue for a broad definition of science, inclusive of all ways of knowing. In this form of science, knowledge is created through discourse. The field must evolve in several ways to engage in the conscientious discourse we suggest. One barrier is a lack of pluralist philosophies of science. Currently, just a few token critical or interpretivist works are published in top journals (see data in Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018, which shows the lack of interpretivist work even among qualitative studies). Instead of merely tolerating the inclusion of critical and interpretivist work, the field must recognize its value (Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005; Frazer 2020; Maxwell 2020). One reason for such devaluation is a lack of knowledge of diverse epistemological positions. Scholars need to take time to learn these intellectual alternatives (see, e.g., Small and Calarco 2022). A lack of qualified reviewers cannot be why more critical and interpretivist work is not published. More reviewers would be available if scholars were better informed and doctoral students were adequately trained across intellectual traditions (Scott, Glickman, and DiTommaso 2022). Despite the importance of becoming more pluralist, inclusive, and welcoming, additional steps are needed to make steep progress on social equity and justice.

In addition to conscientious discourse about others' work, we must also be conscientious about how our work contributes to the discourse. All research involves some degree of speculation about a study's findings (Teo 2008). Indeed, an entire section of our research articles is dedicated to interpretation (referring to the discussion section).

This section could be far more productive if it represented a wider array of interpretations, namely the interpretations of those the research is likely to affect. Some qualitative researchers account for varying interpretations by engaging in member checks with research participants. Involving research participants is a practice that all researchers could benefit from (Clark 2022). In our view, too many scholars rest unduly easily believing that their research conveys “objective facts” without regard for implicit assumptions, including values, and the implications of their claims. Researchers must take responsibility for the fruits of their research and attend to its ethical implications (Castillo and Gillborn 2020; Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018). Although our research is not always read by mainstream audiences, it has the potential to do widespread good or widespread harm (as we have demonstrated). Scholars would do well to remember this as they publish their findings.

### Honest Scholarship Through Academic Reflexivity and Privilege Work

We recommend that scholars become more active in rejecting objective axiology. We are lucky to have a large body of research addressing how it can be done. Researchers who reject objectivity treat the inseparability of fact and value as a virtue, not as a negatively charged “bias”; lived experiences make us human and bring nuance and complexity to our research (Finlay 2002). Instead of attempting to dissociate from our values, the goal should be to make these values and experiences explicit through reflexivity (Wacquant 1989).

Reflexivity is the practice of engaging in “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” (Finlay 2002, 532), and it is how interpretivist and critical scholars address the inherent subjectivity of their research (Lichterman 2017). Reflexivity is a multi-level, never-ending process through which researchers become more self-aware about how their experiences and values impact their choices (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015). It is considered best practice in most qualitative research circles to include a positionality or reflexivity statement in their articles and explicitly state their philosophical assumptions. However, no such convention exists for other forms of research. *All* researchers need to make their value-laden choices explicit. The only way for a reader to judge the quality of a piece of research is for the researcher to be honest about how their values and experiences may have shaped the research. The researcher's responsibility is to lay this information bare; it is the reader's responsibility to evaluate it. To be clear, reflexivity is not intended to remove “bias.” It is about generating greater insight into human experience (Finlay 2002; Lichterman 2017). Therefore, we call on all researchers to include a reflexivity statement along with their work. We implore authors to come out (McDonald 2013) from behind the curtain of objectivity, both through reflexivity and by claiming our choices—by using first-person and active voice.

As part of our reflexivity, it is essential to acknowledge that academics tend to be socialized by a particular set of values and experiences. Academics are a privileged group, and many come from privileged backgrounds. To make social equity core to our research and teaching, we must include privilege work (Scully et al. 2018) and race consciousness (Warmington 2009) as a core element of our reflexivity. Privilege work entails the active questioning of assumptions and values born out of our privileged position in society, and

this work is essential to becoming an effective ally in the fight for equity and justice (Scully et al. 2018). While this work is relevant for every scholar, those who enjoy the privileges of whiteness and maleness must work the hardest because these practices do not come naturally (Hendrix 2002). Only when privilege work has been rigorously done can we realize our scholarship’s full implications (e.g., intentional or unintentional, good or bad) and pass this important and practical skill on to our students (Heckler 2022).

**Forthrightness Through Intellectual Activism and Public Admission**

It is imperative that we take our responsibility to society seriously by engaging with public officials, the public, and our students forthrightly. As academics, we have the power to, and the privilege of, generating knowledge. Those with the privilege of creating knowledge have the duty to use that knowledge to obtain justice (Romero 2020). As Greek philosopher Plato aptly stated, “the punishment which the wise suffer who refuse to take part in the government, is to live under the government of worse men [sic].” Scholars centering marginalized voices know it is impossible to separate politics from research. They invite us to intellectual activism: “the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice (Collins 2013, ix). In PA, the term activism often carries a negative connotation, but we contend that engaging in value-based discourse with public officials and society is our ethical responsibility. We cannot engage in intellectual activism disingenuously, though, by implying that the knowledge we convey is

value-free and objective. Instead, we can retain credibility by demonstrating that we actively engage with evidence counter to our claims (Frazer 2023).

A commitment to authenticity is particularly relevant in the classroom. We cannot rest on our laurels, claiming to teach “objective” knowledge. Our teaching is conditioned by the same values and experiences as our research—and our students deserve to know. Across the country, educators are being accused of indoctrination, an accusation that rests on the assumption that teaching can be done “objectively,” independent of values and prior experience. Just as in research, the solution is not to hide our values and experiences but to make them explicit to our students, inviting them to engage us on these assumptions and our reflexivity journeys. This classroom practice permits students to bring their values and experiences into the classroom, making them fodder for critical dialogue (Berry-James et al. 2021; Freire 2018).

Coming clean to the public and public officials will likely be more complicated than to our students. If we are to reject value-free objectivity, we must tell the general public, political officeholders, and career civil servants that objectivity is a self-imposed yoke and that it limits sound, equitable policymaking. Take, for example, the recent explosion of artificial intelligence to deliver more “objective” decisions and how those decisions have continued to spur inequality (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2018). Across all sectors of and policies in society, it has become clear that the use of big data and algorithms has increased inequality (O’Neil 2016). As another practical example, consider how the law has taken up the term “objectivity” surrounding sexual

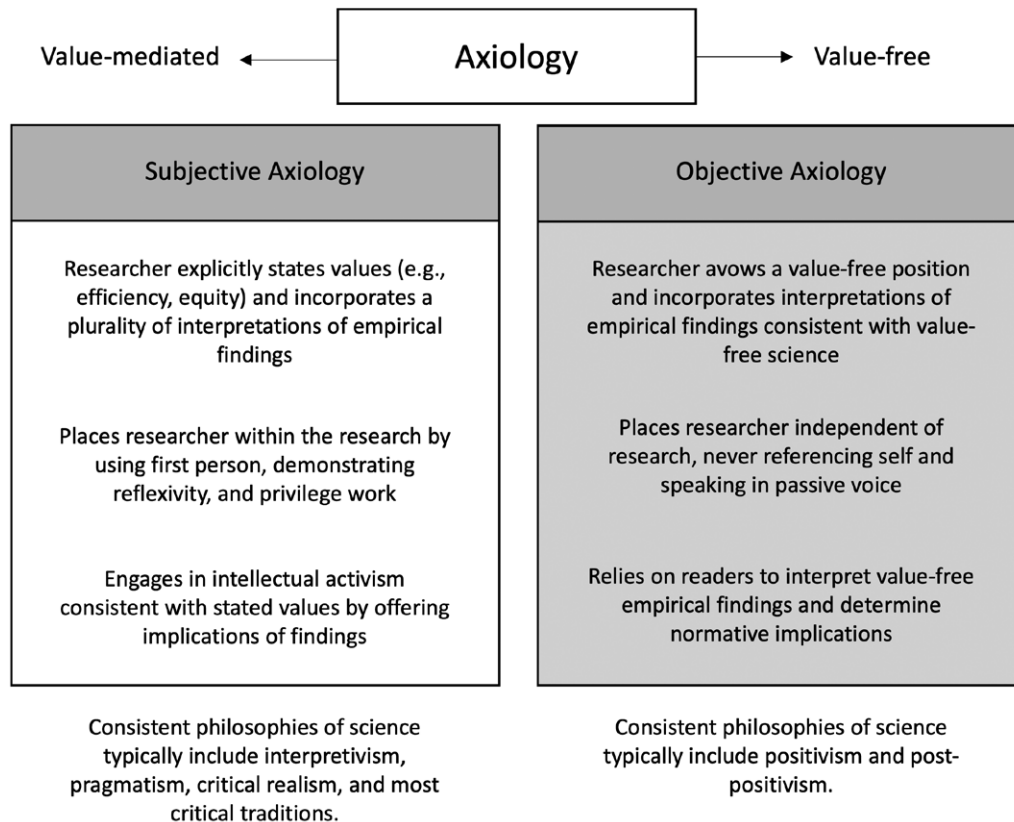


Figure 2: Axiological Positions and the Associated Research Practices

harassment and assault. The Supreme Court has stipulated that schools are only liable for sexual harassment when it is “so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive” that it inhibits a student’s education (U.S. Supreme Court as quoted in [Stabile and Grant 2022](#), 139). But who decides what is “objectively offensive?” Research shows that court judges are no more objective than the rest of us on these matters ([Glynn and Sen 2015](#); [Stabile and Grant 2022](#)). Relying on objectivity will not help us progress and may draw us further from social equity and justice.

Many will fear that admitting our lack of objectivity will undermine academic credibility. At first, that could be the case, but the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term costs. Standing in the ivory tower, hiding behind a pretense of objectivity, most certainly has not lent us the legitimacy and indispensability the academy deserves. Regardless of its costs, we can and must remove the yoke of objectivity not only from ourselves but from society as well. We wish to leave our readers and the field clear about the practicalities of our vision. Reconsidering axiology does not necessarily change how research is conducted. By this, we mean that within a broad definition of science, quantitative researchers will continue to draw on statistics, and qualitative researchers will continue to draw on interpretive analysis. However, even those holding an objectivist ontology and methodology can embrace a subjectivist axiology. Aligning on axiology may be an opportunity to bring scholars of different persuasions together. To this end, in [Figure 2](#), we summarize the practices associated with the subjective/objective axiological positions in their purest forms. We offer a more detailed toolkit outlining the steps toward removing the yoke of objectivity, including relevant readings, that can be found in [Online Supplementary Appendix B](#).

This article provides a long overdue challenge to objectivity in the social sciences, particularly in PA. We leverage a multidisciplinary body of knowledge to problematize objectivity, focusing pointedly on axiology. We conclude that, minimally, we must stop reifying objectivity as a taken-for-granted and general standard. The yoke of objectivity creates a set of pressures that have significant implications. It forces researchers to make decisions that undermine a serious commitment to public values. Lifting the yoke of objectivity involves better understanding how objectivity permeates our research through inherited philosophies of science, appreciating the varied meanings of objectivity, and then, based on those understandings, making more intentional choices in our research, teaching, and service. We hope that this is the beginning of a meaningful discussion that enables the field of PA to become more honest, conscientious, and forthright—a more direct path to social equity and justice.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at the *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance* online ([www.ppmg.oxfordjournals.org](http://www.ppmg.oxfordjournals.org)).

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