INTEROBJECTIVITY

Introduction

The concept of interobjectivity has been introduced and developed in the social sciences to account for the non-conscious engagement in the course of social interaction that occurs within a social field that is phenomenally objective for subjects and that includes interactions with objects. From the phenomenological point of view, the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is a false one.

A phenomenological claim is that in our everyday engagement in social practice, other people do not appear to us as having subjective perceptions that differ from our own (cultural researchers would dispute this claim). Human subjects appear to us as oriented to the properties and processes of things in the same way as these appear to ourselves, as objective facts. Human subjects phenomenally perceive the characteristics of objects as if they were inherent to objects themselves, rather than products of their perceptual processes. From this viewpoint, objects thus seem to us to have an objective existence independent of our perceptions (Asch, 1952/1987), and on the basis of this human subjects are able to utilize objects to mediate their social interactions (Latour, 1996). Consequently, in everyday phenomenal experience, the divide between self-conscious subjects is bypassed by recourse to a taken-for-granted, yet culturally constituted, objective reality that serves to structure automatic, non-conscious interaction. A focus on interobjectivity calls for a re-examination of the importance of objects and object relations in the study of cultural phenomena.
 (Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi, 2010).

Definition

The notion of interobjectivity was introduced by Latour in 1996, who sought to make an argument for granting artefacts social agency. Latour argued against the prevalent notion of intersubjectivity, claiming that social interaction need not require the physical co-presence of interacting subjects but can be framed and structured through the use of objects. Latour goes on to accord artefacts social forces due to the fact that action is relegated to objects in the environment in which they exist. Subjects and objects thus come to co-exist as in a collective of humans and non-humans. And insofar as human relations are framed by objects, they can be characterised as interobjective.

A further conceptualisation of interobjectivity has been advanced by Moghaddam (2003) who defines interobjectivity as 'the understandings that are shared within and between cultures about social reality' (2003, p. 221). Moghaddam implies that objectifications of the social world held by a cultural collective constitute for such a collective a socially constructed reality that has for that cultural group a character of objectivity and that serves to orientate routine interaction accordingly. Moreover, Moghaddam posits that certain objectifications can span across diverse cultural universes, encompassing different object relations for different social groups.

Traditional psychologists often 'discover' these commonalities and label them as 'universals', sometimes mistaking their origin to be biological. Such objectifications can be termed interobjective inasmuch as they transcend different social representations and legitimize different forms of object relations.

In a paper advocating a focus on interobjectivity, and iline with these two conceptualisations, Sammut, Daanen and Sartawi (2010) define interobjectivity as "a representation of an object that incorporates different social meanings and that exists across diverse cultural groups […] that permits different inter-objective relations […] with the object in common, according to each group's version of the object itself" (p. 456).

That authors argue that objects that inhabit multiple social worlds constitute interobjective representations that meet the inter-objective demands of each world in its own right. They distinguish between 'inter-objectivity' as a process and 'interobjectivity' as a product, the former with reference to object-relations in social interaction and the latter with reference to an overarching objectification that spans a number of ecological objectifications.

Debates

Interobjectivity theorists advance a critical debate that much of the scholarly concern with intersubjectivity should be supplanted or supplemented with one on interobjectivity (Sammut, Daanen & Sartawi, 2010; Moghaddam, 2010, Daanen & Sammut, 2012). They posit that the starting point of social interaction is not conscious, reflexive thought but non-conscious meanings and practices.

Interobjectivity theorists consider intersubjectivity as a relationship between subjectivities, that is, a process that resolves the distance between individuals with independently derived subjective worldviews, who come to understand other individuals with similarly derived and subjective worldviews. The critical challenge that interobjectivity theorists pose is that conscious, reflective thought does not constitute the primary way of interacting in the social world. Rather, they argue that much of social practice is habitual and matter-of-fact and relies on enculturated subjects who are in a position to interrelate on the basis of immediate and non-conscious meanings of commonplace objects and events without having to deliberate upon them.

In routine interaction, dissent between subjects may arise in which routine states of affairs are questioned and what may previously have been regarded as natural is brought into consciousness and problematised. In such cases, disputes are resolved in the intersubjective exchange that occurs between two subjects. Yet, for fully enculturated adults socialized into a certain environment, much social interaction along with the meanings of objects implied in interaction is immediately and non-consciously intelligible. And even intersubjective disputes are resolved by appeal to a mutually objective frame of reference that holds across the dispute. Consequently, intersubjective issues are resolved by appeal to an underlying interobjectivity.

References

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