Frank G. Cookingham, October 2016

I humbly submit this discussion as a description of objectivity as understood by TE practitioners. I welcome challenges to it.

There are a variety of understandings of objectivity that are appropriate in different contexts. For example, on page 230 Moreland points out the difference between psychological objectivity and epistemological objectivity. Psychological objectivity refers to a person's lack of commitment toward a given claim. Epistemological objectivity refers to public evidence that supports the rationality of some claim. A person can be passionately committed to the value of some claim (psychologically not objective), and still be open to examining public evidence to determine ways in which it supports and counters the rationality of the claim (epistemologically objective). <u>Science/evaluation is concerned with epistemological objectivity</u>.

Epistemological objectivity is the essential basis of all good research/evaluation. What does this mean? In essence it means that the researcher applies sound reasoning to his observations and submits his observations and ideas to empirical refutation by others (Kirk & Miller).

For TE there are three interacting elements that determine the objectivity of an evaluation exercise: independent critiques, cultural differences, and bias.
- The scope of competent independent critiques of methodology and findings, and the rationality of the evaluator's response to them. Without such critiques there either is no objectivity or the strength of objectivity cannot be determined.
- The scope of relevant cultural differences included in the exercise. The broader the scope the stronger the objectivity.
- The bias displayed in describing the evaluand; implementing data collection, analysis and interpretation; and reporting findings.

Degrees of Objectivity

	NO Critique		Competent Critique & RATIONAL RESPONSE	
	MONO-cultural	MULTI-cultural	MONO-cultural	MULTI-cultural
LOW Bias	UNDETERMINED	UNDETERMINED	WEAKER	STRONG objectivity
HIGH Bias	NO objectivity	UNDETERMINED	WEAKEST	WEAK

Bias control

Michael Scriven says that objectivity means unbiased or unprejudiced (not prejudged). Having strong views (being psychologically not objective) is not the same as being unprejudiced. The key question is whether the views are justified. Having a strong conviction based on rigorous examination of relevant evidence is not an indicator of prejudice.

Being objective is not the same as being neutral. Being neutral means not supporting any of the disputing factions. Someone who does not support disputing factions is no more likely to be right than any of the factions; is more likely to be ignorant about the disputed issue; may or may not be more objective. Using program neutrality as a criterion for selecting an evaluator increases the chance that the findings will be biased toward program ignorance.

The purpose of bias control in evaluation is to limit the influence of premature or irrelevant views, not to exclude the influence of definite views. The general principle of bias control is to balance program bias in a group of evaluators rather than trying to eliminate bias.

In social research "bias" refers to systematic error, or error that will have adverse consequences to people. Such errors are often due to a tendency to prejudge issues based on emotions or beliefs that are wrong or irrelevant.

An important source of bias in community development evaluation is the extent to which the evaluator(s) share power with stakeholders. Sharing power in making decisions builds trust. The more the evaluator is trusted by stakeholders, the more in-depth information evaluation participants will be willing to share. The more the evaluator is transparent about how the participants were brought into the evaluation process, and about how the evaluator's personal, professional and political identity influenced the relationships between the evaluator and other

participants, the more objectivity there is. Consult the extensive literature on participatory approaches to inquiry.

Multi-cultural Perspectives and Subjectivity

The objective evaluator is accountable to the evaluation participants for respecting them throughout the evaluation, and representing their conditions and views accurately. Moreover, the evaluator is accountable for learning about all groups affected by the object of the evaluation process, and including them in the evaluation process.

Proper methods cannot ensure objectivity and truth. But interpretations can be authenticated as empirically based representations of experiences and meanings by following procedural guidelines: examples include triangulation, negative case analysis, member checks, peer debriefings, methods audits.

The more the evaluator discloses the attention given to social and cultural differences within the evaluation setting and how they affected each aspect of the evaluation process, the more the evaluation user can assess how that affected the evaluation claims.

Numerous discussions attempt to clarify objectivity by contrasting it with subjectivity. This is not helpful in the sense that the implication is that in evaluation to be objective you must not be subjective. This is a fallacy that can limit the degree to which TE can be objective.

The essence of subjectivity is clarifying what is important to me, regardless of how it is important to others (Newbigin).
- All knowing involves personal interests, personal commitments, to exercise the skills I have learned within a particular discipline or tradition to acquire knowledge. Disinterested use of skills can yield shallow results, which is a form of bias.
- Knowing within any tradition involves personal commitment with the intention of finding shared meaning with others. That is, it involves moving back and forth between subjectivity [what is important to me] and objectivity [the information we agree is factual based on our shared observations and reasoning].

Openness to Critique

TE is a form of social inquiry. Therefore, the <u>discussions of objectivity in TE should be informed by social inquiry literature.</u> One sense of objectivity connotes a way of knowing that includes the risk of being demonstrated to be wrong. Scientists rigorously subject their ideas to tests designed to disconfirm them, or show them to be false. This is the sense in which social science regards objectivity (Kirk & Miller).

An objective process of inquiry involves multiple objective observers who actively engage in rigorous dialogue concerning appropriate data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting throughout the inquiry process. The process itself is thoroughly documented and submitted to

qualified persons for critique. Bias control and scope of cultural differences, subjected to competent independent verification, are the essential elements of objectivity in TE.

Objectivity in the kingdom of God

From a different perspective, John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodist theology in the eighteenth century, describes objective experience that is due to the prevenient presence of the Holy Spirit.

[Prevenient…whatever comes before to prevent hindrance with something, or to enable it. Something that anticipates a need and supplies something to meet that need. A prior action that takes account of or forestalls a later action.]

An argument is objective if all hindrances to the working of the Holy Spirit have been removed before and during the process of framing the argument. To test the objectivity of an argument, compare the logic and conclusion with biblical teachings. Compare it with the logic and conclusions of spiritual guides.

References

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (editors), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, 1994.
> See chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 for discussions of objectivity from the perspectives of different paradigms.

J. C. Greene, Qualitative program evaluation: Practice and Promise. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, Sage, 1994.

Egon G. Guba (editor), *The Paradigm Dialog*, Sage Publications, 1990.
> Collection of papers and responses by educational researchers and evaluators on four paradigms for guiding inquiry – positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory. Valuable resource book that allows the reader to explore different perspectives on important concepts that influence research work.

Jerome Kirk, Marc L. Miller, *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*, Qualitative Research Methods Series, vol. 1, Sage, 1986.
> Includes helpful discussions of objectivity.

J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science*, Baker Book House, 1989.
> Author has degrees in chemistry, theology and philosophy. Defends three theses: (a) There is no set of criteria that separates science from non-science. (b) The claim is unwarranted that science claims about truth should overrule claims by theology or philosophy. (c) Attempts to integrate science and theology should not assume a view of science known as scientific realism.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.
> The first seven chapters provide a framework for developing a Christian approach to applied research and evaluation work. Studying the complete book will deepen your understanding of mission for a Christian relief and development agency. Studying the first seven chapters again and again will provoke thinking about research and evaluation approaches that are appropriate for enabling such work and other Christian work in the world.

Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason,* University of Notre Dame Press, 1997.

> Defends the thesis that objectivity is the core of rationality. Critical scrutiny of relativistic thinking reveals flaws and fallacies in the deliberations of those who dismiss objectivity as obsolete and untenable. Discusses the role of objectivity in various applications such as measurement, communication, morals and values.

Michael Scriven, *Evaluation Thesaurus* (fourth edition), Sage, 1991. Pages 67-70

Carole Truman, Doing Feminist Evaluation with Men: Achieving Objectivity in a Sexual Health Needs Assessment, In *Feminist Evaluation: Explorations and Experiences,* New Directions for Evaluation, Number 96, Winter 2002, Jossey-Bass. Pages 71-82.

> Describes a framework for objectivity that involves rigorous description of all groups of participants in the setting and how differences among them influenced each aspect of the exercise.