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**An Ex-Con Teaching Criminal  
Justice:  
The Etics-Emics Debate and the  
Role of Subjectivity in Academia**

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## **Abstract**

*The etics-emics debate, “neutral objectivity” versus “biased subjectivity,” is ongoing within the academy. As academics we are indoctrinated into, and convince ourselves of, the ideology of objectivity. We are subjective human beings who attempt to develop objective standards. This stated, we are subjective by nature yet strive for the arcamedian point of absolute neutrality. The present paper explores the positive-negative aspects of incorporating personal-subjective experience(s) in teaching criminal justice. The reality of subjectivity is explored within the context of the unobtainable pursuit of pure objectivity.*

## **About the Author**

Daniel S. Murphy is an assistant professor of political science and criminal justice at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. Having spent in excess of five years confined in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Murphy has a unique insight to the realities on both sides of the razor wire. Post incarceration he worked his way through Master's and Ph.D. and now merges his subjective experiences with academic training. He can be contacted at [murphyds@appstate.edu](mailto:murphyds@appstate.edu) or by phone at 828-262-6700.

# **An Ex-Con Teaching Criminal Justice: The Etics-Emics Debate and the Role of Subjectivity in Academia**

## **Introduction**

We are all human beings; a simply complicated construct. As human beings we each are inherently subjective; a sum of our individual experiences. Yet this reality is obfuscated within the academy through socialization into the ideology, the “religion,” of objectivity. The etics-emics debate, neutrality versus subjectivity, is ongoing within academia. The present paper brings into question the religious fervor many academicians ascribe to the Arcamedian Point - total neutrality: (Manheim, 1952), this often at the expense of experiential teaching, research, and service. The predicate contained herein is *not* to disregard or detract from objectivity, but rather to highlight the often dismissed benefit(s) of subjectivity in teaching criminal justice. The author suggests that denying ones subjectivity is tantamount to denying ones humanity.

## **Conviction: Life on the other side of the razor wire**

Life experiences have dramatically shaped the teaching philosophy, as well as research and service initiatives I have embraced. I was incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons from 1992 to 1997 for “manufacturing and using marijuana to alleviate debilitating and chronic back pain caused by an auto accident in 1985” (Railey, 2003). Prior to incarceration I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Pre-prison academic training in research methods and statistics laid foundation for “really participant research” (Murphy, 2003). In 1993, I began recording observations of prison life, which included interviews with other

prisoners as well as staff members. By the end of my sentence I had collected over 500 pages of field notes that became a major component of his doctoral work, and ongoing teaching/research. My research was not merely academic: “I had lived the insanity...and I decided that something need be done to address the “reality” [of America’s failing prison system]” (Railey, 2003). My academic training, in conjunction with my prison experience, drives my teaching style and research interests. In both venues I incorporate subjectivity, predicated upon my prison experience, and objectivity, developed through academic preparation.

### **Historical Background to the etics-emics debate: “Objectivity” and “subjectivity”**

By some, I have been “labeled” (Becker, 1950, 1963; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) “subjective,” and hence, an “outsider” within the Academy (Collins, 1991). This subjective label is due to the fact that I incorporate personal experience into pedagogical practices. This said, what is objectivity? As Lorraine Daston (1992) has pointed out, “Our usage of the word ‘objectivity’ is hopelessly but revealingly confused. It refers at once to metaphysics, to methods, and to morals.”

Scores of scholars have demonstrated that the current academic definitions of “objective” and “subjective” are the result of a series of long and often subjective epistemological and ontological debates within the Western intellectual tradition. What are the origins of the Academy’s present espousal of “aperspectival objectivity” and the concomitant “detachment, impartiality, disinterestedness, and emotional distance attributed there to?”

### *Origins of the Debate*

While it is neither the purpose nor scope of the current paper to fully plumb the roots of the etics-emics debate, it is necessary to examine the “Enlightenment-Positivist” ideology that defines what data and experiences *can* and *should* be utilized in University classrooms today.

The origins of the current dichotomy between etic (objective) and emic (subjective) knowledge can largely be traced to the philosophy and epistemology of Enlightenment and Positivist thinkers of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Based on the revolutionary scientific advances made in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western “moral/natural philosophers” attempted to redefine conceptions of “knowledge” and “truth”, “objectivity” and “subjectivity”. For instance, from Medieval times to the 18<sup>th</sup> century “objective” primarily referred not to the external, material world, but rather to objects of thought. During this time “truly real objects were ideas in the divine mind” and “subjectivity” in terms of one’s intellect was not considered a barrier to authoritative intellectual pursuits (Daston, 1992). Increasingly in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, philosophers such as David Hume (1711-1776), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Auguste Comte (1798-1857), sought to base the pursuit of knowledge and truth on “pure reason” attained through the scientific method. Long before Mannheim (1952) described the “Archimedean Point” of “objective knowledge,” Adam Smith called for aperspectival perspectivity in the “moral sentiments”:

We must view them [i.e. moral sentiments], neither from our own place nor from his, neither with our own eyes nor with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person who has no particular connection to either, and who judges with impartiality, between us (Daston, 1992).

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century many Western intellectuals believed that through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning (e.g., Descartes and Bacon) scholars could arrive at the modern definition of “objective knowledge”: knowledge which eliminates individual idiosyncrasies, emotions, and personal judgments (Daston, 1992).

### **Positivism and “Going Native”**

In the second half of the 18th century, anthropologists (some of the first “social scientists”), began the classification of races and peoples through observation, measurements, and comparisons between groups of men and animals (Mosse, 1978). To accomplish this, scores of European ethnologists traveled the globe to study “primitive societies” to observe humanity's early evolutionary origins. Studying and sometimes living among “native” cultures presented unique problems for Western scientists. Chief among them was the danger of losing one's scientific objectivity, or as it was described in the 19th century, “going native:” becoming attached to or a member of the tribe/culture under study.

While incarcerated, I experienced the process of “going native.” I not only had a “really-captive” audience to interview, I myself was a prisoner of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Mid-way through the second year of imprisonment I had come to understand the convict code. I learned prison argot. I learned violence. I learned how to survive. I became *one of them* (Murphy, 2003). Even so, I struggled to maintain an “observer consciousness” and was able to amass four and one half years of qualitative data delineating the many harsh realities of America's prison system.

The following reflection underscores the interactive process of the etics-emics debate:

Are the data I collected while living the incarceration experience more salient than data collected by a non-participant objective researcher? Is the internal validity of data collected based upon my subjective perspective and domain specific understanding, both in and post prison, greater than the internal validity of data collected from the objective perspective? Do the data I collected from the subjective orientation more accurately reflect the reality of the prison condition as compared to data collected from the objective orientation? Are the data I collected skewed as result of my being “one of them” (going native)? Is my interpretation of the reality I experienced biased as a function of experiencing the reality? Does my experiential understanding help or hinder in teaching students Criminal Justice at the University level?

This thought process reflects the predominant positivist approach imbued within the academic disciplines. And while valid, perhaps my queries are misapplied. Perhaps the problem is not my own subjective prison experience, my “perspectivity” (Collins, 2003), but rather the Academy’s dogmatic application of the Enlightenment-Positivist philosophy of “objective” scholarship and teaching. Academics who do not share the dominant political and philosophical ethos of the Academy are in the minority, and thus may be marginalized professionally. Those professors whose personal history or personal beliefs run counter to Enlightenment-Positivist ideology, the holy grail of pure objectivity, may find themselves outside the gates of the ivory tower; “outsiders within.”

### **Patricia Hill Collins: “Outsiders Within”**

The modern academy is the product of Enlightenment-Positivist philosophy, and thus the academy's definitions of “fact,” “truth,” “objectivity,” and “subjectivity,” reflect the prejudices and biases of 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western intellectuals. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) is insightful in describing the affect of Enlightenment-Positivist ideology and the role of “outsiders within.”

Collins states that methods of “knowing” fall within three broad categories: that which “I” know, that which “others” know, and that which “we” know. Collins points



out that sociological knowledge has been traditionally defined by white male insiders (most of whom, it must be added, hold an Enlightenment-Positivist - “Objective” world view). This form of knowing is predicated upon what others know, and what others deem appropriate to know. If one is not a white middle class male, Collins argues, such an individual is an “outsider within” - one who gains knowledge determined correct by others, while concomitantly possessing personal knowledge that is divergent from the espoused creed.

“Knowing is another [Eurocentric (Enlightenment-Positivist)] dichotomous construct. Distinctions between . . . fact/value, and knowledge/judgment, are all variations of an objective/subjective dichotomy in knowing” (Collins, 2003). As Collins argues, incorporating “perspectivity into academic discourse; incorporating subjectivity in the search for ‘objectivity’ leads to multi-variegated understandings and analyses which benefit the fields of knowledge” (2003). Herein lies the essence of the etics-emics debate as relates to teaching in the field of Criminal Justice.

### **Teaching Criminal Justice: Objectivity and Subjectivity**

As a “Convict Criminologist” I must deal with a number of personal and professional issues predicated upon my past subjective experience as relates to teaching style and research interests. Dr. Francis Cullen questions the subjective approach implemented by members of Convict Criminology:

[Convict Criminologists] may selectively perceive their (prison) environment, paying attention to the things that jump-out at them but ignoring other factors, and therefore there’s a risk of their perceptions being unintentionally biased. . . Now, they could also be unintentionally perceptive. There’s a tendency among convict criminologists to say ‘Because I’ve been there, I know and you don’t.’ Being there gives you access to some information, but not all information. It illuminates and it distorts . . . People who are involved in convict criminology will

frequently talk about how social disadvantage led people to crime, and how people who are involved in crime are mistreated by the criminal justice system, and those, I think, are appropriate insights. . . . But what they would not tend to focus on, for example, are the personality traits of offenders, how do personality traits like low self-esteem lead people to be offenders? (St. John, 2003)

Cullen refers to “evidence” which suggests that some career criminals may have a disposition that leads to low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), and that I.Q.’s among inmates are on average 8 to 10 points lower than the general population (Alland, 2004). “Now what convict criminologist is going to say people are in prison because they have low self-control and lower I.Q. scores?” (St. John, 2003).

The present paper suggests the position Cullen maintains is the antithesis of objectivity. The logic of Cullen’s arguments illustrates subjectivity. What is self-control and how is it quantified (see Grasmick et al., 1993)? Do I.Q. tests measure intellect or do they measure cultural factors? For example, if I.Q. test were to be written in inner city argot, would the outcome be a reduction in question comprehension and thus result in reduction in test scores within the cohort of suburban dwellers? If a reduction in test scores for the suburban dwellers were to occur, predicated on wording/understanding of the questions, would this measure reflect lower levels of intelligence among suburban dwellers, or, would it reflect cultural differences? Definitionally, the positions Cullen advocates as objective, are in fact subjective; we are all subjective human beings, a sum of our individual experiences.

Further, personal experience, review of the literature, and discussions with professional academic colleagues support the author’s opinion that domain specific-subjective experience enhance both teaching and research. My subjective prison experience allows me to share with students perceptions of the “reality” of prison. This

does not devalue objective scholarship presented via text material, but rather provides additional information for students who may then implement a multidimensional analysis of constructs surrounding the correctional system. In the classroom, a professor possessing personal experience related to the course material taught may “bring to life” the concepts and constructs discussed.

I am very open with students in sharing my personal prison experience. On the first day of class it is my standard practice to write my eight-digit prison number on the board and ask students to guess what it is. Once my subjective background experience are made public, I then advise students that I inherently bring a subjective “bias” predicated upon personal experience, and stress the importance for students to implement *critical thought* in questioning my perspective. To underscore the importance of critical thought and questioning the instructor’s potential subjective perspective, question one of the first exam reads as follows (correct answer: “C”):

1. Critical thought refers to:
  - a) The fact that Dan is ALWAYS right and it is his job to tell you what to think.
  - b) Looking for issues to criticize.
  - c) Questioning Dan’s subjectivity and gaining information about a topic from a variety of perspectives thus enabling an enlightened approach for you to make up your own mind.
  - d) Staying away from the news to avoid becoming depressed.

The first question on the first exam underscores what I view to be the important role of sharing my subjective prison experience in effort to enhance the process of teaching/learning Criminal Justice.

### **Student Assessment of Subjectivity in the Classroom**

The support by students for my incorporation of subjective perspective with objective course material has been vociferous and humbling. Over my University career

I have received teaching awards each year. Each semester the students have rated me as one the top 3 teachers in the department. I have conducted independent surveys to ascertain what elements of my teaching style are appreciated and which could be improved. Following are a representative sample of student responses. As is delineated below, students indicate that my subjective perspective, in addition to objective material presented in class, enhance their learning experience.

Made me realize things that I had no idea about. I have the utmost respect for you. Keep up the good work!

This class kicks some major \*\*\*. I have learned a hell of a lot of material about CJ. Furthermore, the instructor strongly emphasized critical thought and was able to tell us how it really is.

I have really enjoyed taking this course and I think Dr. Murphy is a very good teacher and he knows what he's talking about.

I enjoyed Dr. Murphy's additional "insight" to the course. It allowed me to understand both sides of the corrections dilemma.

I highly recommend this professor. His experience relates to the course perfectly.

Dr. Murphy is a wonderful professor. I learned a great deal in his class and am thankful I took the course. He taught real world situations and made me no longer naïve about our society. Thank you for all your hard work and your dedication to changing our world.

Dr. Murphy has great real life skills. He caused me to change my major to CJ by opening my eyes to so many things. Keep it up!

The preceding is a representative sample of fourteen semesters of teaching. Over the entire period I found only several negative expressions criticizing my implementation of subjective teaching.

Someone should inform this guy that this is planet earth. He is so out of touch with reality and need realize that prison is full of bad people.

Professor Murphy distorts the reality of the criminal justice system. He is blinded by his own experience.

The negative comments are so few and far between that they may be viewed as outliers, disjunctive from the consensus. The vast, vast majority of comments provided by students, I suggest, underscore the utility in pedagogical philosophy of merging subjective with objective teaching in the field of Criminal Justice.

### **Collegial Assessment of Subjectivity in the Classroom**

Combined, the colleagues interviewed represent approximately forty years of research and teaching experience. They have published approximately forty-four journal articles, ten books, twenty-two book chapters, and have presented a combined one-hundred and twenty-four conference papers. Each has received awards for teaching and research.

#### *Inside the Police Department*

One of the colleagues interviewed is a former military police officer, a former member of the explosive ordinance disposal unit, and a former police officer where he provided service to a community of approximately 35,000 residents. This individual had been injured in line of duty and is now a medically retired police officer. Following his injury, my colleague returned to academics, worked his way through his Ph.D., and is currently an associate professor who specializes in policing.

I interviewed my colleague to ascertain if it is his perspective that subjective pre-academic experiences add to his teaching style and pedagogical philosophy. He stated that in his opinion, personal experience did support his research and teaching. He explained that he “knew the language, the reality of being a police officer.” He elaborated stating that he could relate to the “blue code”: the norms, values, and rules of

police officer culture. He provided an example of the problems faced by an academic researcher who did not have subjective understanding.

There was a very prominent researcher in the area of policing. He was conducting research into the thin blue line of the police code. Here he was an outsider attempting to glean information about the inner workings of police officer culture. He was assigned to an officer for a ride-along. His research design incorporated ride-alongs as mechanism to personally experience aspects of policing, and also provide opportunity to interview police officers. As was told to me, upon getting into the squad car, the officer he had been assigned to ride along with took a jar and placed it on the console between the officer and researcher. The officer then proceeded to stuff a wad of chewing tobacco into his mouth. Subsequently the officer began spitting tobacco juice into the jar that was precariously placed between officer and researcher. As time went by the level of tobacco juice continued to rise. Sharp turns would cause the tobacco juice to slosh. As the level rose, the researcher became more and more disquieted. Ultimately, questioning of the police officer by the researcher stopped and the researcher asked to be dropped back at the police department. The fact is the officer was testing the researcher. The researcher did not have the insight to realize he was being tested. Further, the researcher ultimately failed the test. The officer in the squad car returned to the police station after his shift and shared with his colleagues that the researcher was a putts and should not be trusted. This suggests that an outsider does not understand the inner workings of police culture and therefore is barred from access to its inner secrets.

The example provided by my colleague is insightful. It demonstrates that access to domain specific information predicated upon common, shared, subjective experience between researcher and researched enhances the interview process. He concludes: “Where I am really able to bring to life the reality of being a police officer is within the courses I teach at the University. It is here I can expand upon the text material and tell the students how it really is.”

#### *An African Scholar in America*

The second colleague interviewed was born and raised in Africa. He is an internationally acclaimed scholar in the areas of comparative government and African

affairs. I interviewed my colleague to ascertain whether he thought his heritage provides insight into his research and teaching.

My colleague indicated that his personal experiences provide important insight into his areas of research. He went on to point out the importance of objective review of research. He stated that outside scholarly observation is required because “personal bias may incline one to live the issue rather than analyze the issue.” He points out “intellectual biases may result in skewed objectiveness.”

As the interview progressed, it struck the author that the respondent clearly valued subjective insight, and made certain that issues surrounding the objective and subjective debate are considered. This was made clear when the respondent indicated: “whereas objective checks and balances are intellectually important, the objective outsider perspective is incomplete.”

An area the respondent indicates subjective information plays a role in his research is in the development of research questions and framing of hypotheses. He indicates that his “familiarity with a research topic by way of associated personal experience provides direction to research questions that an individual without comparable experience would lack.” He indicated that his subjectivity enhances his ability to convey the “reality” of the course material; “I have lived that which I teach.”

#### *A Criminal Justice Scholar*

The third scholar interviewed is prolific in publications analyzing the corrections system. He is an academic who has not had the first hand subjective experience of living the corrections system. His writings are grounded in the literature and add to the body of

knowledge. I interviewed my colleague to ascertain his perspective on subjective and objective knowledge.

The respondent indicates “objective research is the desire to find the truth while fairly considering findings. In theory, the researcher does not have an opinion as to research outcomes. Findings need be based on empirical evidence.” The respondent then questioned his response asking “what is objectivity?” Answering his question, the respondent indicates “objectivity is just a theoretical tenet. Think about it, we as researchers subjectively choose our areas of academic inquiry. I write about what interests me therefore at the onset of the research process I have introduced bias.”

The respondent distinguished between “realistic” and “reality.” He indicated that a realistic insight into the workings of the corrections system may be gleaned from the literature. He codified his distinction between realistic and reality by describing the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. He described the sensations he experienced while watching such a realistic portrayal of military combat. He then pointed out “but this is not reality, yes it’s realistic but bullets are not flying in my direction. At disquieting scenes, I could turn my head from the screen. In real life the bullets keep coming.” The point the respondent was making with this example is “you can know what something is like and not really understand the ramifications of living it.” The respondent concludes, “In a perfect world true objectivity would exist. In the reality of our world, true objectivity is merely a theoretical tenet.”

### **Recommendations for Pedagogical Change and Assessment**

There was a time in Western higher education when both professors and students were free to pursue truth without stifling their own intellectual individuality (what today



is referred to either pejoratively as “bias,” or positively as “teaching/learning style”). A reassessment is needed acknowledging the reality that subjectivity adds to, yet does not detract from, objective analysis and teaching. To do this, two steps should be taken.

### *Culture Change within Academia*

First and foremost, the academy needs to openly admit and embrace the reality of subjectivity in the classroom. There needs to be a broadening of the definition of “acceptable” experiential knowledge within the academy, one that is *allowed* to question “Enlightenment-Positivist” presuppositions, biases, and traditions. The “post-Modern” movement within academia has done much to point out Enlightenment racial, sexual, and gender prejudices, but most post-modern scholars still tenaciously maintain the 19th century's anti-subjective biases. This last bastion of “Enlightenment- Positivism” need be seriously and openly addressed by the academic community.

### *Training*

Perhaps because of the Academy's reluctance to seriously contemplate the role of subjectivity in the classroom, there is a dearth of resources available for faculty who wish to address the issue of incorporating objectivity and subjectivity in the classroom. Faculty development centers need be created that offer workshops, seminars, and symposiums to facilitate the professional introspection and evaluation needed to grapple with subjectivity and objectivity in higher education. Such colloquiums should be safe places for professors to share with other colleagues their own personal and professional experiences in the academy as pertains to their teaching and research. Prospective teachers (i.e. students) should also be exposed formally to the etics-emics debate through mentoring -seminars with faculty and discussions within the curriculum of teacher

training. Such training would be of much benefit to the Academy. As Socrates taught, education must start with "knowing thyself." It is time the Academy remembered and embraced this ancient truth.

### **Conclusion**

The role of objectivity and subjectivity in the classroom speaks to the essence of higher education. That academicians are and should always be objective is a sacrosanct tenet in pedagogical philosophy. In reality, however, no scholar can be totally objective simply by the virtue of our humanity. Subjectivity is a fact of life in the academy, whether it is acknowledged or not. The purpose of this paper has not been to minimize or discount the critical importance of objectivity, but rather to stimulate thought and discussion as to the importance of "subjectivity" we human professors and researches incorporate as part and parcel of our pedagogical philosophies.

The author of the present analysis maintains that subjectivity, when acknowledged and moderated by objective academic training, actually enhances teaching, learning, and research. Our subjectivity, our own personal experiences, gives each scholar an empathy with his or her subject matter that cannot be derived by simply immersing oneself in the literature. Yet too often the Academy has been unwilling to critically examine its definitions of "objective" and "subjective," and by so doing has ignored many salient questions basic to the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and learning.

For instance, can research conducted by objective researches who have not experienced prison, and who do not possess characteristics common among those imprisoned, accurately reflect the reality of the prison experience (Murphy, 2003)?

Lorna A. Rhodes and other scholars are finding that a purely etic analysis of America's prison system is inadequate to gain an accurate "picture of the nature and effects of incarceration" (Monaghan, 2004). The purpose is not to detract from objectivity, but rather, come to understand that subjectivity buttresses objectivity.

If the Academy is to be more than just a place of "blind observation and bland description," *objective* subjectivity, recognizing one's own biases while still striving to enlarge one's own perspective, must have a place in the classroom (Collins, 2003). The line between the objective and subjective presentation of facts can be thin, as one colleague pointed out: "Preaching is. . .an explanation of the truth [in the sense of absolute truth]; there are no other truths," whereas "Education is about challenging, and getting students to think, and weigh pieces of opinion." If challenging and analyzing pre-conceived ideas truly is the mission of academics within higher education, then the Academy's current definitions of "objective" and subjective" are ripe for reassessment. The factual reality is that subjectivity is a fundamental component of our humanity. An honest inquiry into the etics-emics debate must be a critical component of the intellectual harvest.

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