

Rethinking subjectivity in economics:

**Situated cognition and embodied and
distributed cognition**

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Summary *

I review the situated cognition (SC) and embodied and distributed cognition (EDC) literatures as a possible alternative foundations to the conventional concept of subjectivity in economics

Interpret subjectivity as an ‘embodied subjectivity’ (rather than a private internal subjectivity) depending on socially shared cognitive ‘scaffoldings’ (Clark, 1997).

Use the idea of a person being in a particular position – combining the ideas of ‘person invariance’ and ‘position relativity’ (Sen, 2009) – to advance a ‘positional objectivity’ grounding for this ‘embodied subjectivity’ framework

* This presentation is drawn from a chapter in *Identity, capabilities, and changing economics* forthcoming with Cambridge University Press

Situated cognition (SC)

Developed as a theory of perception by psychologist James Gibson in the 1970s

Rejected the Cartesian, dualistic “distinction between the ‘mental’ and the ‘environmental’ and an ‘Inside’ and ‘Outside’ of human cognition” (Petracca, 2017)

Rejected the idea that information processing occurred only in the brain

Our environments create ‘affordances’ unmediated by mental models or symbolic representations

There is a direct, two-way relationship between perception and action

Exchange between Gibson and Herbert Simon

Simon's earlier bounded rationality view shared the idea that cognition needed to be understood in terms of individuals' environments, which in his famous metaphor was the second blade of the scissors accompanying the human processing blade

However, for Simon and his colleagues, "symbolic processing lies at the heart of intelligence," and the "fundamental problem for cognitive modelers is to interleave *internal* and *external* states (Vera and Simon, 1993, 7-8, 12).

Gibson denied "symbols are fundamentally involved in all cognitive activity and argued Simon's view represented a return to a Cartesian dualism that fails to recognize the role action played in behavior

Embodied and distributed cognition (EDC)

A large collection of different but related research programs in cognitive science and philosophy sharing the assumption that cognition ‘in a broad sense’ depends on the specific characteristics of the human body in both its natural and social environments, rejecting the idea that cognition can be understood ‘in a narrow sense’ as primarily brain processing (Wilson and Foglia, 2017)

In virtue of the characteristics of the human body and its environments, much of people’s cognitive processing is ‘off-loaded’ or embodied in and distributed across their environments

Those environments can themselves be shown to contain processing structures that co-determine how people process information

Embodied and distributed cognition (EDC)

Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Mind, World, and Body Back Together*: “human reasoners are truly distributed cognitive engines: we call on external resources to perform specific computational tasks, much as a networked computer may call on other networked computers to perform specific jobs” (Clark, 1997, 68-69)

The “big idea” of *Being There*, “one with lasting impact in embodied cognitive science” was “that minds are not for thinking, traditionally conceived, *but for doing*, for getting things done in the world in real time” (Wilson and Foglia, 2017, sect. 2.3)

Recalls Gibson’s emphasis on action and earlier work by 1930s Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986) who observed students rely on external educational tools such as dictionaries and multiplication tables to process information

Consider AI today

The ‘extended mind’ and distributed self

People are linked with the world “in a two-way interaction” creating “a *coupled system* that can be seen as a complete cognitive system in its own right” – one in which all “the components in the system play an active causal role, and ... jointly govern behavior in the same sort of way that cognition ... does” (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, p. 8)

“What makes some information count as belief is the role it plays, and there is no reason why the relevant role can be played only inside the body” (*Ibid.*, p. 14)

Thus, an alternative to traditional Cartesian ‘internalism’ that identified mind and cognition solely with some sort of inner, private process

They go on to ask: “What, finally, of the self?” and answer that the “boundaries [of the self] may also fall beyond the skin” (*Ibid.*, p. 18)

Thus, we need to see the individual as embodied and distributed in the world as well, in social terms, as socially embedded in it

Embodied subjectivity: Being somewhere = being in a position

In our space-time world, *Being There* or being in the world involves being in a particular position in space and time

Does this invalidate objective reasoning seen as independent of position?

I employ Sen's concept of 'positional objectivity'

A 'view from somewhere' conception of objectivity is philosophically alternative to the often conventional 'view from nowhere' conception of objectivity (Davis, 2023)

Positional objectivity

“‘positional objectivity’ is about the objectivity of what can be observed from a specified position. We are concerned here with person-invariant but position-relative observations and observability, illustrated by what we are able to see from a given position. The subject matter of an objective assessment in the positional sense is something that can be ascertained by any normal person occupying a given observational position” (Sen, 2009, 157-8).

person-invariant but position-relative observations and observability depend on the concept of a “normal person” often explained in terms of the epistemological requirements of ‘normal observer’

What a “normal person” is in science and epistemology can be re-framed in a non-Cartesian way in terms of embodied and distributed cognition

What is not discussed here that is in the chapter from which this is drawn

The chapter employs a capability conception of the individual and interprets this as an extension of the SC and EDC emphasis on action

Capabilities are what people can be and do

The book itself incorporates counterfactual thinking into its analysis of individual behavior

People often engage in counterfactual thinking it provides a means of managing Keynesian/Knightian uncertainty

Embodied subjectivity is explained as the subjectivity people have when they are 'in' a sometimes radically uncertain, non-Bayesian world

Thank you

References available on request

Queries about my forthcoming CUP book also welcome

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