

## Introspection as object for qualitative research

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Scientific psychology has turned its back to introspectionism ever since the days of James and Wundt. Likewise, modern qualitative research has stayed clear of the methods provided by classical introspectionistic research as well. At the same time, however, introspection seems to be generally confused with ordinary perception or registration of information in many psychological writings. I find it important to make the following distinction: Introspection implies a conscious state in which one is oriented towards one's own conscious state. That is, one must be aware *of* one's conscious state in order to be introspective. This kind of knowledge and directedness is not a requirement for normal perception.

So why was introspectionism abandoned? Several kinds of criticisms have been put forward against the introspectionists, but especially two objections turned out to be influential, according to a historical analysis by William Lyons (1986). The first objection, made by August Comte, was that if introspection implies that the organ observed and the organ observing are identical, how can any observation take place? Or, in other words, in order to direct one's attention towards one's own inner states, one must first shift attention from the, say, perceived physical object "out there" that caused this inner state in the first place. Therefore, one can never be introspective.

Two of the leading theorists of the day, Wilhelm Wundt and William James, both provided answers to this objection, but in doing so, the conflicts between them of how to make sense of introspection became even more visible.

Wundt defended introspectionism, arguing that introspection involves a splitting of consciousness, so that "one half observes the other". This solution seems **counter**-intuitive, since it could be claimed to have very little phenomenological validity. I, at least, do not recollect to have been divided into two experiencing subjects when introspecting my conscious states. On the other hand, Wundt's theoretical move does "save" introspection as research strategy in that one can have direct access to one's own conscious states, and in this sense beyond any doubts be correct about them.

William James chose to redefine introspection as retrospection. Accordingly, we can never have direct access to observing our conscious states while they occur. Instead we store them in memory and observe them as unconscious pieces of information. In doing so, he avoided the somewhat strange notion of a divided consciousness. On the other hand, he created other problems.

First, it must seem inconceivable to a committed dualist as James to claim that a “retrospective state” implies an unconscious memory that however is mental and is the object of a conscious state. Second, he disqualifies retrospection as a means of getting direct access to one’s own consciousness. Memory is notoriously inaccurate.

Comte’s second objection created further problems, and in many attempts to analyse the intellectual climate of the day, this became the tombstone of introspection (not everyone agrees on this however – see for example Adams, 2000)). It stated that even if the act of introspection is possible, the claimed data from introspection are so conflicting as to be useless as data in psychology. The most notorious dispute among different schools of experimental psychology arose when Titchener and his colleagues at Cornell believed to have demonstrated that non-sensory thought was possible. All conscious thinking, they believed, involved sensations, images, or feelings. The Würzburg School – whose best-known figures were Külpe, Ach, and Bühler – on the contrary, believed that their experiments showed the opposite to be the case: that there could be non-sensory conscious thought.

James’ account of introspection could provide one answer to this second objection: the unreliability of memory. However, it still gave rise to a number of methodological problems: how can one be sure, for example, that one is engaging in inner observation and description, and not also evaluating, guessing, or projection? Furthermore, it remained unclear how to isolate the target of introspection, and if and how much the act of introspection in itself changed the underlying sensation.

William James himself came to doubt the whole business of consciousness and introspection, and voiced his doubts in a paper entitled “Does ‘consciousness’ exist” (1904), though he did not give up on dualism.

The dethronement of introspection is a historical fact. However, I find that many of the unresolved issues at the end of the introspectionist era should be considered highly interesting for psychologists. Together with philosopher Oliver Kauffmann and psychologist Thomas Z. Ramsøy, I have tried to investigate whether there is a difference between being in a conscious state *per se* and being in a conscious state directed at one’s conscious state, that is, an introspective type of state (Overgaard, Kauffmann & Ramsøy, 2001). In general, researchers within consciousness studies accept such a distinction, but it is often ignored in empirical research. One reason for this is a basic methodological constraint: Introspection seems to be the *sine qua non* for a subject’s getting access to the contents of his conscious states. Therefore the information about the content of some subject’s conscious state is not in principle dissociable from the subject’s undergoing an introspective state.

We tried out an experimental way to circumvent this methodological constraint. First, we presented a series of simple visual figures of different shape, colour and

location on a computer screen to 5 subjects. The presentations had duration times from 16 to 170 milliseconds. The subjects were each presented with 706 such stimuli through four rounds of trials. In two of these rounds, the subjects were asked to “guess” what was presented to them on the screen in a forced choice task, by pointing at scales of colours, shapes and locations.

In the other two rounds, the subjects were asked to think of their visual experience *as* an experience, i.e. a mental phenomenon, and to describe this experience. The experimental set-up was exactly the same as in the first rounds (except that they now had the possibility of indicating that they had no experience of, say, the colour of the stimulus). We wished to find out whether the way the subject oriented himself towards the stimulus (in an introspective vs. non-introspective way) would in itself give rise to differences in the subjects’ responses. The responses of the subjects were treated as being either “correct”, “incorrect” or “near correct” (e.g. when they pointed at the same colour as the one presented, but in a brighter or darker tone).

The results showed significant differences between the two conditions regarding the correctness of the subjects’ responses: In the “normal” condition, the subjects had a tendency to give more of the “correct” and “incorrect” responses, while there were more “near correct” responses in the introspective condition.

One interpretation of these findings is that the underlying experiential state is the same in the two conditions, but that the subjects are performing different cognitive tasks. In the “normal” condition the subjects have an attitude toward the stimulus as being an external event, while the stimulus in the “introspective” condition is taken explicitly as an experiential event (“within” the subjects).

Another interpretation is that the experiential state is different in the two conditions due to the difference in the subjects’ attitude toward the stimulus. This second possibility reflects that introspection changes the experience of the stimulus.

In writing this article, I wish to invite researchers working within qualitative research methodology to discuss these results. On the surface, the results address issues in philosophy of mind and experimental psychology. However, it seems plausible that there would be consequences for qualitative research as well. Thus, I will encourage people interested in research on introspection to respond through articles, or to e-mail me directly.

## References

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