

Limits of Validity: Alienation and the Power to Ignore

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Abstract

Under conditions characterized by widespread unease about the emergence of a ‘post-truth’ world in which the credibility of facts and expertise are under attack, trying to understand how social science can achieve a measure of validity through research has emerged again as a central concern. Perspectives aligned with positivist, social constructionist, and critical epistemologies have tended to approach the issue of validity in terms of how best to establish, open up, or bring to light more credible knowledge claims. This article argues that we need to pay attention to social-material entanglements and processes that seek to ignore social-materially embedded everyday knowledge and establish disentangled claims of validity that tie in with capitalist processes of alienation. To illustrate the argument, I use ethnographic evidence from a North London warehouse belonging to a global retail company to demonstrate how processes of inventory making and the establishing of valid facts in that particular context were indifferent to the particular entangled moments within which those processes unfold and relied on the power and ability to ignore embedded understandings of the world.

What can we learn about validity from a warehouse bin in North London? In a time of heightened anxieties about the emergence of a ‘post-truth’ world in which no validated fact can survive a tweet, where democratic political systems are crumbling under capitalist pressures and populist lies, where the whole scientific project is under threat from flat earthers and climate deniers (Sismondo, 2017), it might seem that talking about validity in relation to warehouse bins represents yet another sociological distraction from what is really important. In addressing these issues, some would argue, surely we need to start by focusing on bigger phenomena, with new transformative techno-methodological developments (Berghel, 2017), widespread government reform and intervention (Suiter, 2016), and a realignment of the political-educational-media landscape (D’Ancona, 2017). Why even bother with a bin in a North London warehouse?

It is tempting to seek system-level understandings of problems that occur on a massive scale. However, by starting from something relatively uncomplicated (in terms of making authoritative and valid knowledge claims), we can begin to get a better sense of the processes that shape our understandings of the world and how they relate to validity. I will argue that by paying attention to this humble warehouse bin, and by noticing how it is embedded in everyday entanglements, we can learn more about how to approach, understand, and deal with validity and the challenges of a post-truth world than we can from approaches that seek to understand and establish new global orders of systematic and reified truths. Entanglements bring attention to how our knowledge, practice, and bodies are caught up in ‘dense material-semiotic networks’ (Law, 2004: 68) and how ‘we are caught up in sets of relations that simultaneously have to do with meanings and with materials’ (ibid). At the same time, noticing entanglements also highlights the importance of paying attention to the consequences of processes that seek to disentangle life-worlds, whether that is in the form of scientific methods that lay claim to objective facts by disentangling complex social and material relations (Law, 2004) or capitalist processes of accumulation that ‘imbue both people and things with alienation, that is, the ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter’ (Tsing, 2015: 5). From the everyday unfolding entanglements engulfing this warehouse bin, I will demonstrate both how knowledge emerged out of the everyday practices centred on the bin, and I will also draw out how capitalist processes create and enforce disentangled and alienating claims to validity (Tsing, 2015).

Understanding validity is not just important in connection with post-truth political and social anxieties. Questions around how to understand and achieve validity are central to social science and connect up with wider concerns about the role that social science and social researchers should play in society (Lather, 2007). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the full range of diverse approaches to validity in the social sciences, but to situate our understanding of the warehouse bin I will tease out a few general characteristics of particular epistemological approaches to validity within the social sciences and the concerns that motivate them.

Within the social sciences, one loose set of positivist-aligned approaches conceive of validity in terms of how to establish objective, credible, generalizable, and transferable facts and knowledge claims out of the particularities from which they emerge (Cho and Trent, 2006). When it comes to achieving validity, discussions and practices in this area tend to focus on methodological issues – valid findings are treated as the product of valid research methods. Attempts to determine such methods by delineating the strengths and weaknesses of a range of different approaches thus becomes the central concern in ongoing attempts to establish social-scientific validity. Whether it is discussions about the use of triangulation, persistent observation, negative case analysis, recording and coding of data, and how best to ensure strong links between research categories and the phenomena being studied, the goal is to establish normative social-scientific practices that can yield more robust and pure knowledge claims (Erzberger and Prein, 1997; Lather, 2007; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

The positivist promise of universally unproblematic and consistent valid truths arrived at by applying the right methodological principles has proven hard to deliver. Fine-grained explorations of how particular scientific knowledge claims gain importance and validity have shown, contrary to positivist credos, that validity is not obtained by merely applying the right methods; rather, it emerges from specific standpoints embedded in social, political, and cultural discourses, practices, and processes and the authority granted to them. For those who draw on constructionist and interpretive approaches (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011), the emphasis has to shift – namely away from decontextualized principles and towards how knowledge claims are shaped, constituted, and made powerful through historically and spatially contingent discourses (Kvale, 1995). On this view, validity is not something that can be achieved by a discerning social scientist applying the right methodology. Instead, validity is treated as one among many variably connected discursive attempts to establish truths that are themselves bound into wider practices that function to separate, bound, and police what can be considered knowledge under particular conditions. As such, the role of the social scientist should be to deconstruct these powerful knowledge claims and open up space for the subversive and playful voices of multiplicity and difference (Scheurich, 1996; Cho and Trent, 2006).

Although these social constructionist approaches to validity have been helpful in unpicking assumptions around the (im)possibility of establishing objective valid knowledge claims, they can end up overlooking the importance of lived, embedded, everyday knowledge treated on the same basis as any other exercise in knowledge and power (Siebers, 2001). To move closer to an understanding of validity, then, it is necessary to pay attention to the entanglements of everyday life and examine the ways in which certain knowledge claims are made valid.

The concept of reification (Chari, 2010) can help when it comes to understanding some of these processes. This is because reification foregrounds the relationship between socially grounded materialities and how capitalist, political, and cultural processes obscure these underlying realities to create purified singular knowledge claims and objects. The notion of reification, with its links to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism – whereby commodities take on detached, thing-like properties that conceal how they are produced through labour and social relations – has undergone multiple developments and reinterpretations. These include the work of Lukács who focuses on how commodity fetishism and modern rationality have led to subjects passively accepting the capitalist reification of the world (Lukács, 1971), as well as Honneth's view that reification is intersubjective and based on forms of collective misrecognition of the conditions of life (Honneth, 2008). Nonetheless, while there are several differences within these approaches (Chari, 2010), when it comes to validity they urge us to reflect on how embedded and entangled knowledge claims are reworked and disentangled from their lived circumstances and how they take on new properties in their purified forms that are re-imposed on the world. Moreover, writing in this tradition illustrates the need to examine the link between claims to validity and the alienating effects they can have once those claims have become separated from and are subsequently imposed back onto the everyday experiences they profess to reflect, remoulding them in the process (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman, 2015; Hall, 2018). Theories of reification thus encourage us to remain attentive to powerful underlying processes within capitalism and the alienating effects that can result from the reification of lives. Where such analyses become problematic, however, is when they claim that these processes are hidden and obfuscated from the people who are affected by them and that it is only through critical methods that valid understandings of the real world can be revealed (Latour, 2004).

The problem is that there are situations in which nothing is hidden and where embedded understandings of the world are actively ignored so as to enable claims to validity to be enforced. To illustrate the kind of situation I am talking about, we need to return to the warehouse bin in North London. The bin I have in mind is not for refuse, as a 'bin' in the UK would be outside of the warehouse. Instead, it is a demarcated space on a shelf where items are stored. The bin is one of more than 100,000 equivalent spaces located within a warehouse owned and run by IROHA (pseudonym), an online global retail company. During my ethnographic fieldwork study of precarious work and living in London, I spent months working at IROHA. The job of most people in the warehouse consisted of either taking items away from the bins or putting new items into the bins. But my job, together with around sixty other people in the quality assurance unit, was to count the items in the bins so that the company could validate the real number of items in any given bin.

In terms of living in a complex, intertwined world, establishing how many items there are in a bin might be thought of as one of the simpler tasks that might emerge in such circumstances. For social scientists studying the complex social relations that encompass endlessly interconnected elements, the matter of establishing how many items a given bin contains surely comes nowhere near such levels of complexity. Yet, the very real problem for us whose job it was to quantify the items in the bins was that it was not the sort of thing that could be settled with certainty. On numerous occasions, we were informed by management that we had made an error. Although the bins had the capacity to hold hundreds of items, most of the time there were only a handful of items and sometimes we were told that we had made an error when we reported bins containing just one or even zero items.

The fact that we had made such a mistake was further compounded in light of the elaborate procedures put in place to minimize such errors. A management software system had been developed to keep track of how many items were supposed to be in a bin. This software was then tied in with our scanners, which told us what bin we were to check. After scanning the correct bin, we then counted the number of items and typed the number into the scanner. If the number we had counted was different from what was supposed to be in the bin, we had to count again by taking out all items in the bin and putting them on our trolleys to make sure we had not overlooked anything. If there was still a discrepancy, we would then be asked to confirm the count again before moving on. To double-check our count, another person would then arrive to scan each individual item one by one. If there then continued to be a difference between what we had counted and what the second person (known as the 'control person') had counted, we would 'get an error'.

'Getting an error' was not something to be taken lightly, since if you were to get more than a couple of errors per week, you would get in trouble. People were disciplined as a result of errors. They were sent to retraining because of errors. They lost the opportunity for lucrative overtime work because of errors. They were laid off because of errors. Despite the seriousness of errors and the obvious incentives people had for avoiding them, people were regularly told that they had miscounted bins that contained either one or zero items.

There are various ways in which we could attempt to analyse this situation. We could approach it from a positivist standpoint and assume that given all the technological methods and practices implemented by IROHA to ensure a valid count, human error can explain any counting mistakes. The workers had simply miscounted the number of items (twice) or pushed the wrong button on the scanner (twice). This certainly sounds plausible. Getting the count wrong was entirely feasible and when a worker was told that they had miscounted bins with 60–70 items in them, they often had few complaints. However, when different workers were consistently told that they had miscounted bins containing either no items or just a few items, this suggested that something else was going on. This 'something else' was not immediately clear; only after having worked there for a while did it become evident that the warehouse was not just rows of neatly ordered bins that could be counted and ordered as was imagined within the systematizing software that guided and evaluated our work.

The first thing that started to pick away at the software's ordered worlds was the dawning awareness that the bin was not really a bin in and of itself, and that it was inseparable from the intertwined flows that pervaded a warehouse in which nothing was entirely solid or self-contained. That is, the warehouse was constituted by flows of people fluctuating between being hungry, bored, stressed, overworked, apathetic, playful, and always on the move, and items that were not just blank, interchangeable, docile units/entities waiting to be counted, but materials with multiple shapes and weights, endowed with properties of temptation, allure,

and transformability. There were luxury chocolates that over the course of a 12-hour shift screamed out to be tasted. There were wigs that, after counting or picking or stowing thousands of items, invited you to try them out for a quick laugh amidst all the boredom. There were gaps in the shelves through which items would fall out of sight. In other words, the warehouse was a world constantly changing, pushing on, affecting and being affected, connecting and breaking apart, and re-emerging in new shapes. To maintain the perfect separation of bins and items, beyond the particular moment in which they happened to be counted, was impossible. There were countless ways that items could be opened, consumed, pushed on, grabbed, moved, misplaced, and found, and if any of this happened between the first count and the control count – a period in which hours or weeks could go by – it would lead to an error for the person who had made the initial count.

By understanding the everyday flows and entanglements of the warehouse, we can then explain why people continued to count items that, according to the systemized software validations, should not exist in that bin. However, this knowledge was not hidden from or unknown to anyone who had been part of the inventory assurance unit for some time. It was widely known among both the workers and the managers (who often themselves had worked years on the floor before becoming managers) that this was how things worked. The problem was not that people did not have enough grounded and valid knowledge about their immediate circumstances. They knew very well about the arbitrariness of the management software system and the unfairness of the error system. They knew that the real, lived experience of the warehouse was nothing like the software's pure encoded visions of a world of self-contained and manageable bins and items.

The issue was not a lack of credible knowledge. Getting a better understanding of what was going on would not have solved anything. There were no illusions to dispel, no false consciousness to raise. The workers knew that when they counted zero items in a bin, twice, there were no items in that bin at that particular time and place. It was as valid a fact as anything constituting our world. They knew that trying to disentangle that fact from its embedded context so that it could be processed within the management software system meant that it lost connection with what was really going on. They also knew that the alternative reality of management and software validity was what would ultimately matter, and that any discrepancy would be classified as their error, as their misapprehension of the world.

This process is not unique. Tsing argues that although capitalism is adept at dealing with all kinds of embedded complexities of the world, one of the central premises of the capitalist economy is its ability to disentangle items from the embedded context from which they emerge and to make them into transferable items (Tsing, 2015). For the workers in the warehouse, the enforcement of the error system was also just one of many everyday encounters where their own embedded, lived reality was dismissed as invalid, and where a system view of the world was enforced by either state agencies or capitalist enterprises. Being told that you cannot count to zero was frustrating, but hardly unique. In all the other jobs the workers had experienced, similar processes were part and parcel of the role, and whenever they had to engage with state-capitalist assemblages outside of work – from migration officers to bank officials – their lived experience again meant nothing when set against and assessed relative to documented and ordered systems.

If the establishment of validity is bound up with state-capitalist powers to disentangle, transform, and ignore embedded knowledge, how should we then approach validity? In terms of anxieties about the role of social science in a post-truth world, we could start by paying attention to how people's embedded everyday knowledge is continuously ignored within the processes that make claims to validity so powerful. In a world where validated knowledge claims about your life are consistently at odds with what you know to be the case, it should not be surprising to find that people start to question other supposedly validated knowledge claims regardless of how many social scientists say that something is true. Indeed, if we turn attention to our practices as social scientists – whether tied in with state, academic, or commercial assemblages – we should ask whether we also rely on our ability to ignore, purify, and move knowledge claims outside of the deeply embedded contexts in which they develop. If we do so, then it is an open question as to why our claims to knowledge and validity should be treated as less problematic than the enforced validity claims that emerge in state-capitalist assemblages. I do not pretend to have any easy response to such questions, but if we want to get closer to properly addressing the most troubling questions about the role of validity, then reflecting on our relations with some of the simple complexities of the world (such as a warehouse bin) may not be a bad place to start.

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