

Methods used in conducting social research



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Historically, it was perceived that social research could be performed objectively using positivistic techniques related to the natural sciences. Despite their ideological variations, Comte, Durkheim and Marx all perceived that natural scientific methodologies could be applied to social studies thus providing objective value free research. Yet the social sciences are divided as the objectivity of social research has been a highly contested issue within ontological schools of thought claiming that the social world cannot be explored wholly objectively. This debate was brought to the forefront when Becker who takes an interactionist perspective, claimed that it is impossible for social researchers to make values free judgements and that sociologists 'take sides' namely that of the underdog, the oppressed and the powerless. This essay will explore the concept of objectivity within social research by giving a historical account of social theory before critically analysing the claim that the objectivity of the social researcher is fatally compromised when he or she takes sides. The Becker/Gouldner debate will be critically addressed before analysing the notion of 'public' sociology.

Before addressing the debate, the historical significance of social theory must be addressed as there is a long history regarding issues of objectivity, and value free research. Prior to World War Two, social research was dominated by the paradigm of positivism. Philosophers such as Comte (1798-1857) strongly affirmed that methods applied to the natural sciences such as physics should be applied to the study of social behaviour (Benton & Craib, 2001). The positivist perspective placed great emphasis on the objectivity of social research, accepting Science as 'the only general form of knowledge' that produces 'reliable social scientific knowledge' that can be

generated into theory applicable to social behaviour within society (Benton & Craib, 2001: 23). Moreover, like the natural sciences it requires both logical and empirical support. Causal relationships can be identified and truths can be falsified thus, positivist sociology 'assumes that law-like generalisations' can be derived from social research Pedraza (2002: 75). Postivism was widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century as science was assumed to be the highest form of knowledge, thus by applying the methodologies of the natural science to the newborn social sciences allowed for some level of acceptance. As far as 'objectivity' is concerned, positivist methodological approaches claim that 'objectivity' is an ideal that is attainable, as the social reality of society can be observed without any antecedents. As a result, the aim of the social scientist is to be exogenously detached from the research subject.

Although not positivists, both Durkheim and Marx both ascertained that social research could be studied using natural science techniques therefore obtaining objectivity. Although not a positivist himself, Durkheim drew upon positivistic methods in his study of suicide using statistical data to identify patterns of causal relationships. (REF)

Turning to Weber (WEBERREF) changed the direction of social research claiming that although social research should be value free, obtaining completely objective research was impossible. This is simply because researchers are subjective humans. Weber coined the term value free sociology and urged that sociologists need to be unconfined by personal values if it was to make a positive contribution towards society. Weber recognised that personal values would to some extent influence research

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topics but encouraged objectivity in exploring a topic once chosen. For Weber, value freedom is then a non-judgemental analysis of society ' in its own terms'. Although Weber advocated this approach to social research, it must be acknowledged that values can enter research in a variety of ways ranging from the choice of research area, formulation of the research question; methodology including data collection, analysis of data; interpretation of data and overall conclusions (Bryman, 2008).

Following from Weber the epistemological position of positivism has been overtly critiqued by various theorists, particularly those who take an ontological, interpretivist stance. For example, Becker (1964: 245) argues that, ' there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one way or another'. Therefore, social research cannot be completely objective as researchers can unknowingly contaminate their exploration of an issue with values developed throughout their own biography. Furthermore, Becker (1964) claims that, sociologists must either ' write from the position of a superordinate or from that of a subordinate' (Lawson, 1991: 591). In addressing this claim, Becker (1964) discusses the ' credibility of hierarchy' which explores the notion that social groups whom are perceived to be superior within a given society are in a position of power that can define the rules of society. The exclusivity of the natural sciences within society is an example of this. Becker (1964: 242) goes on to surmise that sociologists challenge this rule by refusing to acknowledge the ' established status order' in which it is surmised that the ' truth of knowledge' is unequally distributed. Therein, Becker suggests that social

research should focus on the ‘underdog’ in order to reform knowledge distribution.

This is similar to the view that has been taken up by feminists such as Hartstock (2004: 7) who place emphasis on relativist standpoint theories whereby knowledge is shaped by power relations, that it is ‘socially situated’. Therefore those oppressed can give the best account of the internal workings of their group. Hartstock (2004) attains that prior to feminist sociology, research disciplines and public policy did not account for women as a group with their ‘own knowledge’. For Hartstock (2004), any social research that does not address the unequal distribution of knowledge, is therefore, potentially skewed. Thus drawing upon the Marxist notion of historic materialism standpoint theorists such as Hartstock (2004) and Harding (DATE) chose to address this with the aim of exercising social research from the position or ‘standpoint’ of women. It can be surmised from this perspective that it is therefore impossible for a social researcher to extract themselves from power relations in their own situation. Therefore the feminist approach strongly advocates that objectivity should not be the primary aim of a social investigation. Rather, it is important for researchers to adopt a stance and consider how their values will influence their research. In addition, it should be recognised that feminist researchers shape the results of their analyses no less than do those of sexist and androcentric researchers. The “objectivist” stance should be avoided as it attempts to make the researcher’s cultural beliefs and practices invisible, while simultaneously skewering the research objects, beliefs and practices to the display board (Harding, 1987: 9).

What are the arguments against this?

GOULDNER

Gouldner is in consensus with Becker that social research cannot be value free yet he openly criticises Becker's claiming that Becker does not address the reasons why sociologists are more inclined to take the side of the underdog. Furthermore Gouldner asserts that is not always the case,

" the manner which some sociologists conceive the value-free doctrine disposes them to ignore current human problems and to huddle together like old men seeking mutual warmth. ' This is not our job,' they say, ' and if it were we would now know enough to do it.'" (Gouldner, 1973: 13)

It is clear that subjectivity poses a severe limitation for the positivist objective approach to social research. For Gouldner, however, the positivist approach posed another extensive problem, it was ' useful to those young, or not so young, men who live off sociology rather than for it, and who think of sociology as a way of getting ahead in the world by providing them with neutral techniques that may be sold on the open market to any buyer' (Gouldner, 1973: 12). In others word Gouldner saw self interest as a powerful motivator - the outcome of research being affected by the context in what it is undertaken. Thus the social researcher is not necessarily on the side of the underdog.

In laymen terms Lawson (1991) suggests that the crux of this debate is the question of whether sociologists are allied with the state, accepting the state as the overall authority or should they adapt a more ethical, moral role in addressing social problems of society. Ultimately social researchers are

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divided by this dilemma that as Gouldner suggests, depends on the social context of the researcher. What Gouldner recognises is that the attempt of sociologists to draw upon the natural sciences to obtain an objective approach does not entirely fit with social studies and that the institutions in which professional sociologists consult such as government, academia and business can have a profound effect on a researchers values.

Parsonian sociologists such as Haak (1994) and Hammersely (2000) are critical on views promoted by Becker and Gouldner arguing that that the politicisation of social research is not only misguided, but inherently dangerous, and that ' an intelligent and sceptical commitment to the principles of objectivity and value neutrality must remain an essential feature of social research' (back cover). Hamersley (2000) promotes the idea of value-free, objective social research placing emphasis on academia as the key institution to producing knowledge. Yet the University as a place for producing knowledge itself is under threat. This can be demonstrated by addressing the tragedy of the anticommons.

ANTICOMMONS 300

In response to Harding's Tragedy of the Commons whereby a resource is exploited by overuse, (HellerRosenburg1998)) address the notion of the ' anticommons' where upstream and downstream technologies are compatible for the development of a new product yet the technology is patentable and ownership is fragmented thus the price of the new product becomes high and its consumption ends up being small or there is a ' gridlock' in the development of the products

EXAMPLE OF ANTICOMMONS – This is not objective research if the notion is to make profit 250

This situation can be directly perceived by examining changes within university systems. For example, in Japan, national universities that conduct public research have transitioned to 'University Corporations' by which there is an emphasis in profiteering from any innovations it may develop (Nishijima, 2004). According to Nishijima (2004) the Japanese ministry of education has advocated universities to acquire patents of innovations and to partake in research activities with private organisations such as corporations.

through establishing Technology License Office for the past few years. The transition of National University to University Corporation implies that results of basic research will suddenly change from public goods to private goods and that the anticommons problem will emerge in the product innovation where basic research and development of new products are complementary.

In the case of National University, there seems no consensus (no argument so far) on how economists should formulate the objective function of national university. ¹⁰ Even if we assume that national university behaves as if it maximized a particular objective function such as probability of research success subject to budget and other constraints, equilibrium variables of national university will not be far from those arbitrarily given, as long as the particular objective function is not convincing. Therefore we have no choice but to exogenously give particular values to variables

Thus as Oliver (1992) ascribes, social research are sometimes forced to take sides as funding bodies are not willing to take risks and support user-controlled research.

The point that Gouldner (1973) puts across is that sociology should focus on social change therefore it must take sides. Essentially, Marx emphasised the need for social research to contribute to social change,

“ The Standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the stand point of the new is human society, or social humanity. The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it. (Eastman, 1935)

like Marx, Gouldner (1973) believed that sociology should count towards human emancipation - thus Gouldner became a strong believer in public sociology.

REFLEXIVITY 300

The notion of reflexivity. Researchers must give an indication of the purpose of their research and how they have come to partake in such research

This illustrates some of the factors that can affect social research. Namely, the need for profit.

PARSONIAN SOCIOLOGY – ARGUES FOR EPISTEMOLOGICAL RESEARCH – DISCUSS!!

BURAWOY – PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY – DISTINCTION BETWEEN THOSE THAT ACT AND THOSE WHO DONT

As Burawoy (2005: 324) asserts ' the possibility for public sociology comes from sociology's spontaneous connection to - its reflexive relation with - civil society'. Burawoy clearly recognises that sociology in itself is a reflexive paradigm and suggests that it clearly needs to move from ideological theory to commitment to action. In a sense Burawoy (2005: 325) advocates that social research must take sides claiming like Marx and Gouldner that society should ' place human society or social humanity at its organising centre'.

200 words

Whilst this debate continues, a few conclusions can be drawn from this essay. Firstly, it is near impossible for social researchers to complete value free research. There are several factors that account for this. Namely as Gouldner asserts, the social context in which research is conducted.

Secondly, It would seem that social research is clearly divided by professional and public sociology. Thus it is not a case of whether or not to take sides but more a case of which side our values empower us to choose. Those inclined towards professional sociology may attain that objectivity is not compromised whereas those inclined towards public sociology may recognise that it can be and even more so, that it is necessary to evoke humanitarian changes.