

Sociology Shortcuts

M13. Objectivity, Subjectivity and Value-Freedom

1. Value-Freedom

The term "value-freedom" is a little misleading since it suggests human behaviour can be 'free from the influence of values'.

An alternative concept, therefore, is **value-neutrality** - the idea a researcher recognises how their values influence the research process and adjusts their research strategy accordingly. For example, the need to ensure conclusions drawn from research are not influenced by personal prejudices.

Dentler (2002) suggests debates about value-neutrality generally fall into two main camps:

1. Positivists, who argue sociological research should be value-neutral.
2. Those who argue it should be **value-committed**. Feminist approaches, for example, argue research should be directed towards promoting social change in the status of women.

How values intrude into the research process can be considered in two ways:

a. **Practical**: doing research involves making *choices* about what to study / how to study it.

- Some choices reflect direct personal values (**Townsend** (1979) spent much of his career researching **poverty**).
- Others reflect indirect values. *How and by whom* research is **funded** may influence not only *what* is studied but also *how* it is studied; much UK government-funded research, for example, requires **quantitative** rather than qualitative data.

b. **Theoretical**: These choices reflect beliefs about the nature of the social world and how it's possible to study social behaviour.

These relate to the researcher's **beliefs** about what exists, the kinds of **proof** they are willing to accept and ideas about what constitutes **reliable** and **valid** data.

At a fundamental level sociologists have to confront their beliefs about their subject matter and how it influences research design and conduct – whether people are, for example:

- 'equal participants' in a process where their active involvement is encouraged (**Interpretivism**) or as:
- 'research objects' to be questioned and observed in whatever way the researcher deems appropriate (**Positivism**).



2. Objectivity and Subjectivity

Coser (1977) argues *choice* is always influenced by values (**value-relevance**), but once research choices have been made **value-neutrality** involves the researcher *acknowledging* their values and not imposing them on the research process - an important dimension of **objectivity** and **subjectivity** - ideas illustrated by four related types of knowledge.

1. Ethical

Whatever their personal involvement or beliefs, a researcher must maintain a critical and **objective detachment** - a form of objectivity to which *all* sociologists subscribe.

2. Personal

This reflects a researcher's beliefs about how it is possible and desirable to study behaviour.

- For **positivists**, the researcher doesn't become 'personally involved' by participating in the behaviour being researched. This **social distance** between researcher and respondent is maintained using research methods, such as questionnaires, to ensure the researcher *doesn't* interact with their respondents to influence their behaviour.

- Interpretivists**, on the other hand, argue for **personal subjectivity**; the researcher *should* get as close as possible those being researched (while maintaining **ethical objectivity**). This generally involves using 'subjective' research methods, such as **unstructured interviews** or **participant observation**.

3. Ideational

This involves beliefs about the nature of knowledge (whether, for example, it's possible to get at *the truth* about something). In terms of the methods used in the research process.

- Positivists** argue it is possible to generate **objective** knowledge, which means the task of the sociologist is to test **hypotheses** using objective research methods.

- Interpretivists** argue all knowledge is necessary **subjective** and the task of the sociologist is to reveal different *forms of truth* by *describing* social behaviour.

4. Social

This refers to core beliefs about the nature of the social world and how it can be studied.

- For some approaches - particularly **positivism** and **realism** - the social world has an objective existence. This, **Mulder** (2004) notes, means society "*exists independent of the researcher's perception of it. The object would "be there" even if no-one perceived it*". This meaning of objectivity is "*typically associated with ideas such as **reality** and **reliability***".

- For **Interpretivism** the social world exists **subjectively** and societies can't be **validly** studied independently of the people who create them. The aim of research is to reveal how people *make sense of their world*.

1. Objectivism

Positivists and **realists** argue we can study objective features of the social world (**institutions** such as families and educational systems) because they have both permanence and solidity.

Objectivism, therefore involves the idea social structures are real, exist independently of the observer and can be experienced directly or indirectly. Sociological research, therefore, involves **discovery** - progressively uncovering the principles on which the social world is based - and should be value-neutral; the researcher should not allow values to influence what they see and they study the social world as a detached observer. As **Firestone** (1987) puts it, this approach argues "*There are **social facts** with an objective reality apart from the beliefs of individuals*"

What is a Social Fact?

- o Social facts are
 - o General – general throughout society and diffused throughout the group
 - o External – exist outside the individual, prior to him and independent of his will
 - o Constraining – coercive
- o Social facts are things, not ideas
 - o Can be observed

These social facts - embodied in the idea of social structures that influence and constrain individual behaviour - can be studied in much the same way a physicist studies natural phenomena.

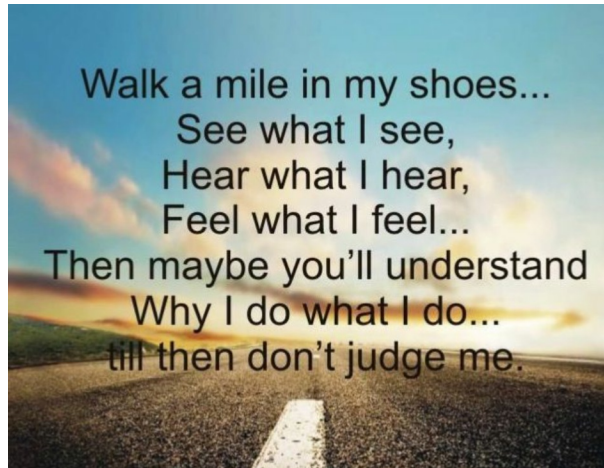
Objectivism, therefore, argues human behaviour is always the result of **external stimulation** - social structures pushing people to behave in particular ways, such as playing particular roles and conforming to specific norms. Just as in the natural world where the behaviour of things is determined by the operation of *physical forces*, such as gravity, human behaviour is theorised as the result of **social forces**:

If a natural scientist wants to understand why apples *always* fall to the ground, they don't ask the apple; they study the **forces** that propel apples to behave as they do.

Similarly, to understand social behaviour we need to understand the *social forces* that compel people to behave in particular ways - and if individual action is a product of external social stimuli, it follows these can be identified, researched and explained in an objective, scientific, way.

Empathy (what **Weber** calls **verstehen** or *understanding*) involves the ability to see events from the viewpoint of others and is not something to *avoid*. Rather, sociologists should take advantage of the fact they have something in common with the people they study.

Murphy (1988), for example, argues the researcher should recognise *how we see* something is always based on our values and can't be separated from how we *interpret* what we see.



Value-freedom - rather than giving sociologists access to "the truth" - actually distorts data because it's (unattainable) pursuit stops the researcher *questioning* how and why their

values are part of the research process. Sociologists should, therefore, "*strive to understand the value base of data, rather than searching for ways to purge values from research*".

2. Subjectivism

Where objectivism sees a single reality that can be discovered through systematic research, subjectivism argues there are *many realities*, expressed through the various ways different people see and understand the social world.

The social world is not something *out there* waiting to be discovered; rather, it exists only as '**interpretations** waiting to be made' - how people understand both their own behaviour and that of others. From this position the aim of social research is the production of "subjective understanding".

Interpretivist and feminist approaches, for example, see the researcher as a **channel** through which individuals can "tell their story". The objective is to uncover how and why people see the social world - and their role within that world - in particular ways.

This *doesn't* mean the researcher should be personally subjective. **Williams** (2005), for example, argues, researchers should strive for **personal objectivity** in their work.

Williams also argues we should see *objectivity* and *subjectivity* as part of a **continuum** - a line with '*pure objectivity*' at one end and '*pure subjectivity*' at the other. Although sociological research is *more* value-laden than natural scientific research, this doesn't automatically render it unreliable and invalid, for two reasons:

1. **Pure objectivity** is an *ideal* that can never be attained because *all* research involves some degree of value commitment.
2. If sociologists recognise how values impact on their work (by identifying the **assumptions** under which they are working), this research is less value-laden, more reliable and valid than the opinions of the non-sociologist.