

Values and Sociology

Can sociology be value free? Can sociology be free of personal beliefs, prejudices, opinions etc.

Given that sociologists are human beings – can they study society objectively as they are part of what they are studying? 3 main positions on this can be identified:

1. Value freedom is possible
2. Value freedom is not possible
3. Values should be celebrated and incorporated into sociological research – Committed Sociology.

1. Value Free Sociology

This has developed from positivists who believe that we should copy the methodology of the natural sciences (like Biology, Chemistry etc). Like the natural scientist the sociologist studies phenomena that exist totally externally to the individual. These social facts can be observed objectively by following the scientific procedure.

Any personal or political beliefs and biases of the researcher are irrelevant as long as the research is well designed and the findings are not altered or tampered with.

2. Value Laden Sociology

This school of thought believes that sociology cannot be value free – even if it wants to be. A number of areas show how it is impossible to keep values out of the picture:

1. **Funding** – Like other sciences, sociology relies on funding from various sources and it is important to question why a certain piece of research has been commissioned.
2. **Career progression:** - Sociologists have personal ambitions and career aspirations. Reputations can be made and these desires can intrude into research (knowingly or subconsciously).
3. **Personal beliefs:** - As sociologists we are human beings and consequently it is impossible to escape from our personal beliefs no matter how hard we try when conducting research. Choice of topic in the first place is often a result of personal interests we have.



Weber and Values

- For Weber values, unlike facts, cannot be disproved and he saw an essential role for values in sociological research:
- **Values as a guide to research:** - values are essential to help us choose which aspects of social life to study.
- **Values and data collection:** - **When** collecting data Weber believed we should keep our values out of the process.
- **Values and data interpretation:** - values are important again when we interpret what the research is telling us. We need to put the findings within a theoretical concept. We need to tell others about our values so that our interpretations can be made in context.
- **Values and effects of research:** - Weber believed that as sociologists we have a responsibility to look at the effects of our research. We cannot hide behind 'objectivity' at this stage – particularly if our findings can cause harm.

Values and Methods

There is a link between the beliefs of value freedom/laden approaches and the methods chosen to study social behavior.

Those who believe a value free approach is possible – such as positivists tend to favour methods generating quantitative data which are seen as reliable, objective and offering the chance to look for correlations etc.

For those who believe that values cannot be ignored and those who warmly welcome their input – qualitative methods are preferred where depth, validity, verstehen etc. are seen as important.

Committed Sociology

Some sociologists argue that sociology cannot and should not be value free and rather as a subject it should have values guiding research.

In the 1970s there was a big debate between Gouldner and Becker. Both agreed that sociology should openly 'take sides' as it were in research.

Gouldner believed that

1. Sociologists cannot ignore their values when doing research
2. Sociologists need to hold on to their values or they risk 'selling out' to the highest bidders when conducting research.

Becker (famous for labeling theory) argued that sociologists should argue from the side of the 'underdog' (criminals, Mentally ill patients etc) because little is known about their position.

Gouldner argued the opposite and suggested that sociologists should focus on the really powerful groups as these create the 'structures of oppression'. Gouldner is critical of Becker's position which he sees as an over-sentimental view of disadvantaged groups. Instead Gouldner advocates a Marxist position in siding against the powerful, exploitive groups in society.

Feminists agree with this idea of exposing exploitive groups, but see the key issue being the patriarchal nature of society – how males dominate and control society.

Left Realists are also committed to the rights of exploited groups – but unlike Marxists, they do believe that change can occur within capitalism.

Relativism

The relativist position argues that there are many different versions of 'truth' - the sociologists research is just one of these. As we have already seen this is the position of the postmodernist.

Others disagree and say that there is a real factual world out there and sociologists can observe, record and report on what is going on out there irrespective of their values.