

Objectivity in Social Sciences: Embracing Openness

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Abstract. Value-laden social sciences have been discussed over its objectivity ever since its birth. The issue around objectivity is of methodological and ontological importance, further concerning the disciplines' credibility and long-term development. This paper aims to bring about several crucial debates around this topic, hoping to bring in new spotlights for the academia's faith in the future of social sciences. It thus reviews some essential literature pieces, and analyses and summarises their core points and distinct perspectives. The paper focuses on three major topics, the value-laden nature of social sciences, the cultural factors and the fall of fact/value dichotomy. In conclusion, it suggests for a kind of openness in the academia, as scholars admit the subjectiveness lying in their work and open themselves for scrutiny and judgement.

Keywords: Objectivity; values; fact/value dichotomy; social sciences; cultural relativism.

1. Introduction

Ever since the publicly recognised birth of social sciences in the 19th centuries, social scientists in this aspect have been seeking for the absolute objectivity which is considered as the cornerstone of modern science. Objectivity, commonly implying that the physical knowledge about a physical object can be completely separate from knowledge about the observer [1], always incorporates the dichotomies of “intellectual” vs. “emotion” “self” vs. “others”, as well as “fact” vs. “values” [2]. In order to scientifically study society and individuals in the social world in a universal indisputable manner, the subject of social sciences has undergone methodological shifts from “quantitative revolution” in the Victorian era to the experimental revolution recently [3]. Scientists adopt the methods and methodological rules originated from natural sciences to try to clear away biases and values based on personal perceptions. The ultimate goal of “truth” and the pursuit of it drives social scientists to speculate and practise objectivity in observing and explaining the social worlds around us.

However, social sciences were born to be value-laden as the researchers themselves are nevertheless one living part of the social world, which sparked endless debates and thoughts of objectivity in terms of social sciences research. As the found father of sociology and one of the most influential figures in this discourse of controversies, Max Weber made his famous claim about objectivity regarding “cultural and historical sciences”, that social problems could be scientifically resolved – once a particular end or the necessary orientation to value had been established [1]. In short, he believes that the research itself – observing people's actions and motivation- can be objectively conducted while the ends or purposes of the research bear personal values.

Today, as social sciences theory and research have an undeniable influence to everyday aspects of social life and social institutions, from economic policies to politic ideologies, debates stemming from Weber's theories about the conviction of objectivity and its questionable existence is a matter of the meaning of social sciences and its whether justifiable consequence and applications. This paper is therefore seeking to unravel some of the important debates lying in this field, hoping to bring in new spotlights for the academia's faith in social sciences' future.

This is achieved by four parts. The first part is an overview of the possibility of social science to ever reach a level of objectivity, regarding its nature and the process of its research – observing, understanding, testing and applying. The second part then discusses the important cultural factor affecting our judgement and understanding, as well as its concerning effect, especially in the discipline of anthropology that is heavily troubled by the method of participant observation. The following part looks at the debates about the dichotomy of values and facts that is challenging the

traditional understanding of this long-held belief. Finally, in the last part there is a conclusion followed by a brief discussion about all the sentiments made above.

2. Overview: Impossibility of Factual Objectivity

The difficulties lying in social sciences, regardless of their specific methodology, are determined by the fact that social sciences are operated by humans, and they study the act conducted by humans in a social world constructed by humans. It poses complexities in two sides of any process of social science study – the actors and the interpreters, for between neither of them it's possible to articulate their actions, feelings, and thoughts in a completely accurate and neutral language, and that any attempt to do so fail to capture the real glimpse of social life in a paradoxical way.

Surely enough, any scientific study – no matter which discipline, in a modern sense – starts off with direct observations to the phenomenon. Scientists observe the reality around them, generalise them, and try to construct a trustworthy explanation that is based on repeatable experiments. While quantitative methods attempt to demonstrate social facts in value-free numbers and data, what social science ought to do is much more than describing the reality. Its goal to study the social world and understand its mechanism requires it to further reflect and understand. Regarding to what is observed in social sciences, Weber stated: “From our viewpoint, ‘purpose’ is the conception of an effect which becomes a cause of action... The specific significance of observation of action consists in the idea that we not only observe human conduct but can and desire to understand it.” For Weber, social science empirical knowledge is descriptive as factual declarations of both action and intention that objectively exist in the social nature. Both action and intention—what occurs in a society and what acts imply to the actors in a society—are observable in social events [1].

Then, some social scientists use hermeneutical methods rather than naturalistic ones to interpret human behavior. They may do this by using psychologically, historically, or socially focused approaches [4]. However, the challenge in social science observation is that to fully understand the intentions of any social actor, shared communication and linguistic conversation is the only bridge between the observer and the actor. The actions and motivations of actors will and need to be translated into textual work for further analysis. While a scientific neutral language is always the pursuit, the ability to fully comprehend social facts come from the interpreters' own built-in concepts of the language that they learn from society. The meaning of words can be altered and unnoticed given different contexts. At the same time, to understand a social action comes along with normative judgement of the interpreter. Though scientists always attempt to separate empirical observations from normative judgements, for the social sciences, being a human being indicates that a judgement of the object is unavoidable. In short, empirical judgement is required in the “observation of human conduct”, while normative judgements are inevitably adopted in our “desire to understand it” [1].

More challenges lie in the process of theoretical construction, which includes the testing of a theory and its applicability. Conventionally, the methodological significance of theory has been to comprehend a natural event thoroughly enough to be able to predict empirical occurrences [1]. Yet in the realm of the social world, it is neither convincing enough to claim that there is only one true explanation of the “laws” that the functioning of society depends on, nor that we could expect what to happen based on established theories. In an ever-changing social world, we can only look upon “what have happened” in the way to explain and reflect. This lack of a “social laboratory” leaves the social science in this situation where it must methodologically create social theories grounded not only upon empiricism but also upon normative judgments.

In the social sciences, the trend in the theoretical field is the opposite of that in the natural sciences: Instead of intergrating numerous theories grounded upon accumulating empirical evidence and agreeing on a mainstream explanation, the social sciences mostly have diverged to become different schools within the discipline [1], such as the realism and the idealism. That is to say, social sciences have developed on the basis of “uncertainty”. As more speculation occurs, it only becomes more uncertain rather than more certain. Then, when it comes to prescribing – what is avoided by a lot of

social scientists – as well as anticipating in order to help social reality, there are concerns with values and normative judgements, also with what scientists believe to be the framework of their ideal world. In the end, as the social sciences are value-laden in nature, a very important premise for the almost religious pursuit for objectivity is that social science observers are aware of their values and biases, and that at least their primary intention is to find empirical truth.

3. Culture and Understanding

As is mentioned above, understanding objects' actions and intentions is fundamentally an important aspect of all social sciences research. Knowing what an object is thinking is what brings social scientists into further reasoning and assumption. While compassion and logic enable us to understand at least partially others, culture and its impact is always encompassed in the process, as men are nevertheless culturally produced and raised. And the hegemony of one culture – for example, Eurocentrism - is a constant fear in any debate of objectivity today. The illusion of Orientalism in the past that generated a false depiction of lives of other cultures warned us of the danger of falling into a purposeful misconception.

Compared with other disciplines in social sciences, anthropology is considerably designated to deal with the fraction between cultures. It is seen as a “craft” whose skills lie not merely in collecting threads of facts—but also creating a picture that is both accurate and comprehensible to others [5]. The intention to learn about and then understand distinct cultures creates this situation of “insiders” and “outsiders” as a matter of objectivity. The subjectivity of the observers and the subjectivity of the natives is then translated to the question of how to achieve the sense of understanding needed to provide true demonstration of the culture. Inside anthropology, the distinct research technique of participant observation introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski carries many debates of this topic significant in the field. Apart from the dispute over its reliability on data collecting, the main debates centres on whether the long-term living together experience actually enables the scientists “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world [6]”, which then move on to the talk of cultural relativism relevant in all social sciences.

Carefully differing itself from cultural variation and cultural diversity, the following are the fundamental tenets of cultural relativism: Since diverse cultures have unique values, beliefs, and traditions that can only be understood, they must, by necessity, be evaluated using their own internal standards, or not at all [7]. The relativists believe in the incommensurability of cultures and that only a transcultural standard – whether it exists or not – can be adopted. They believe that this perspective on culture promotes objectivity by broadening the view and avoiding ethnocentrism, which in turn enables objective comparisons. The goal of erasing the researcher's subjectivity is to make room for other people's subjective contents [7]. Along with the popular acceptance of cultural relativism in social science studies, it raises questions about whether embracing the subjectivity of others necessarily yield objectivity, and whether we can ever “judge” a culture by a non-human objective standard.

Since cultural relativism believes no inferiority nor “rightness” in culture, critics also question the relevance of discussing contingency, when the beliefs, desires, values, or practices under consideration differ only in their geographically distant origination or their expression in unfamiliar voices [7]. The opposite trend has emerged – what advocates call pragmatic ethnocentrism. By this they mean that rather than viewing the goal of inquiry as “getting things right”, one should be comfortable with their limited historical and cultural placement with developing new vocabularies that allow them to perform particular tasks and better cope with the outside world [7]. The pragmatists argue for the essential role played by cultural and historical contexts and the need to integrate novel and foreign beliefs with those already established in order to find solutions to real-life concerning issues. For them, the perfect objectivity away from any cultural context is not important. What matters is how an understanding of it contributes to “our own” world.

As Weber elegantly puts it: “One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar” [7]. He believes that understanding others can be done without sharing their living experiences. However, whether we have understood Caesar in his way of seeing between then and now is another question; and whether his way of seeing really matters in regard to studying the entire society in which he lived, leads us to questioning the complicated relation between man and history (and culture). The meaning of understanding (from which perspective and by which standards), its ultimate purpose, and the way to do so, spark constant debate in the social sciences. The eternal problem is that we are deeply troubled by our culturally constructed brains – the only tool that we rely on to comprehend how others behave around us [8].

4. The Fall of Value/Fact Dichotomy

Along with the claim of objectivity, the dichotomy of facts and values, which originated from modern science philosophy, has previously dominated the realm of early social sciences. When we ask if social sciences can tell us what is good or what to do, the answers are conventionally a hard “no”, which almost became a common sense in public life. Value free was seen as a symbol of being objective, and according to many, there can and should be a clear line between facts and values. Even for some social theorists, values are just a “cultural” or “social construction”, a contingent outcome of history and power, lacking any objective or rational foundation [9]. Yet, more and more social scientists are questioning its theoretical grounding, arguing that not only facts are inevitably value-laden, values are also facts-laden. They are constantly leaking to each other’s tanks.

It is more commonly acknowledged and easier understood to prove the value-ladenness of social facts. As is explained above in the first part, interpreting social facts requires one’s own knowledge and one’s own meaning of language symbols. Moreover, in a social constructivist view, each person sees a different social reality based on their own experiences nurtured by their society and culture. In this way, no one could ever see and further describe the one and only realistic fact. Another argument talks about the process of theoretical building to be value-laden, arguing that given the facts at hand, it is frequently challenging to decide between two or more competing theories in the social sciences [9]. That is to say, we must take into account other “epistemic values” criteria, such as being “simple” and “uniform,” while selecting a “good” theory. The “proper” ordering of these values is then the basis for our assessment of conflicting ideas, which is unlikely to be the subject of scholarly or disciplinary consensus [9]. More arguments discuss values hidden in our seemingly neutral language used in scientific description, especially when categorising people’s roles and actions. No matter how “dispassionately” we use this terminology, it carries certain presumptions about human personhood and judgments about human capabilities (such as the value of being rational over emotional) that are certain to affect our scholarly interpretations.[9].

The other way around is less realised by social scientists - how values are also facts laden. One argument, common among philosophers, focuses on “thick ethical concepts” such as “cruel”, “brave”, “generous”, “indifferent”. They feature a moral assessment of that person's character as well as a description of some aspect of that person’s character [9]. These kinds of words can be both factual and evaluative, as the person’s character is indeed a fact that is affecting his social reality. To talk about facts-laden values more broadly, we can see that all values are actual entities that exist in the social world we study, and that facts can always lead to the production of new values. Values never only stand in our inner “subjective” minds - they emerge and die in the same flow with the changing of facts. For the advocates, social sciences’ importance thus lies in a way to study these values fulfilling our social world, instead of plainly drawing lines in between values and facts.

But why is the dichotomy so popular and so widely accepted in academia and public? The fact-value distinction, in other words, enables social scientists to avoid certain political conflicts and continue with their professional work. Social scientists might shield themselves from external criticism, internal conflict, and consideration of the normative dimensions of their descriptive assertions by asserting their stance as being value-free [9]. However, this claim also generates a sense

of moral indifference - by clearing moral factors away from the “objective” facts that we are studying. In some way, the fact/value distinction itself has helped to create this situation where certain theories’ ethics exerted enormous influence on culture and politics, by suggesting that it is value-free and thereby insulating it from moral criticism. Thus, the critiques of facts values dichotomy centres on the importance of individual and collective well-being, about how “value-free” discoveries generate novel values that affect our everyday real-life experiences. By reconsidering the dichotomy, social sciences may reflect on their “in-born responsibility” oriented from their nature.

5. Conclusion

Despite distinct arguments and debates, there is the basic agreement that social sciences fail to reach the level of objectiveness adored by traditional natural sciences, influenced by values, ethics, culture, emotion and the uncertainty of the social world. However, as social sciences are especially concerned with policy making, their points are extremely relevant to the progression of humanity, affecting every bit we feel in our social life [10]. Admitting that absolute objectivity is an illusion does not mean that no objectivity-based ground should be adopted in the research of social science. No matter how limited we are to separate ourselves with “objective” truth, the theoretical achievements should be produced following established methodological rules that give the research credibility, allowing it to be most applicable in explaining the social reality, moreover enabling us to search for humanity’s collective well-being. It should be honest and loyal to the whole complete observation coming from the social world.

That is to say, though different people hold different images of what collective well-being looks like, there exist common values that people adore in opposition to evil thoughts. Deep in people’s bones, the “shared subjectivity” occupied society to advocate justice, fairness, or most fundamentally the rights to live. Values have their ethic ground and they can and should be judged according to this consensus. Social sciences shall not serve as the defence for the current status quo in any manners, arguing for its validity by its existence, nor shall social sciences let “ends” determine their “means”, supporting ideological claims blindly by selecting and producing imagination. What is important is a sense of awareness, which means social scientists are very aware of their values, biases and the possible consequences brought out from their claims, as any research worth the name has ethical implications of this kind. This awareness will enable them to always hold spaces for another version of discourse, and also for critiques and judgement.

This paper then argues for a kind of openness in social sciences. The first layer of it is open-mindedness. Good social scientists should strive to be aware of their ethical presuppositions and open to revising them in the light of evidence [9], which means that they do not deny or ignore anything happening in opposition to their theories. The second layer of it is a requirement for the ecosystem of social sciences disciplines. The discussions in the realm should be open for scrutiny. It is, at the same time, an embracement to diversity of ideas. It is time to abandon the equation of objectivity and neutrality. Systematic attention should be paid to the complex relationship between the descriptive and the normative. Instead of struggling with nominally objectivity, social scientists should strive to combine engagement with open-mindedness [9].

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