

OBJECTIVITY

# objectivity

- **Objectivity is the most cherished value of a scientific research.**
- **The essence of objectivity is to make a given research free from researcher's biases.**
- **The bias can be caused by a variety of reasons and not all the reasons are always controllable by the researcher. This is true especially when the subject matter of study is human beings.**
- **For instance, we cannot check a theory on effect of riots over group decision making by creating riots. Naturally, we are bound to study riots only after they happened.**
- **Consequently, the cause-effect relationship is adulterated by extraneous variables. This makes the results of research not free from biases.**
- **However, we can strive for making our study as much objective as much possible while following the ethical and professional standards applicable on the given subject-matter**

- **Objectivity** in social **research** is the principle drawn from positivism that, as far as is possible, **researchers** should remain distanced from what they study so findings depend on the nature of what was studied rather than on the personality, beliefs and values of the researcher (an approach not accepted by **researchers**)
- **Objectivity** and Subjectivity in Classical **Sociology** In the realm of ontology, objective things are mind-independent and subjective things are mind-dependent.
- In other words, objective phenomena are those that exist outside of, or independently of, the human mind.

# Problems of Objectivity

- **Objectivity is a goal of scientific investigation. Sociology also being a science aspires for the goal objectivity.**
- **Objectivity is a frame of mind so that personal prejudices, preferences or predilections of the social scientists do not contaminate the collection of analysis of data.**
- **Thus scientific investigations should be free from prejudices of race, color, religion, sex or ideological biases.**

- **The need of objectivity in sociological research has been emphasized by all important sociologists.**
- **For example Durkheim in the Rules of the Sociological Method stated that social facts must be treated as things and all preconceived notions about social facts must be abandoned.**
- **Even Max Weber emphasized the need of objectivity when he said that sociology must be value free.**
- **According to Radcliff Brown the social scientist must abandon or transcend his ethnocentric and egocentric biases while carrying out researches.**
- **Similarly Malinowski advocated cultural relativism while anthropological field work in order to ensure objectivity.**

- **However objectivity continues to be an elusive goal at the practical level.**
- **In fact one school of thought represented by Gunnar Myrdal states that total objectivity is an illusion which can never be achieved. Because all research is guided by certain viewpoints and view points involve subjectivity.**
- **Myrdal suggested that the basic viewpoints should be made clear. Further he felt that subjectivity creeps in at various stages in the course of sociological research.**
- **Merton believes that the very choice of topic is influenced by personal preferences and ideological biases of the researcher.**
- **Subjectivity can also creep in at the time of formulation of hypotheses.**
- **Normally hypotheses are deduced from existing body of theory. All sociological theories are produced by and limited to particular groups whose viewpoints and interests they represent.**
- **Thus formulation of hypotheses will automatically introduce a bias in the sociological research.**

- The third stage at which subjectivity creeps in the course of research is that of collection of empirical data. No technique of data collection is perfect.
- Each technique may lead to subjectivity in one way or the other. In case of participant observation the observer as a result of nativisation acquires a bias in favour of the group he is studying.
- While in non-participant observation of the sociologist belongs to a different group than that under study he is likely to impose his values and prejudices.
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- In all societies there are certain prejudices which affect the research studies. In case of interview as a technique the data may be influenced by context of the interview, the interaction of the participants, and participant's definition of the situation and if adequate rapport does not extend between them there might be communication barriers.
- Thus according to P.V Young interview sometimes carries a subjectivity. Finally it can also affect the field limitations as reported by Andre Beteille study of Sripuram village in Tanjore where the Brahmins did not allow him to visit the untouchable locality and ask their point of view.
- Thus complete objectivity continues to be an elusive goal. The researcher should make his value preference clear in research monograph.
- Highly trained and skilled research workers should be employed. Various methods of data collection research should be used and the result obtained from one should be cross-checked with those from the other.
- Field limitations must be clearly stated in the research monograph.

- social science lacks objectivity in more than one sense. One of the more important debates concerning objectivity in the social sciences concerns the role value judgments play and, importantly, whether value-laden research entails claims about the desirability of actions.
- **Max Weber held that the social sciences are necessarily value laden. However, they can achieve some degree of objectivity by keeping out the social researcher's views about whether agents' goals are commendable. In a similar vein, contemporary economics can be said to be value laden because it predicts and explains social phenomena on the basis of agents' preferences.**
- Nevertheless, economists are adamant that economists are not in the business of telling people what they ought to value. Modern economics is thus said to be objective in the Weberian sense of **“absence of researchers' values”**.

In his widely cited essay “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy” (Weber 1904a [1949]), Weber argued that the idea of an aperspectival social science was meaningless:

There is no absolutely objective scientific analysis of [...] “social phenomena” independent of special and “one-sided” viewpoints according to which expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes

All knowledge of cultural reality, as may be seen, is always knowledge from particular points of view.

- The reason for this is twofold.
- First, social reality is too complex to admit of full description and explanation. So we have to select. But, perhaps in contraposition to the natural sciences, we cannot just select those aspects of the phenomena that fall under universal natural laws and treat everything else as “unintegrated residues” (p. 73).
- This is because, second, in the social sciences we want to understand social phenomena in their individuality, that is, in their unique configurations that have significance for us.

- Values solve a selection problem. They tell us what research questions we ought to address because they inform us about the cultural importance of social phenomena:

Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value-conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us.

- It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to use due to their connection with our values.

- **Nevertheless, for Weber social science remained objective in at least two ways. First, once research questions of interest have been settled, answers about the causes of culturally significant phenomena do not depend on the idiosyncrasies(individual ways ) of an individual researcher:**

But it obviously does not follow from this that research in the cultural sciences can only have results which are “subjective” in the sense that they are valid for one person and not for others. [...] For scientific truth is precisely what is valid for all who seek the truth.

- The claims of social science can therefore be objective in our third sense. Moreover, by determining that a given phenomenon is “culturally significant” a researcher reflects on whether or not a practice is “meaningful” or “important”, and not whether or not it is commendable:
- “Prostitution is a cultural phenomenon just as much as religion or money” (p. 81). An important implication of this view came to the fore in the so-called “*Werturteilsstreit*” (quarrel concerning value judgments) of the early 1900's.
- In this debate, Weber maintained against the “socialists of the lectern” around Gustav Schmoller the position that social scientists qua scientists should not be directly involved in policy debates because it was not the aim of science to examine the appropriateness of ends.
- Given a policy goal, a social scientist could make recommendations about effective strategies to reach the goal; but social science was to be value-free in the sense of not taking a stance on the desirability of the goals themselves. This leads us to our conception of objectivity as freedom from values.