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| Value freedom (objectivity/subjectivity) debate | |
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| Key assumptions:  Value freedom occurs when sociologists ensure that their own personal views/ideologies (values) do not affect the way research is conducted and research outcomes.  This debate is between positivists who believe that value free sociology is possible versus interpretivists who believe it is not possible. | Different views of whether sociology can be and should be objective or value free:  Classical sociology  Value neutrality  Committed sociology  Relativism |
| **Positivist views** | **Interpretivist views** |
| Objectivity  Objectivity is generally taken to mean that researchers approach topics with a totally open mind and with complete detachment from those being researched. The research and findings remain completely independent personal feelings believe etc. Research should provide completely unbiased knowledge about the world, and the researcher simply collects data which are totally external to their own views. Objectively has generally been associated with positivism and the use of quantitative scientific methods in sociological research. | Subjectivity  Subjectively is the idea that sociologists are part of the society they are studying, and therefore involved in what they are researching and theta their values and beliefs will affect the research in some way ; it is therefore impossible for them to be completely objective and detached. Sociologists are routinely involved in making choices about the things they are researching, and there are always some elements of personal judgments and interpretation in any research. Subjectively is commonly associated with interpretivists and feminists who believe it is necessary to have interaction, personal involvement and closeness to those being studies in order to fully understand the meanings and interpretations they hold. |
| **Classical Sociologists** | **Classical Sociologists** |
| Value free sociology **is** possible:  **Comte and Durkheim:** Positivists like Comte and Durkheim believed that not only should sociology be value free, but that it could be objective and value free so long as it used similar methods to those used in natural sciences.   1. Because it **is** possible for sociologists to follow the **logic** of natural science research. Although experimental research is rarely used because of practical (difficulties controlling variables) and ethical issues (potential harm to participants), the logic of natural science research can be followed (hypothetico deductive model). For example, sociologists should only look at what is directly observable (no feelings, emotions etc.). 2. Sociologists can be objective:   a) They can ensure that their own personal ideologies do not enter into their research-remaining detached and neutral.  b) By using quantitative methods which allow little room for researcher bias. E.g. 1 Official statistics such as death rates are “hard data” (little room for subjectivity). For example Durkheim made use of official suicide rates to establish an objective and scientific theory of suicide. E.g. 2 Structured interviews questions are standardised and allow little room for interviewer involvement. For example the BCS has set questions on victimisation where the interviewer’s role is limited to asking questions and recording data on a laptop.   1. When analysing data the sociologist merely looks for patterns and deals with facts in an objective way.   **Marx:** There is a debate about whether Karl Marx was a positivist; however it is certainly true that he saw himself as a scientist. He believed his method of historical analysis, historical materialism, could reveal the line of development of human society. This development involved an evolution through a series of different types of class based society, leading ultimately to a future classless communist society, in which exploitation, alienation and poverty would be ended. Marx thus takes for granted the value of the ideal communist society and argues that his scientific approach will show us how to reach it. In this he is similar to Comte and Durkehim, in that he sees science as helping to deliver the good society. | Value free sociology is not possible:  **Max Weber:** Weber made a sharp distinction between value judgments and facts and he argues that we cannot derive the one from the other.  For example, research might show that divorces are more likely to commit suicide. However, this fact does not demonstrate the truth of the value judgment that we should make divorce harder to obtain. There is nothing about the fact that logically compels us to accept the value. For example, we might argue that we should instead make it harder to get married (another value), or that people have every right to commit suicide if they wish )a third value). None of these value judgments are ‘proven’ by the established fact. None of these judgments are ‘proven’ by the established fact. Indeed, in Webers view, a value can be neither proved nor disproved by the facts: they belong to different realms.  However, despite making a sharp distinction between facts and values, Weber still saw an essential role for values in sociological research. His views can be divided into 4 stages of the research process.   1. Values as a guide to research- Social reality is made up of ‘meaningless infinity’ of facts that make it impossible to study it. Therefore the best a researcher can do is to select certain facts and study these. The facts which are chosen will be the ones that are most important to the researcher based on their own values. For example, feminists values gender equality and this leads to the study of women’s oppression. 2. Data collection and hypothesis testing- While values are essential in selecting what to study, we must be objective and unbiased as possible when collecting the data, keeping values and predijuces out of the process. For example, leading questions should not be asked. 3. Values in the interpretation of data- values become important again when we come to interpret data collected as The choice of theoretical framework or perspective is influenced by values 4. Values and the sociologist as a citizen- Research findings often have very real effects on people’s lives. It is the politicians or public wo decide what to make of the findings. Weber argues that scientists and sociologists must take moral responsibility for the harm their research might do rather than ‘hide’ behind words such as ‘objectivity’ or ‘value freedom’. For example, Einsteins theories helped make the atomic bomb possible; yet he subsequently spoke out against nuclear weapons.   In summary, Weber sees values as relevant to the sociologist in choosing what to research, in interpreting the data collected and in deciding the use to which the findings should be out. By contrast, the sociologists values must be kept out of the actual process of fact gathering. |
| **Modern Sociologists** | **Modern Sociologists** |
| By the mid 20th century positivists tended to argue that their own values were irrelevant to their research. There were two reasons for this:   1. The desire to appear scientific- Science is concerned with matters of fact, not values. Critics argue that science had high prestige in modern society, so mimicking it was a way of earning the subject status and respect. 2. The social position of sociology- Gouldner argues that by the 1950s sociologists became ‘spiritless technicians’. This was because they were no longer ‘problem makes’ who defined their own research problems, but instead they became ‘problem takers’ who hired themselves out to organisations such as businesses or the military to take on and solve their problems. As the sociologists were simply hired hands, they saw their values as irrelevant.   **Objectivity and relativism:**  If all perspectives involve values, are findings just reflection of their values, rather than a true picture of society? If so, there would be no way of deciding which of these different versions of reality were true.  Relativism argues that:  -Different groups, cultures and individuals – including sociologists-have different views as to what is true. Each sees the world in their own way, through their own perspectives, concepts values and interests.  - There is no independent way of judging whether ant view is truer than any other.  - There is no absolute truth, just truth plural. ‘What you believe is true, is true-for you. What I believe is true, is true-for me.’ So if you believe the earth is round, while I think it is flat, there is no way of saying who is right. | Some sociologists argue for a committed sociology.  **Mydral:** Mydral argues that sociologists should not only spell out their values-they should also openly take side by espousing the values and interests of particular individuals or groups.  Committed sociologists who advocate this approach argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to keep values out of research.  **Gouldner:** In Gouldners view value free sociology is:   * Impossible – because either the sociologists own values, or those of their paymasters, are bound to be reflected in their w * Undesirable – since without values to guide research, sociologists are merely selling their services to the highest bidder.   **Becker:** Becker asks ‘who’s side are we on?’ If all sociology is influenced by values, this means the sociologists must inevitably take sides. By not choosing a side, the sociologists are in fact taking the side of the more powerful against the less powerful. Traditionally, positivists and functionalists have tended to take the view point of powerful groups such as the police, psychiatrists etc. Becker argues that instead of seeing things from the perspective of these ‘overdogs’, sociologists should adopt a compassionate stance and take the side of the ‘underdogs’-the criminals, mental patients and other powerless groups. This is partly because les sis known about these groups and their story needs to be told in order to redress the balance. By identifying with the underdog and giving them a voice, we can reveal a previously hidden side of social reality. For example, by emphasising with mental patient, we can show the hidden rationality of behaviour that the psychiatrist thinks of as irrational.  **Goffman:** The interactionist Goffman argues, to describe the situation of the mental patient faithfully, we have to take their side. We have to be biased in favour of the patient and the psychiatrist. This emphasis on identifying and emphasising with the powerless has clear links to the kinds of research methods favoured by interactionists. They have a strong preference for qualitative methods such as participant observation, which they see as revealing the meanings of these ‘outsiders’.  Gouldner has criticized Becker’s views (see below) for taking a romantic and sentimental approach to disadvantaged groups. He accuses Becker of being concerned only whose who are misunderstood and negatively labelled, exotic specimens of deviant behaviour. Instead, Gouldner adopts a Marxist perspective and argues that sociologists should take the side of those who are ‘fighting back’ such as political radicals struggling to change society. Sociology should not confine itself to describing the viewpoint of the underdog. It should be committed to ending their oppression by unmasking ways in which the powerful maintain their position. |
| **Objectivity and relativism:** | |