

Topic 5

SPECIFICATION AREA

Debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom

Subjectivity, objectivity and values in sociology

Subjectivity

Subjectivity is the idea that sociologists are part of the society they are studying, and therefore involved in what they are researching and that their own 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 judgement and interpretation in any research. Subjectivity is most commonly associated with interpretivists and feminists, who believe that it is necessary to have interaction, personal involvement and closeness to those being studied in order to fully understand the meanings and interpretations they hold, and the collection of qualitative data inevitably involves a subjective dimension of selection and interpretation.

Objectivity

Objectivity is generally taken to mean that researchers approach topics with a totally open mind and with complete detachment, separation and distance from those being researched. The research process and findings remain completely independent of, and uninfluenced by, subjective influences such as the personal feelings, prejudices, opinions, beliefs, values or interpretations of researchers. Research should provide completely unbiased knowledge about the world, and the researcher simply collects data which are totally external to their own views. Objectivity has generally been associated with positivism and the use of quantitative scientific methods in sociological research, and was considered in Topics 3 and 4 on sociology and science, and the links between theory and methods.

Objectivity and subjectivity are often seen as two extremes, but the following sections will suggest that all research, including natural science research, is influenced by subjective elements and values to a greater or lesser extent. Subjectivity and objectivity should therefore be seen not as an either/or situation, but as a continuum: a line with two very different extremes at either end, but with each in-between stage having only small differences between them. Much sociology falls in a mid-position between the two extremes, as shown in figure 5.7.

Values in sociology

There has been a long-running debate in sociology about whether it is possible or desirable for sociologists to study society in a completely value-free, objective way, or whether there is inevitably subjectivity involved, with the researcher's values influencing research. There are three main competing positions adopted by sociologists in the 'values debate':

- 1 That sociology should be and can be value-free
- 2 That sociology cannot be value-free
- 3 That sociology should not be value-free, even if it were possible.

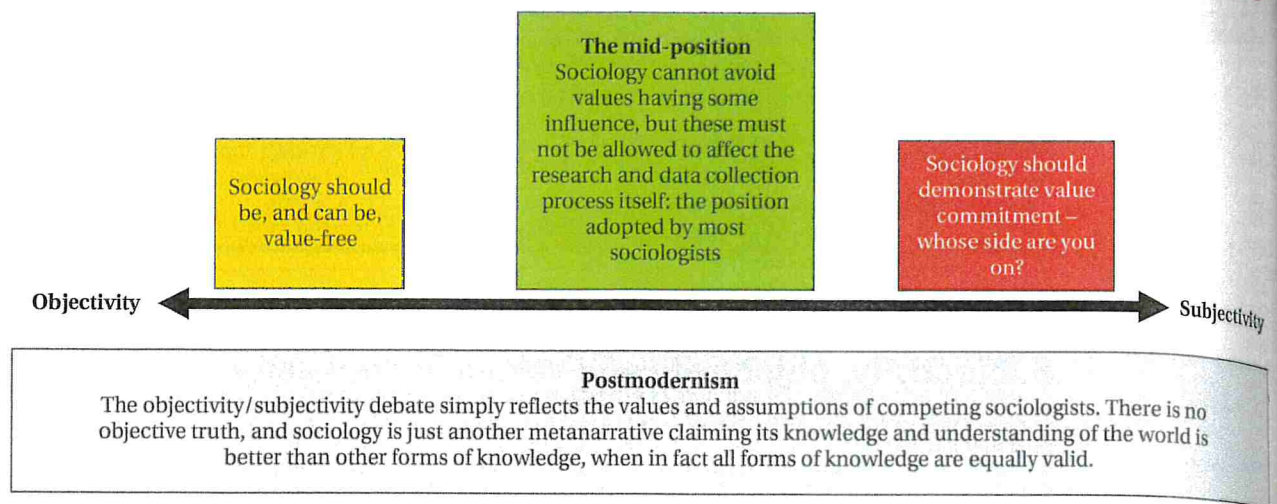


Figure 5.7 Subjectivity, objectivity and the values debate

There is a further position in this discussion taken by postmodernists, who basically dismiss the whole subjectivity/objectivity and values debate as pointless and meaningless, as they see all knowledge as relative and value-laden anyway.

This continuum between subjectivity and objectivity, and the various positions in the 'values debate' are illustrated in figure 5.7.

A value-free sociology is desirable and possible

Sociology should be value-free

When sociology was being established as a subject, positivists like Comte and Durkheim were concerned to show that it was possible to study society objectively in the same way as scientists studied the natural world, untainted by personal values, and thereby to establish sociology as a science in the same way as the natural sciences. They thought sociology *should* be value-free in order to give the subject the status and authority that would enable it to be regarded as a source of impartial, objective information, in the same way as the natural sciences were. Such an objective, value-free sociology could then provide the facts that might be used to influence social policy and improve the world.

Sociology can be value-free

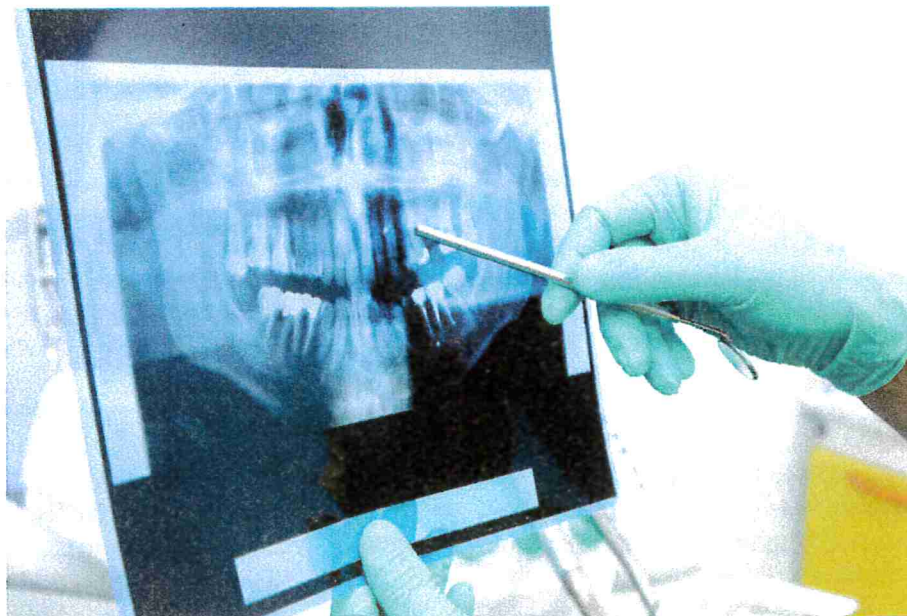
Positivists like Comte and Durkheim believed that not only *should* sociology be value-free, but that it *could* be objective and value-free so long as it used similar methods to those used in the natural sciences, as discussed in Topic 3. They believed society was made up of social structures and social facts that existed independently of researchers and these facts could be clearly separated from the values of the researcher, and studied in the same detached and objective way as natural scientists studied the natural world, in subjects like physics and chemistry. Through the study of social facts and the collection of empirical quantitative data using the hypothetico-deductive scientific method (see pages 404–5), it was possible to test theories using reliable and valid data, which could be checked/replicated by other researchers, establish the causes of social behaviour, uncover the laws of human society, and make predictions. This is what Durkheim sought to do in his study of suicide using official suicide statistics, and that Marx did in his studies of capitalism, which led him to believe in the inevitability of communism. Since the collection of facts could be wholly separated from the subjective views and values of researchers (assuming they didn't cheat or distort or fiddle with the data), sociology could become an unbiased, objective, value-free science of society.

A value-free sociology is not possible: the myth of value-freedom

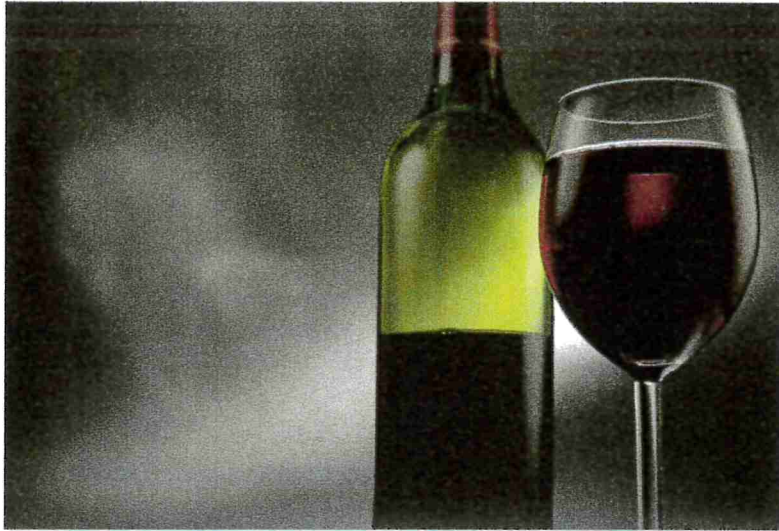
It is impossible for any natural or social scientist to avoid the influence of values completely. For example, their academic training, the paradigm or perspective they have learnt for interpreting and evaluating evidence, their assumptions about society, and their beliefs about what are important or unimportant areas to study are all sources of values. Sociological research – like research in the natural sciences – does not consist of facts that ‘speak for themselves’. ‘Facts’, whether they take quantitative or qualitative forms, are not meaningful in themselves. For example, untrained observers looking at an X-ray picture will see only meaningless blotches and shadows, and will have difficulty in making sense of what they see because they lack the theoretical background and training. Radiologists, however, can make sense of the X-ray as they have the theoretical training to do so. In sociology, participant observers must have some framework for identifying what they should look at and for interpreting the significance of what they see. Without a theoretical framework, it is impossible to know what to observe, or what research methods to use, or to make sense of what is observed. These depend on the theoretical assumptions and interpretations of the researcher.

The assumptions of positivists and interpretivists as a source of values

Sociological investigation is ultimately based on researchers’ assumptions – their subjective assumptions – about the nature of people in society. Positivists, for example, believe society exists as an objective reality, with social structures moulding and constraining individual behaviour. This leads positivists to search for the causes of social behaviour by the collection of quantitative data which they regard as reliable because it is untainted by the values of the researcher and can be replicated and checked by other researchers. In contrast, interpretivists believe society is socially constructed by the actions of individuals, who act in the ways they do because of the meanings and interpretations they give to their behaviour. The only way of discovering these meanings and producing valid data is to collect qualitative data through close involvement with those being researched, and by a process of subjective interpretation of what those meanings and interpretations are.



The facts never speak for themselves, and only become meaningful because people apply their understandings and interpretations to them, and make judgements about what they see. Everyone will see the same X-ray picture, but only some people will be able to understand and interpret what they see.



Is the wine bottle half-full or half-empty? Such difficulties in interpretation affect both natural and social science.

Consider, for example, the differing assumptions underlying the analysis of suicide. Positivists look at the social facts which constrain individuals and make some more vulnerable to suicide than others, while interpretivists are more likely to examine the process by which some sudden, unnatural deaths come to be labelled as suicide while others do not.

The different assumptions of sociologists – subjective value judgements – guide the selection of what is regarded as a worthwhile topic or problem for investigation, the questions to be asked or explored, the research methods employed, what types of data (quantitative or qualitative) are collected, and what information is interpreted and selected as ‘significant’ and ‘important’ (and what isn’t).

Other sources of values

The personal prejudices and political views of the researcher may influence the selection of the subjects studied. For example, feminist sociologists, who are concerned with the male dominance of sociology (‘malestream’ sociology) and the unequal position of women in a patriarchal society, are likely to study subjects that highlight these inequalities. Marxist sociologists will begin with a conception that society is fundamentally class-divided and in social conflict, and investigate issues with a view to highlighting evidence of exploitation and the need for social change. Functionalists, such as Durkheim and Parsons, begin with an assumption that society is fundamentally based on harmony and consensus, and investigate issues which highlight this consensus and threats to it. Durkheim and Comte, from the very beginnings of sociology, and most contemporary functionalists, Marxists and feminists take the view that sociological research is worth doing because it provides a means for what they see as improving society in some way and resolving social problems. All these involve values to some extent, and they are unavoidable.

In both the natural and social sciences, there are a wide range of other factors that introduce subjectivity and values into *all* research, as seen in Topics 3 (see pages 409–15) and 4 (see pages 422–3), so it is simply not possible for sociology to be value-free, even if that was desirable, and value-freedom is therefore a myth.

A value-free sociology is not desirable: the need for value-commitment

The preceding section suggested that sociological research cannot avoid some influence from values. However, other sociologists have posed the question differently – even if a value-free sociology were possible, would it actually be desirable?

IF YOU ARE NEUTRAL IN SITUATIONS OF INJUSTICE, YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE SIDE OF THE OPPRESSOR. ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU



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Should sociologists wash their hands of all moral responsibility for their work? Is there such a thing as being neutral and value-free in an unequal society? Should sociologists take sides when they do their research?

Value freedom as ideology

Gouldner (1962, 1971) argues that it is not possible to be free from value judgements in sociology, for the kinds of reasons discussed in the previous section. But he goes further and suggests that value-freedom is itself a value-laden concept. It is, he argues, little more than a convenient ideology that serves the career interests of sociologists who will take funding from anyone and sell their research to the highest bidders, and avoid taking any moral responsibility for the uses or consequences of their research. Those clinging to the ideology of value-freedom have sold out to the establishment to protect their careers by refusing to take a stand and criticize society as it is and those with power within it. For example, if you were observing a fight between a large bully and a small victim, would you really be neutral and value-free if you stood aside and let the victim get beaten up? Or would your supposed neutrality really be supporting the bully and more concerned with self-preservation than neutrality?

Gouldner argues that pretending to be value-free and not taking sides supports the powerful in an unequal society. Can you and should you be neutral when you are studying the poorest and most disadvantaged people in society? Or should you be applying your research skills to help them to escape their poverty and to tackle social exclusion? Can you avoid taking moral responsibility for your work?

Gouldner's argument is that sociologists should not even try to be value-free, but that there should be a clear value-commitment in sociology, with a public responsibility for – and value-commitment to – improving the lives of the downtrodden, the exploited and the oppressed in an unequal society, and taking their sides against the powerful groups in society who are the sources of their oppression.

Whose side are you on?

Becker (1967) echoed Gouldner's argument when he challenged sociologists to ask themselves the question 'Whose side are we on?' Becker argues no knowledge is value-free, and all knowledge must favour somebody, and therefore we have to choose whom to favour. Sociologists should be committed to social change for human improvement and take responsibility for the moral implications and uses of their work. In other words, they should abandon any idea of value-freedom. This does not mean that such sociological work is any less 'scientific' than any other research, but that the choice of research area is committed to a particular value position. Becker's own research reflected this, as it was clearly aimed at understanding how some people became labelled as 'outsiders' (such as criminals, misfits, the mentally ill and the poor) by those with power (see pages 384 and 459–63 for a discussion of labelling theory). Such a view of sociology involves siding with the underdogs in society, seeing what life is like from their points of view, and giving society's deprived and other outsiders a voice through such research, and thereby hopefully leading to social change.

From this perspective, research should not be neutral, but ought to be driven by a desire to change and improve the world for the most disadvantaged. This value-committed position is the one that has been taken by many feminists and Marxists. Many feminists, for example, see their research as driven by a desire to challenge patriarchy, to fight against male oppression and to improve the position and lives of women and achieve equality with men. It is this value-commitment that has enabled feminist research to increase awareness of gender inequalities, to expose and challenge social institutions, social policies and practices that discriminate against women, to promote more positive images of women, and to raise the status and perception of women in society.

Marxist sociologists have taken similar positions, with a clear value-commitment to exposing the structures of social class inequality, exploitation and conflict in capitalist society, and the power and privilege of the dominant class, with a view to destroying them. Marx himself demonstrated such clear value-commitment when he wrote, as long ago as 1845, that 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.'

Postmodernism and the values debate

Postmodernists like Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (2001) suggest the subjectivity/objectivity and value-freedom debate simply reflects the values and assumptions of competing sociologists. Postmodernists say there is no objective truth, and all forms of knowledge are social constructions, all involve values, none are more objective or valuable than others, and all are equally valid. The assertion of the importance of value-free knowledge is simply an attempt by some groups who may have more power than others to establish their interpretation as the only true or valid approach to studying society. Sociology, whether or not it claims to be value-free, is just another metanarrative claiming its knowledge and understanding of the world is better than other forms of knowledge.

Conclusion: dealing with values in social research

As discussed above, sociology can't be completely value-free, and most sociologists will have political views about society, such as about the extent of inequality, and the need for social change and how it should be achieved. Nonetheless, all sociologists, whatever their theoretical or methodological perspective, would agree that they should *strive* to produce research evidence that provides the fullest, most reliable and most valid explanations of social life. No reputable sociologist would wish to produce research that is so manipulated and distorted by their own political beliefs and personal values – for example by concealing data that they disagree with – that it is little better than poorly researched, value-laden and politically loaded tabloid journalism. Research data that were selectively collected and manipulated to justify and promote the political beliefs of the researcher are unlikely to be taken seriously either by fellow sociologists, or by policy makers whom sociologists might be trying to influence.

The fact that sociology can't escape the influence of values, just as natural science can't, does not mean that it is completely value-laden and worthless. The key issue is the extent to which these values are allowed to influence the actual research and data collection process. There are three ways that we can accept the existence of values in sociology, and still produce valid and/or reliable data.

- 1 *Values can't (and some would say shouldn't) be avoided when choosing the topic to research, but values and personal prejudices should never be allowed to enter the research process itself or allowed to distort or manipulate data collection.* Weber argued the topic chosen for research is bound to reflect what the sociologist thinks important and relevant, and also the values of those funding the research. But once these value judgements have been made, sociologists should tackle research with an open mind and consider all the evidence in a detached and fair-minded way. Evidence should be collected using systematic research methods, whatever perspective is used – for example, the use of careful sampling techniques and skilfully designed questionnaires in positivist survey research, or the careful recording of observations

and interpretations in unstructured interviews or participant observation in interpretivist research. Any conclusions reached should be based on this evidence, not on personal values.

- 2 *Values and personal prejudices should be considered when examining the ethics of research.* For example, what should researchers do if they come across serious crime like murder or armed robbery in their research, or offences like child abuse or paedophilia? Should they shop the respondents to whom they have promised confidentiality? Should they publish data likely to harm those researched? These ethical considerations ultimately rest on the moral values of researchers, but they should properly be considered as part of sociological research. Sociologists have to take some responsibility for avoiding harm caused by their research.
- 3 *Findings should be open to inspection, criticism, debate and testing by other researchers.* Weber emphasized researchers should be open and clear about their own values, so any personal biases, or distortion and manipulation of results as a result of these values, even if unintended, can be checked by others who scrutinize their work. This may be achieved, for example, by scrutinizing the methodology used, replicating the research (carrying out the same or similar research again to check the findings of earlier research) in positivist research, or examining interview transcripts or research notes in interpretivist research.

Activity

Imagine you were an advisor to a researcher about to start a study of child poverty. You know this researcher holds very strong beliefs that child poverty is due to inadequate parents and parenting. What advice would you give the researcher to ensure that the research findings are not simply seen as a reflection of her or his values?

Practice questions

- 1 Outline and explain **two** ways in which a sociologist's subjective beliefs and values may influence sociological research. **(10 marks)**
- 2 Outline and explain **two** arguments for the view that sociological research should *not* be value-free. **(10 marks)**
- 3 Read **Item A** below and answer the question that follows.

Item A

Some argue that it is possible and desirable for sociologists to study society in a completely value-free, objective way. Others suggest that sociologists cannot avoid the influence of values completely, and it is therefore impossible for them to conduct value-free research. A third position is that sociology should not be value-free, even if it were possible, and research should involve a value commitment to improve the lives of the disadvantaged.

Applying material from **Item A** and your knowledge, evaluate the view that value-freedom is an ideal to strive for in sociology, but is impossible to achieve. **(20 marks)**