

Key Concepts in The Philosophy of Social Research

MALCOLM WILLIAMS



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Chris Rojek
Assistant editor: Delayna Spencer
Production editor: Katherine Haw
Copyeditor: Solveig Gardner Servian
Proofreader: Bryan Crampbell
Marketing manager: Sally Ransom
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in India at Replika Press Pvt Ltd

© Malcolm Williams 2016

First published 2016

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016933344

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-85702-741-2
ISBN 978-0-85702-742-9 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using FSC papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

Pawson, R (1989) *A Measure for Measures: a manifesto for empirical sociology*. London: Routledge.

Skvoretz, J (1998) 'Theoretical models: sociology's missing links', in Sica, A (ed.), *What is Social Theory: the philosophical debates*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

KEY THINKERS

Mario Bunge; Jon Elster; Peter Hedstrom; Ray Pawson; Richard Swedberg

See also: *Causality; Complexity; Induction; Realism; Statistics*

Objectivity – Subjectivity

Objectivity is contested in the social sciences. It has many definitions and emphases, but all concern the ability of the researcher to conduct investigations that transcend his or her subjective views or preferences.

The objectivity–subjectivity dichotomy is important in social science. This section, whilst describing the opposed positions of positivism and humanism on the matter, will then examine attempts to transcend the dichotomy. I will maintain that objectivity and value freedom are not the same thing and that a 'situated' form of objectivity is compatible with subjectivity.

In the literature of social science, objectivity and subjectivity are often either dichotomised or the former is described as being more or less available to us, depending on the kind of social science we do. Objectivity and value freedom are also conflated, or used interchangeably. Some deny the possibility of objectivity *tout court* and some deny it because they see it as a claim to value freedom. These positions are somewhat

subjectivity

objectivity –

simplistic, and one might say that the social sciences have not kept up with the debates in the philosophy of the natural sciences. In social science one can discern two philosophically opposed positions, roughly characterised as follows:

- Objectivity is freedom from moral or cultural values and it is the job of science to transcend these in its investigations and conclusions. It follows that social science should similarly do so and should be ever watchful against bias entering investigation. This position owes much to **positivism**, though can also trace its origin to the *methodenstreit* dispute in German philosophy as to whether social science should take a scientific or humanistic approach to investigation (Manicas 1987: 124–126). Although positivism has fallen out of favour with most social scientists, the position on values has persisted, particularly in quantitative research.
- Its opposite, which might be characterised as the humanist position, is the belief that investigations of the social cannot transcend the complex mesh of individual and collective values, that we can only know our own subjectivity and perhaps come to understand the subjectivities of others. This view is close to that of epistemological **relativism**, though it may also arise from a strong moral imperative that the whole point of studying the social is to bring about social change.

For many social scientists, engaged in their quotidian labours, the extremes of these debates hold little attraction and social research methods texts often rather simplistically equate subjectivity with qualitative research and objectivity with quantitative research. This truce, or philosophical fudge, worked to an extent when the two methodological camps got on with their own business, but in these days of mixed methods and ‘methodological pluralism’ (Payne and Payne 2004: 148–149), we probably need to do better.

VALUES

For the subjectivist (i.e. someone who rejects the possibility of objectivity in social science), values do not pose a major philosophical problem. There are certainly methodological issues but values are subjectively (or intersubjectively) held and these values include those embodied in

investigation, so no privileging can take place. Or if it does, this should be on the basis of prior ideological commitment, often to an emancipatory ideal. Positivists and neo-positivists have not been insensitive to the question of values because if one wants to rule them out of investigation, it is necessary to know what they are. A key feature of positivist (and empiricist) philosophies of science is to separate out knowledge of what is the case in the world from our views of what should be the case (commonly referred to as 'is' and 'ought' statements). In this position, it is claimed, one cannot derive an 'ought' statement from an 'is' statement. One of the more sophisticated statements came from Ernest Nagel (1979: 492–494).

Nagel offers a defence of the distinction, in social science, by attempting to separate 'describing ideas' (what he terms 'appraising value judgements') from evaluative ideas ('characterising value judgements'). In order to show that this is a problem also for natural scientists, he illustrates it with an example from physiology, that of anaemia. Its diagnosis is derived from a series of characterising judgements based on observable evidence. However, because this condition leads to diminished powers of maintenance of the animal, it may be characterised as a bad thing. Perhaps an initially persuasive contrast, but would this work in a factory or a university? The characterising judgements themselves would almost certainly be contested and we could only move from characterising to appraising if there could be agreement about what constituted the equivalent of anaemia in a factory or university. Nagel's schema can only work when there is agreement about characterising judgments. That is not to say there *cannot* be, but rather there often isn't.

In the early part of the 20th century, Max Weber also tried to distinguish between motivating values and investigation. Weber maintained that if it is the case that the concepts of the social world were subjectively constructed by agents, then it must follow that the moral and political views and regimes will differ between times and places (1974: 64). He appears to begin from a subjectivist position: that all concepts are known through human subjectivities and because then there were no concepts to discover that are free of human subjectivities, social laws have no 'scientific justification in the cultural sciences'. However, Weber did not embrace the epistemological relativism this appears to entail (1974: 110) and wanted to show how, under these circumstances, a 'value free' scientific sociology was possible. His starting point can be summarised as saying that in matters of policy there will be always be a

debate about 'ends', about what should be achieved and therefore what investigation should be pursued. Investigation is value driven and in sociology the subject matter of investigation is values. However, he claimed that it does not follow from this that the moral and political values of commitment should bias investigation.

The social scientist should not be indifferent to policy issues, indeed the desire and need to investigate arises directly from commitment. However, in investigating the issues that arise from such commitment, the social scientist should examine his or her value positions for their logical coherence and their relationship to other concepts and principles. Weber proposes two levels of analysis (1974: 77): first, that of the cultural significance of a phenomenon; and the second, an investigation of the causal factors that lead to the mass significance of such a phenomenon. The existence of (his example) the money economy is a concrete historical fact, thus (he implies) existing outside of any given subjectivity, but nevertheless a product of subjectivities.

What is often described as Weber's 'value free sociology' was not a sociology without values, but rather a sociology that began with values, yet was neutral in the conduct and means of its subsequent investigation. The Weberian view provided a consensual view, particularly for the burgeoning US social policy in the mid-20th century. But it was criticised by Alvin Gouldner (1973). He argued that Weber's 'value free sociology' had produced a group myth that sociology was value free. The myth had become an excuse for complacency amongst US sociologists, a self-serving complacent professionalism that did not contribute to the public interest (Gouldner 1968: 109). His alternative to this, of 'objective partisanship', is that objectivity should be directed to particular goals, some of which are universal, for example the alleviation of suffering.

Most influential in sociology and its cognate disciplines, in recent decades, has been the work of Howard Becker (1967). He posed the question 'whose side are we (the sociologists) on?' Becker's position has been differently interpreted (see e.g. Hammersley 2000), but the core of his argument is simple. Should sociologists be value neutral or should they express a commitment to a particular cause?

For it [value freedom] to exist, one would have to assume, as some apparently do, that it is indeed possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies ... the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on. (Becker 1967: 239)

Becker goes on to say that whatever perspective one takes in sociological investigation, it will always be one that is from the standpoint of 'superordinates' or 'subordinates'. The 'complacent' US sociology Gouldner complained of is in the first category. He maintained that if the sociologist adopts the standpoint of the 'superordinate', this will be the normative position and not criticised by those in power, yet if the position of the 'subordinate' is taken, the sociologist will be accused of bias. Becker's conclusion from this is that 'there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one way or another' (1967: 245). His conclusion was that sociologists should challenge the normative and advocated that they should take the side of the underdog.

In Becker there is a recognition of the value laden nature of enquiry and the role of power and rhetoric, but there is also some justification in Gouldner's criticism of this position as replacing the myth of value free social science by a 'new but no less glib rejection of it' (Gouldner 1968: 103).

THE VALUE CONTINUUM AND SITUATED OBJECTIVITY

The feminist philosopher of science, Helen Longino (1990 (see **feminism**)) has argued that not only do values enter our scientific endeavours, indeed they should. Whilst she divides values into constitutive (those of science itself) and contextual (the social values surrounding science), she maintains that the latter do and should enter science. One might go further and say that values exist along a continuum from numeric to moral values. Whilst these obviously are different, they shade into each other (Williams 2006). Temperature readings measure the physical environment, but different measures are used (Celsius, Fahrenheit, Kelvin). They are socially constructed, as are the values of scientific method and what it is that science investigates, though each of these measures are convertible into the other.

A different way of looking at the objectivity and values question is to begin from the position that science and social science are value laden enterprises. Indeed historically, science itself was born of a set of values. However, it does not follow that beginning from such a position cannot produce knowledge of the world that transcends subjectivity (or even intersubjectively held views). The values of science might be seen as philosophical tools to help us transcend the subjective. Objectivity is such a value. Examine it more closely and it too comprises values, the search for truth (see **logic and truth**), a willingness to entertain the notion that there are identifiable 'things'





in the world, and that our investigation is for a purpose. That this purpose may differ from time to time and place to place does not detract either from our ability to test propositions, discover new and novel things, and indeed to show ourselves to be wrong (see **falsification**). Objectivity is socially situated and is not at all the same thing as value freedom.

THEORISING SUBJECTIVITY

Much of this section, so far, has been concerned with objectivity and values, but this is not to devalue the importance of subjectivity. Indeed subjectivity, in the form of values at least, is unavoidable in science. However, subjectivities are an important focus of social science investigation, and moreover if one is to investigate these from an acceptance of beginning from values, then it must follow that objectivity must have its roots in subjectivity (Letherby 2012; Williams 2015). Subjectivity is closely entwined with meaning and interpretation (see **interpretation and meaning**). Our psychological dispositions are undoubtedly unique to us and we are rarely aware of all of them, but equally these dispositions have developed as a result of our interaction with the external world and this is why their manifestation as subjective meaning is of interest to the social scientist, but equally the social scientist is a subjective creature.

The subjectivist will give equal epistemological weighting to all subjectivities, including her or his own, and indeed in postmodernism these become ‘stories’ indistinguishable from fiction (Jones 1998), but as I have suggested above and in the section on **relativism**, this precludes the possibility of social science. How, then, can we take account of our own subjectivity as social scientists and move toward objectivity? One recent suggestion comes from Gayle Letherby (2003), who argues that our starting point on this journey is to theorise our subjective experience in its social context – what she terms ‘theorised subjectivity’. Just as objectivity must be situated in its social and historical context, so must our understanding of our own subjectivity.

REFERENCES

- Becker, H (1967) ‘Whose side are we on?’, *Social Problems*, 14 (3): 239–247.
 Gouldner, A (1968) ‘The sociologist as partisan: sociology and the welfare state’, *American Sociologist*, 3 (2): 103–116.
 Gouldner, A (1973) *For Sociology: renewal and critique in sociology today*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

