Possibility of Objectivity in Social Science Research: From the Standpoint of Max Weber

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Abstract

In this essay, I have attempted to defend the possibility of objectivity in case of social science research. It is basically an evaluation of Max Weber's interpretation in maintaining the possibility of objectivity in social science. There is a long tradition in the philosophy of social science maintaining a sharp distinction between social science and natural science in terms of both goals as well as method; and there is no doubt about that natural sciences have the higher degree of objectivity in comparison with social science. It is not possible to maintain absolute objectivity in case of social science research. But, by following some tricks it is possible to make a social inquiry more reliable and justifiable. This paper aims to improve such tricks as well as such a unique methodology adopted by Max Weber through which it is possible to maintain objectivity in social science as well as to establish social science as a successful science.

Keywords: Max Weber, Objectivity, Social Science, Natural Science, Value-free Ideal, Theory-Ladenness, Value-Neutrality

Introduction

The concept of 'objectivity' is an ideal in scientific inquiry. It can be considered as the goal of every research. It is the most fundamental and valuable attribute in research inquiry which must or should be followed by all researcher. Ignoring objectivity or making inquiry from subjective standpoint would be the exclusion of all criticism as well as rational debate. Even, the lack of objectivity can ensure the denial of thesis, for there is no place for active participation of intellectuals or the rational unity of mankind as the inquiry is viewed from a subjective standpoint; and as a result, it opens the door to irrationalism and elitism. Thus, it is clear that objectivity is the most cherished value in scientific investigation. Now let us see what objectivity is actually. Simply, objectivity is nothing but such a condition in scientific investigation which makes research free from researcher's biases. It is the principle of doing unbiased inquiry. Such a biased attitude of a researcher can be reflected through a variety of

attachments like researcher's education, training, religion, caste, past experience, personal attitude and so on; and it is not possible for a researcher to control all these affections always as he is very much akin to these attachments in his daily lived life. Now, let us try to understand it with the help of an example. If an atheist person, suppose that, studies on the 'existence of God', intentionally he always tries to emphasize those negative arguments which are capable to disprove the existence of God instead of proving its opposite; for his personal belief always pushes himself to do so. Thus, individual biasness can affect the objective value of a research and as a result it loses its universal acceptance as well as its standard quality which should never be desirable. So, each and every researcher have to maintain objectivity in their inquiry.

Conditions of Objectivity

So far, we have understood that what objectivity is actually. Now a question can enter into every

reader's mind that what are the standards of objectivity? In more specific it can be asked that what are the conditions or criterion in maintaining objectivity in research inquiry? A lot of conditions are there and I am trying to highlight only the following a few of them which are most important.

(a) The first condition is the 'faithfulness to facts.' A researcher must describe a fact faithfully. By following this condition, a research work can become objective to the degree that it succeeds at discovering and generalizing facts, abstracting from individual perspective.

(b) 'Theory-Ladenness of observation' is the other condition in maintaining objectivity in research investigation. If it is possible to add true and eliminate false beliefs, a research work will become more objective; and it is possible on the basis of theory-ladenness of observation. The 'faithfulness to reality' of an observation is always mediated by a theoretical framework which helps in maintaining a neutral ground in research inquiry.

(c) 'Value-free ideal' or 'value-neutrality thesis' can be regarded as an important standard in maintaining objectivity in research inquiry. A researcher should strive to minimize the influence of contextual values in their inquiry, because of a scientific research is concerned with what there is, not what there should be.

(d) 'Freedom from personal biases' can be called another important condition in objective inquiry. A research work can be free from personal biases. An objective inquiry does not depend on researcher's personal preference; rather it is a process where individual biases are gradually filtered out and replaced by rational debate.

(e) 'Verifiability' is also another important condition in maintaining objectivity in scientific inquiry. A research work must be verifiable to the other through which it can obtain its universal acceptance.

Analyzing the problem

After a short introduction of what objectivity is and how to maintain objectivity in research inquiry, it is the time to address the actual problem which force me to write down this essay at last. The problem is about the possibility of objectivity in social science. Now it should be asked that why does such a question regarding the possibility of objectivity arise in case of social sciences? In reply it can be said that the subject matter of social science itself is responsible for this problem. Social science deals with social action or human action which is too complex to admit its full explanation and description. Thus, in describing a social phenomenon we have to select a particular standpoint. As Weber argued that "All knowledge of cultural reality, as may be seen, is always knowledge from a particular point of view."¹ For this reason a sociological research can lose its objective value. This is the problem of this essay. Here, my task is to show the possibility of objectivity in research of social science, i.e.; how a researcher can maintain objectivity by following a unique methodology introduced by Max Weber.

Max Weber's Point of View

Before to discuss any theory or opinion it is necessary, as it seems to me, to introduce the historical context which influences one to think or write in a particular dimension which is nothing but an outcome of such context. In present case of Max Weber's opinion, I also feel so. Max Weber came out from a different intellectual tradition. As he was a German, his training was in German tradition which was trying at that time to maintain a kind of 'Radical Dualism' that natural world is completely different from socio cultural world. As a member of such an intellectual movement, Weber also thinks that social science is completely different from natural science. The most fundamental difference between social reality and natural reality which is introduced by Weber is that social beings can think while natural beings like tree, table, chair, hill, river etc. cannot

¹Weber, Max. (1949) The Methodology of Social Sciences, p. 81

think. In more specific, social reality is spiritual in nature while natural reality is material in nature. Social beings are rational thinking being, they have different reaction in different situation while natural beings have no different reaction; that is why Max Weber defines the subject of social science differently as well as defines sociology in a different standpoint. Sociology, for Max Weber, is "a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects".² From the given definition it is clear that the subject matter of sociology is 'social action'. Now it should be asked that what is a 'social action' as well as what is meant by an 'interpretative understanding' of a social action? Let us try to understand these one by one. In sociology³, social action, also known as Weberian social action, is an act which takes into account the actions and reactions of individuals (or agents). According to Max Weber "Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course."⁴ Here, Weber makes a sharp distinction between a behavior and an action. A social action must have a meaning and intention; on the other hand, a behavior may have no meaning. For example, if it suddenly rains in the market and everyone opens an umbrella to protect them from rain, it cannot be called an action after Weber; rather it is a behavior. But, if it is happened that the spoke of someone's umbrella unfortunately goes into other's eyes and from that incident there arises a conflict between these two people, then it can be called an action after Weber. That means any meaningful action which has a certain motive or intention is called a social action which is completely different from mere behavior.

Now the question is that how do we understand a social action? Weber argued that it is not possible to understand a social action through mere

observation as it is possible in natural science. By mere observation we will not be able to uncover the actual meaning of a social action. Apart from observation we need something more. But what is this something? It is nothing but active interaction. Let us understand it with the help of an example. Suppose that a person is cutting the wood because he is a woodcutter. But how do we know that he is a woodcutter? Only through the naked observation that he is cutting wood we cannot call him a woodcutter. There can be different purposes behind his wood cutting that he can cut wood to earn a wage or to light a fire to keep warm or for physical exercise. We can recognise a person as a woodcutter if he cuts wood to earn a wage otherwise, we cannot call anybody as a woodcutter. Likewise, in this case, to understand that person as a woodcutter we need to interact with him. Until and unless we go and talk to him that what is the purpose of his wood cutting, it is not possible to understand him as a woodcutter. Therefore, Weber suggests that there are two levels to understand a social action completely, not partially - the first one is the level of direct observation and the second one is the level of interaction with the actor. He calls these two levels of understanding as 'interpretative understanding'. This type of understanding needs another tool; it cannot be done independently on its own. What is this tool? It is nothing but 'ideal type'. Ideal type is a mental construct, like a model, for the scrutiny and systematic characterisation of a concrete situation. Ideal type is basically a tool to understand the social reality. It is not a reality in itself, rather it checks reality. Weber himself wrote: "An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct..."⁵

²Robert B. Denhardt. (2010) Theories of Public Organization, p. 27.

³Fadul, J. and Estoque, R. (2010) A Textbook for an Introductory course in Sociology

⁴ Weber, Max (1978) Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology, p. 4.

⁵Weber, Max. (1949) The Methodology of Social Sciences, p. 90

Thus, Weber introduces 'ideal type' as a unique methodology of studying social phenomena. It is a means to realize the actual meaning of a complex social reality as Weber says himself "the construction of abstract ideal-types recommends itself not as an end but as a means."⁶ By applying this unique methodology it is possible to maintain objectivity in social science. In the language of Weber, it can be said that "The Ideal type concept will develop our skill in imputation in research. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description."⁷

Conclusion

Through the entire discussion it is clear that the importance of objectivity is undeniable in both natural science as well as social science. There is no doubt that natural sciences have higher degree of objectivity in comparison with social science; and it is nothing but the subject matter of social science which is responsible for such a distinction. The idea of an aperspectival social science is almost meaningless. It is not possible to maintain absolute objectivity in social science as Weber says that "there is no absolute "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. The reason for this lies in the character of the cognitive goal of all research in social science which seeks to transcend the purely formal treatment of the legal or conventional norms regulating social life."⁸ It is true also that absolute value free social science is an absurd thought. Max Weber argued that social sciences are necessarily value-laden. Not only in social science but also in other science it is an absurd to maintain absolute value-freedom. In this aspect David Goddard says in his article namely 'Max Weber and the Objectivity of Social Science' that "No

science is value-free, for all scientific activity (because it is an activity, a human activity) presupposes some framework of meanings or values in terms of which it is judged meaningful, worthwhile, or useful."⁹ But, on the basis of such drawbacks it cannot be concluded that a social science research has no objective value at all. As we have seen that a social scientist can achieve some degree of objectivity by keeping out his personal perspective. Even, by following the model of 'ideal type' as mentioned by Max Weber it is possible to make a social science research much reliable and justifiable. But it should be remembered that it is not possible for a social scientist to be total objective.

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⁶Weber, Max. (1949) *The Methodology of Social Sciences*, p. 92

⁷Ibid

⁸Ibid, p. 72

⁹ Goddard, David. (1973) *Max Weber and the Objectivity of Social Science*, p. 1

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