

Problems of objectivity in Social Research

Meaning:

Objectivity is the regulative ideal that guides all inquiry [which is] largely a measure directed at how researchers undertake and carry out their research in that it requires them to be precise, unbiased, open, honest, receptive to criticism, and so on" (Smith 1990, p 171, also Phillips 1990, Schwandt 1990). In a similar vein, Lather (1990, p 319) states that "objectivity means being aware and honest about how one's own beliefs, values, and biases affect the research process."

It means the willingness and ability to examine evidence dispassionately. It is the first condition of research. Objectivity means basing conclusion on facts without any bias and value judgement. The conclusion should be independent of one's personal beliefs, likes dislikes and hopes. Both the data and the inference drawn from their analysis must be free from bias and prejudices. Objectivity is a goal of scientific investigation. Objectivity presupposes an independent reality that can be grasped. If there is no independent reality, or if reality cannot be apprehended, or if reality is merely the concoction of the observer, then the notion of objectivity is moot.

Objectivity is therefore defined as the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, historical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness. (Bernstein 1983).

Definition:

- According to Green, "Objectivity is the willingness and ability to examine evidence dispassionately".
- Carr states, "Objectivity of truth means that the phenomenon would be a reality independent of beliefs, hopes or fears of any individual, all of which we find out not by intuition and speculation but by actual observations".

- Robert Bierstadt states, “Objectivity means that the conclusions arrived at as the result of inquiry and investigation are independent of the race, colour, creed, occupation, nationality, religion, moral preference, and political predisposition of the investigator. If his research is truly objective, it is independent of any subjective elements; any personal desires that he may have”.

Why Objectivity is important in Social science:

The question of objectivity has been central to the methodological debates of the social sciences from the beginning.

If we are to hold to the view that social science research offers us knowledge about the social world which is not necessarily available by other means, then we are making some privileged claims about our work. Research thus becomes more than a reflection of our opinions and prejudices: it substantiates, refutes, organizes or generates our theories and produces evidence which may challenge not only our own beliefs, but also those of society in general. It is at this point that the debate over objectivity in the social sciences enters. It is often assumed that if our values do not enter into our research, it is objective and above criticism.

Objectivity in any scientific study including social science is important because:

- Though complete objectivity is not possible in social science, aiming at it, or attaining as much of it as reasonably possible, is a necessary condition for the conduct of all scientific inquiry.
- Viewing inquiry as subjective, or as an entirely individual matter, would be the exclusion of all criticisms.
- Ignoring objectivity would be the exclusion of rational debate
- Ignoring objectivity would be the denial of thesis of the intellectual or rational unity of mankind, which opens the door to irrationalism and elitism.

Problems of Objectivity in Social research:

- a) Social scientist is part of human society and their judgements are subjective and coloured by researchers own experience.
- b) The subject matter of social science research is too complex. All propositions are limited particular social groups and contexts. Thus objectivity is a major issue in social science research.
- c) All members of the society have different values, social researcher will unconsciously influenced by their values.
- d) Social scientist fails to achieve objectivity because the respondents are human beings have certain human problems.e.g. refusal of respondent, improper understanding, reluctance etc,. All these problems cause biases and invalidate the research findings and conclusions.

Factors Affecting Objectivity:

It is very difficult to achieve objectivity in social science research. This difficulty arises out of the adverse influences of **(a)** personal prejudices and bias, **(b)** value judgement, **(c)** ethical dilemma and **(d)** complexity of social phenomena.

- **Personal prejudices and biases:** Prejudices and biases are like fantasies to believe what is comforting to believe. It makes to believe something without considering evidence. The subjective bias in research is a result of adverse influences of personal motives, customs and social situations. The sources of bias are selfishness, over-ambition, friendship, relationship, caste and community, class, religion, location, nationalism, language, political affinity, profession, opportunism, sexual bias, business, careerism, group bias, temperament bias, power bias, personal bias, pessimism, optimism, fanaticism, and militancy. Guarding against such biases becomes a matter of perpetual vigilance for a true researcher.
- **Value Judgment:** Value related problem arises from the social context with in which research occurs. A researcher's attitudes towards socio-economic issues are influenced by his values. The objective observer must strive at self-elimination in his judgments and provide an argument which is as true for each individual mind as his own. He has to overcome his subjective

judgment. But all persons living in a society are bound to have a set of values.

- **Ethical dilemma:** Research relation with other aspect of research creates ethical problems. E.g. Relation with sponsors, relation with source data, relation with research subject etc.,.
- **Complexity of social phenomena:**

Steps taken to ensure Objectivity:

- 1- If the social scientist study “what ought to be” and “what is”, some problems of objectivity can be solved
- 2- Need of training for social scientists
- 3- Research must be taken in a transparent and open manner and should be subject to critique
- 4- A social scientist should not advocate for a particular value

Nevertheless, the importance of objectivity as a most cherished but not sole value is recognized by social scientists of various fields. Thus, we are striving for achieving a balance in social sciences. There may be ardent followers of objectivity as an overriding method in social sciences. But the subject matter of social sciences does not allow us to negate role of other values in theory building and research. Consequently, we can conclude that objectivity must play a significant role in social sciences but it shall not be made a lone standard in judging research studies of social sciences. Otherwise, the uniqueness of social sciences will wither away without any tangible gains for the mankind.

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