
UNIT 3 OBJECTIVITY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to understand:

- Durkheim's views on objectivity,
- Weber's views on objectivity, and
- Popper's views on objectivity.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

What is objectivity? In order to give an answer let us look at the background. The concern for objectivity in social science research in general and sociology in particular has been there since the discipline of sociology was conceptualised by Auguste Comte. As sociology is a subject which studies humans who have their own faculty to react to the external stimulus, unlike the matter in the natural sciences, it was found difficult by the founding fathers to establish sociology as the science of society at par with the natural sciences, owing to the methods and methodology. Objectivity therefore was a concern for all to establish sociology as a science.

Georg Simmel saw objectivity as the greatest achievement of Western cultural history (Ritzer: 2004). Objectivity in a layman language can be understood as the direction given to the researcher to be unbiased and open to criticism. It means that evidences and facts need to be verified dispassionately and conclusions need to be drawn on the basis of facts without any value judgement or preconceived notions, free of the individual's personal beliefs. Objectivity presupposes that

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the reality can be understood objectively, and therefore it presumes it to be the goal of all scientific research. Objectivity in social research has its origin in positivism which propounds that researchers should remain distanced from what they study so findings depend on the nature of what was studied rather than on the personality, beliefs and values of the researcher. Objectivity is often considered as an ideal for scientific inquiry, as a good reason for valuing scientific knowledge, and as the basis of the authority of science in society.

Founding fathers especially Durkheim and Weber were committed to the idea of unity of science and believed that sociology required a collective method that would be universally applicable and was opposed to the methodological individualism in social analysis, meaning that sociology could not be based on the premise that took the individual as the starting point of the analysis. This aspect of positivism on the basis of which Durkheim brought the issue of objectivity is evident in his work *The Rules of Sociological Method* whereby he wanted to chalk out the methods of doing research and establishing sociology as science and also to differentiate sociology from other discipline such as psychology and biology.

3.2 DURKHEIM AND OBJECTIVITY

The term sociology was coined by Auguste Comte. The credit for giving a name to the discipline goes to Comte but Durkheim took upon himself to make sociology as an academic discipline in France. He also worked towards making sociology distinctively different from other disciplines. Comte in his pursuit to establish sociology at par with other natural sciences propounded the methods of natural sciences to do research in sociology but it was Durkheim who outlined the methodological aspects of sociology and in doing so also brought out and clarified the issue of objectivity.

3.2.1 Social Facts

Durkheim while trying to develop the subject matter of sociology and its method propounded that “All preconceptions must be eradicated”(Thompson, 2007;58). By this he meant that anything that was outside of science, in the domain of the layman, should be avoided. Unscientific layman concepts and categories allow them to bring into the study their prior values. Therefore, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim emphasised that there are certain facts in social life which cannot be explained by physical or psychological analysis and these were social facts. According to Durkheim, social facts have an objective reality that sociologists can study in a way similar to how other scientists, such as physicists, study the physical world. Social facts are objective and are capable of being perceived from outside. Social facts are understood only by sociological laws. There can be no psychological explanation of these facts. Sociology cannot be explained by the principle of utility or individual’s motivation. Its explanation can only be social. Durkheim took great pain in trying to rid sociology of preconceptions and to make sociology objective. In this endeavour, he put forward the first rule of sociological research. He observed, ‘Consider social facts as things’ (Durkheim, 1958;14) Durkheim defined social facts as :

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not , capable of exercising on the individual an external constrain; or again, every way of acting which is general

throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestation (Durkheim, 1958;13).

The definition makes it clear that for Durkheim, a social fact is characterised by it being external to the individual, and constraining upon the individual and is independent of the individual and should be treated as things as per the first rule. These characteristics is important as understanding and establishing them would help in the objectivity of his methods. When a social fact is considered as a thing it can be directly observed and objectively measured. Although the social facts enter the consciousness of the individual they are external to the individuals. They are impressed upon them by society, they exist outside the individual and can therefore be studied objectively as external things. In Durkheim's view, society is not simply a collection of individuals, each acting independently in terms of his or her particular psychology or mental state. Instead members of society are directed by collective beliefs, values and laws, by social facts which have their own existence. In Durkheim's words, 'collective ways of acting or thinking have a reality outside the individuals'. Social facts therefore constrain the individuals to behave in particular ways. The explanation of human behaviour thus involves an examination of how that behaviour is shaped by social facts. Just as the behaviour of matter can be regarded as a reaction to external stimuli, so the behaviour of man can be seen as a response to the external constrains. Given this view of the nature of man and society, social facts can be analysed.

Durkheim argued that social realities existed in us as ideas as perceptions, thoughts and reflections are prior to the science. However, science is able to use them in a more methodological manner. It would be very difficult for humans to exist without having some form of idea about the environment in which he lives. Since these ideas are nearer to us we tend to substitute them for the reality. *"Instead of observing, describing and comparing things, we are content to focus our consciousness upon, to analyze, and to combine our ideas. Instead of a science concerned with realities, we produce no more than an ideological analysis."* (Durkheim, 1958;14). Such ideas do not become substitute for things. They will lead us to incorrect understanding of reality and by elaborating and accepting such ideas it will be difficult to discover any forms of laws of reality. If we come to discover laws of reality based on concepts and categories which are based on preconceptions then it will not help us understand the reality but will only prescribe what ought to be rather than what it is. It is therefore very important for the rejection of all concepts and categories which has not been scientifically established. In this process Durkheim is in disagreement with both Comte and Spencer saying that Comte takes ideas for the subject matter of sociology and Spencer does not define society but what he actually does is define the idea of society.

For Durkheim such understanding of realities would not give sociology its scientific laws and therefore said that 'social phenomena are things and ought to be treated as things' (Durkheim, 1958;27). These are unique data for the sociologists. Anything that is observable has the character of a thing. However, even if the phenomena do not possess the characteristic of the thing we have to consider and treat them as things. These things cannot be perceived or known directly, but only through the phenomenal reality expressing them. *"We must, therefore, consider social phenomena in themselves as distinct from the consciously formed representation of them in the mind; we must study them objectively as external things, for it is this character that they present to us"*

(Durkheim, 1958:28) and this rule is applicable to all social reality without any exception. By considering social phenomena as things, what we do, is not let the preconceived notions of reality come into play, but make adjustment so that the conception of the scientist is in accordance with the nature of the social phenomena.

In order to study a social phenomenon objectively a scientist must define the things he treats in order that his subject matter may be known. The definitions of the phenomena to be objective must take into consideration the natural characteristics of the phenomena and not the ideas of it. Therefore, the definition should include all the phenomena which displays such characteristics as these are not the reality but only a clue to establish the reality. *“The subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena so defined should be included within this group”* (Durkheim, 1958:35). By doing this the sociologist is from the very beginning rooted in reality and has no preconceived ideas.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) What is the nature of social facts?

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- 2) Why should social facts be treated as things?

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3.2.2 The Study of Suicide

Durkheim was of the opinion that his study of suicide supported his methodological views and argued that his study of suicide demonstrated that real laws are discoverable, and social phenomena obey laws in the same way as natural phenomena. Durkheim identified altruistic, egoistic and anomic suicide. These types of suicides were categorised on the basis of the level of integration an individual had with the society. Durkheim used detailed statistical records of suicide from number of European societies and showed that the rate of suicide was fairly constant over a period of years, that there were significant differences in the suicide rate between societies and between social groups within each society. From these observation, he argued that suicide rates should be regarded as social facts. Since the rates varied systematically between societies, it may be assumed

that they are socially determined. Thus Durkheim claimed that, 'each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths.' The answer to this differing rates in suicide can be explained by analysing the society and not the individual. From an analysis of the relationship between suicide rates and a range of social facts. He by examining integration of individual within society pointed out the above mentioned types of suicides. Social integration was measured by the number and strength of a person's social relationship with others.

The study of suicide proved that the behaviour of the individual was a product of social facts rather than individual motives. Although suicide seemed to be a personal and private act, its causes lie in the nature of social groups, it is therefore a product of social forces which are external to and act upon the individual.

Box 3.1: Characteristics of Social Facts

Independence

Durkheim maintained that social facts can be dealt with more objectively if they are considered independently of their individual manifestation. Social life is dynamic, therefore the scientist does not have a constant reference point which is a prerequisite for objectivity. Collective habits, however, are expressed in individual acts and in definite forms such as legal codes, social statistics, and religious dogma. These definite forms constitute a standard for the scientist and serve as objective indices. Durkheim's most famous example of the indirect observation of social facts is found in his *The Division of Labour in Society*. In this study of social solidarity Durkheim found himself confronted with the moral phenomenon of social solidarity which is not conducive to exact observation. He, therefore, used an external fact that he believed symbolized the internal fact and studied the latter through the former. He picked law as the external indicator of social solidarity and justified this objective manifestation on the following grounds:

1) The greater the sentiment of social solidarity, the more will be the number, frequency and intensity of the diverse relations in the society. 2) The number of these social relations is necessarily proportional to the number of juridical rules which regulate them. 3) The general life of society cannot expand without its juridical life expanding at the same time and in the same proportion.

These assumptions of Durkheim, however, are not necessarily valid. First, many social relations are not regulated by law, but by customs, folkways, and mores. Often the mores are not in agreement with the laws. Durkheim said that it is an exceptional situation when mores and laws are in conflict and that mores are usually the basis for laws. This may be true, but any scientific method should be definite, and there should be no room or exceptions. Although there are several flaws in Durkheim's rules for observing social facts, his principle of studying social facts objectively helped to boost sociology as a positive science.

Externality

By externality, Durkheim meant that a social fact is an independent reality which forms a part of the objective environment. Social facts are not responsive to individual desires because they are completely exterior to the individual and not created by the individual. This conception of social facts

has put Durkheim in the category of a social realist. He has been accused of maintaining that society, its facts and products, exist outside and above individuals as a super entity. Durkheim, however, persistently denied believing in society as a transcendental and substantial entity. He asked his critics to spare him the humiliation of ever suspecting that his theories implied that a whole can be an existential reality apart from its parts. Durkheim merely meant that social facts have properties which are different from what they would have been if social phenomena had been developed separately by non-associated members of a group.

Constraint

Social facts are capable of exerting constraint over the individual. The individual feels constrained by the social facts that are external to him. Social facts do not conform to individual decision, but they actually mould individual desire and decision to some extent. This characteristic of a social fact is Durkheim's basis for his conception of collective forces in social life. Two types of constraint can be distinguished. One is the constraint imposed by the lack of choice and the other is the pressure to choose according to established notions of what ought to be the case. Morphological factors exercise the first kind of constraint, usually through the form and distribution of material resources. Institutions and collective representation, such as beliefs, norms and values are examples of the second kind of constraint.

3.3 WEBER ON OBJECTIVITY

3.3.1 Methodological Debates in Germany

The methodological debate that dominated the German academic environment, in the late nineteenth century, can be understood on the basis of two interrelated factors. First, there tended to be in Germany, a firm division between the natural sciences and cultural disciplines. This led to only the natural phenomena to be seen as open to theoretical analysis. This as a consequence led to the studies in natural and social phenomena developed in different ways. Second after the early works of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, non Marxist economic theory became stagnant, with the result that economics had great difficulty in trying to explain the workings of actual industrial economies as they existed in the nineteenth century. These problems could be dealt:

- 1) by developing better theories, and
- 2) by avoiding science altogether and to concentrate on the historical development of particular economic systems.

This led to the development of historical and theoretical economics which also had methodological issues dividing them. There were four issues which these two groups disagreed upon. Weber used these debates as his baseline to develop his own methodological orientation. He tried to bridge the gap between the two groups and the origin of his argument to the two schools of thought can be found in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert. It was these two people who provided the methodological tools for Weber to build his sociology.

The four issues on which the exponents of historical and theoretical economics disagreed were :

- 1) Theoretical economics involved the relative importance of deduction and induction. The historical economists blamed that the theoretical economists use of deductive methods was faulty, because their theories could not explain reality. Due to this the historical economists emphasised on the importance of observation and describing the patterns of human action.
- 2) the division between the two groups had to do with the universality and the relativity of the findings. Historical economists were of the opinion that the universal applicability of the economic laws as propounded by the theoretical economists was not correct. To this the theoreticians were of the opinion that theory is oriented towards that which is common and not towards which is exceptional. The theoreticians were of the opinion that economic theories could explain human behaviours that were common to all societies but admitted that not all human behaviour and action could be explained by economic theory.
- 3) There was mis-understanding regarding the level of rationality and irrationality in human behaviour. The historical economists were of the opinion that it was unrealistic on the part of the theoretical economists to believe that human beings were rational and motivated only by small self-interest in their economic behaviour. The theoretical economists argued that economic behaviour was only one aspect of human behaviour and the other social sciences should look into the other aspects of social life.
- 4) Finally the two groups had to deal with the issue pertaining to economics as ethical discipline on the one hand and as economics as science on the other. The historical economists saw it as the ethical discipline that could solve the problems faced by German society.

3.3.2 Weber and Dilthey

Dilthey argued that nature and human behaviour could be studied scientifically but they produced different kinds of knowledge, which was to be recognised (Turner, Beeghley, & Powers, 1995). Dilthey argued firstly that the two sciences have different subject matters and because of this researchers in each field obtain different kinds of knowledge. Natural sciences produces knowledge which is external meaning that physical phenomena are affected by one another in ways that can be seen and explained in terms of valid laws. In social sciences the knowledge that is produced is internal meaning that each person has an “inner nature” that must be comprehended in some way in order to explain events. Therefore, researchers in the sphere of nature and sphere of human behaviour should have different orientation to their subjects. In natural sciences it is enough to observe events and relationships but in social sciences researchers must go beyond mere observations and seek to understand each person’s “inner nature” in order to explain events and relationships and these explanations can vary based on the cultural background of the researchers.

For Weber, Dilthey was correct in noting that the social sciences could obtain different form of knowledge than the natural sciences. Further, Weber agreed with Dilthey that social science statements are different from and must be kept separate from value judgements of any sort. The most important part that Weber agreed was that social scientific knowledge is to understand (*verstehen*) the subjective meanings people attached to their actions.

Weber, however, pointed out that the problem of Dilthey's work lay in his emphasis on understanding each person's 'inner nature,' as if an objective social science could be founded on intuitive re-experiencing of others' desires and thoughts. Hence Weber developed a different way of emphasising the importance of *verstehen*. Weber emphasised the importance of understanding individual behaviour while at the same time he was able to assess the significance of historical events in an objective manner.

3.3.3 Weber and Rickert

Rickert was also concerned with the disjunction between the world of nature and the world of human activity that existed. Rickert was of the opinion that reality could be divided into unlimited number of objects for study and that these objects could in turn be broken down into unlimited number of parts, which meant that reality could never be completely understood as there would always be some other way of understanding or looking at it. The problem that arose was how could one then know anything about the reality. Rickert was of the opinion that human beings could formulate concepts of those aspects of reality which they thought were important. Concepts were thus the means by which humans could know the reality. Therefore, for Rickert, concept formulation was an important tool in knowing the reality objectively.

Rickert confronted the problem of how scholars select topics for study and at this point his emphasis on concept formation as the essence of science trapped him in a non-productive philosophical argument. Essentially, he asserted the researchers choice of topics is made in terms of "value relevance." However, this emphasis on value relevance implies a subjective rather than objective conception of knowledge, because the researchers are forced to rely on their own values in determining what topics are worth doing for research.

Weber agreed that reality is unlimited and human beings could know it in terms of the concepts used to select out significant part of the world for examination. Weber on the other hand thought that it did not matter why a scholar chose one topic over the other, because the selection of topics was determined by values. Therefore, Weber argued, what was more important was that the research process needed to be objective and this could be achieved when the data are clearly conceptualised and systematically analysed. These debates to a large extent shaped Weber's methodology and his concern for objectivity in social sciences.

3.3.4 Weber Views on Objectivity

Weber's methodology of social sciences began with a consideration of the overriding importance of objective sociology. He was of the opinion that no scientific analysis can include ethical values within it and be regarded as objective. During the time of Weber many did not believe that an objective sociology was possible as values were not separated from research process. Weber confronted

the problem of values by observing that sociological inquiry should be objective or *value-free*.

3.3.5 Value-Free Sociology

By value free sociology Weber meant that researchers' personal values and economic interests should not affect the process of social scientific analysis. If such factors affected the research process then the social action could not be represented as objective. Objective analysis were possible if sociologists use a rational method in which the research process is systematic that is 1) empirical data must be categorised in terms of clearly formulated concepts, 2) proper rules of evidence must be employed, and 3) only logical inference must be made.

With the help of his methodological orientation Weber implied that value-free sociology could not be a moral science and thereby distinguished between 'what ought to be' that is the sphere of values from 'what is' the sphere of science and that social science should focus only on the latter. He also implied that new science of sociology contributes to an ongoing historical process in which magic and other forms of inherited wisdom become less acceptable as means for explaining events. Weber referred to this change as the process of rationalisation.

3.3.6 Values and Science

Weber was aware that it would be difficult to separate values and science in practice but to distinguish helped in the highlighting the relevance of values before and after the research. Social scientists face a very practical problem how to choose the topic of research. Weber said that there was no scientific way of choosing a topic of doing research. However, the choice of topic comes before the research is undertaken. The only basis for the individual to choose a particular topic is values. But once a topic is chosen for study Weber advocates that the scientist must follow an objective research process. The situation is even more difficult when dealing with public policy issues. With regards to issues of public policy as well Weber was of the opinion that the selection of one goal rather than another and one strategy over the other ultimately depended on people's political values, their economic interests and so forth but it does not mean that social science are irrelevant to public policy and believed that sociologists could do their task objectively by categorising the data in terms of clearly formulated concepts following proper rules of evidence and making logical deductions. Weber rejected the search for general laws in favour of historical theories and opined that universal laws excluded important and unique historical events.

Though Weber projected the methods to make social sciences objective, he wanted to address the bigger empirical questions which existed during his time like the why capitalism originated in West and not somewhere else. He was aware that emphasis on the development of general theories would not allow for an examination of such issues. For him ideal types were the method for dealing with these issues.

3.3.7 Ideal Types

Weber believed that only the use of ideal types could lead to an interpretative understanding. Ideal typical concepts, according to Weber, helps to develop our skill of assertion in research. It is not a hypothesis but it offers guidance to the

construction of hypothesis. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give a clear means to describe the reality. Ideal types are created according to the reality. To create it, only those elements are selected from the reality which fit together in the most rational and suitable way.

“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, discreet, 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.” (Weber, 1949:90).

The ideal type is a utopia. It is a mental construct which cannot be found to exist in reality. An ideal type is constructed by the abstraction and combination of an indefinite number of elements which although found in reality are rarely or never discovered in this specific form. With the help of ideal type one can find out, to what degree is it similar or different from the reality. In this manner if it is carefully applied it can be very useful to research. Ideal type is a means and not an end. It is an attempt to analyse historically unique events. Thus, by constructing a rational ideal type, we can learn something of how the world works. We can then learn more by comparing the ideal type with reality, say for example bureaucracy. We do not end with a model of what a bureaucracy is, or what it should be, but of what it might be if it were entirely rational. In this way we can learn much more from the sources of evident meaninglessness in real bureaucracy.

Ideal types are not formed out of a need for purely conceptual thought, but are created, modified and sharpened through the empirical analysis of concrete problems. This in turn, increases the precision of that analysis. Ideal type has been used by him as a device in understanding historical configurations or specific historical problems and are different in both scope and usage from descriptive concepts, which can be transformed into an ideal type.

For this he constructed Ideal types that are to understand how events had actually taken place and to show that if some antecedents or other events had not occurred or had occurred differently, the event we are trying to explain would have been different as well. For example, because of the implementation of the land reform laws and penetration of other modernizing forces like education, modern occupation etc. the joint family system has broken down in rural India. This means that there is a causal relation between the event (Land reform, education etc.) and the situation (Joint family). In this way Ideal type concept also helps in the causal explanation of a phenomenon.

Weber does not believe that one element of society is determined by another. He conceives the causal relations both in history and sociology as partial and probable relations. It means that a given fragment of reality makes probable or improbable, favourable or un-favourable to another fragment of reality.

1) What is value free sociology?

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2) What is the significance of ideal type?

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3.4 POPPER ON OBJECTIVITY

Popper understood the social and human sciences to be inter-changeable. In Popper's logic, three dominant concepts characterize the social sciences (a) scientific, (b) objective, and (c) empirical. First, Popper understood the social sciences as sciences, a position that attempts to refute the widespread idea that the social sciences represent a weak form of science. Popper (1991) elaborated, although historicism admits that there are plenty of typical social conditions whose regular recurrence can be observed, it denies that the regularities detectable in social life have the character of the permanent regularities of the physical world.

Popper considered the social sciences to be objective. Popper placed the social sciences in social world, which contains definite physical forces. These physical forces, give an objective character to the social sciences. For this reason, the social sciences provide us with an objective understanding of the social world.

Popper situated objectivity in a much more communal and inter-subjective sense than is usually perceived within the natural sciences, wherein the researcher is often seen as the sole center of science. Locating objectivity in an inter-subjective way he highlights the social world of science as necessary to ensure objectivity itself, since the exchanges that happen in such inter-subjective engagements as peer review and criticism, can filter out biases. Objectivity, then, is not a goal in and by itself, nor the achievement of an individual scientist, but a nest of autonomous, objective, and physical entities of the social world, namely: communities, groups, institutions, and venues that criticize the researcher's proposed theories. Objectivity derives from the combination of these social and physical forces. In other words, objectivity is the by product of critical inter-subjectivity such that the subject does not command on his/her own.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have tried to show how objectivity in sociology has been understood by Durkheim, Weber and Popper. Durkheim tried to show us how objectivity can be maintained in sociology through the use of social facts and treating it as things. On the other hand Weber tried to show us that objectivity is not absolute in sociology as culture is value oriented and selecting the topic of research itself is based on these values. However, objectivity can be maintained by following the procedures of research in an objective manner and thereby making inferences in a logical behaviour. Popper unlike the two founding fathers of sociology maintains that objectivity in social sciences can be achieved through inter-subjective criticism.

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GLOSSARY

Objectivity: in a layman language it can be understood as the direction given to the researcher to be unbiased and open to criticism. It means that evidences and facts needs to be verified dispassionately and conclusions need to be drawn on the basis of facts without any value judgement or preconceived notions, free of the individual's personal beliefs.

Social Facts: is every way of acting, fixed or not , capable of exercising on the individual an external constrained; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestation.

Value Free Sociology: Weber meant that in sociology researchers' personal values and economic interests should not affect the process of social analysis.

FURTHER READINGS

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