

Can Sociology be value free?

There is no objective measuring stick that can tell you what the most important thing to research is

Gomm/ Gouldner say Sociologists claiming to be objective by using quantitative methods are kidding themselves

What does this even mean?

Can sociologists keep their values - i.e their personal and political beliefs out of the research process?

Deciding what methods to use appears to be value laden

Interpretivists would criticise this kind of question for ignoring intersubjective processes such as labelling and the thoughts and feelings of students

E.G. 'What are the most important home based factors which explain why poor kids underachieve at school'

This involves a value judgement - that it's worth investing time and money to focus on this issue

This excludes focussing on issues of gender and ethnicity

If trying to find out about causes, this still requires narrowing the focus of research

This involves the imposition problem - the questions to be asked are determined by the researchers in advance

Also the data to be collected and analysed will be limited

Positivists argue quantitative methods are more objective

However

Fems/ ints say it's necessary to get involved with research subjects to get valid data

Interpretivists and Feminists avoid the imposition problem by doing open ended qualitative research

This allows the respondents to speak for themselves

The decision to do long winded in depth qualitative research is also value-laden - based on criticisms of 'scientific' methods

However

You still need to select and summarise elements of the data which may lead to selection bias

Qualitative methods allow for the researcher to influence the respondents more (lowers reliability)

Issues about who you're going to work for, and how you're going to fund your research

Research for charities may be biased to support their interests

Universities need to get funding

Working for government departments may limit what you can research or what you can publish

May avoid research which harms elites

Preference for statistical work due to large samples

Deciding what should be researched appears to be value-laden

Positivists claim you can keep your own values out by just analysing data which already exist

However data may already be distorted by other people's values

There is so much data that it's possible to interpret it in many different ways

So values still get in the way when you select which data to focus on!

Governments don't release data which may harm them

Stats are socially constructed and reflect the interests of the powerful

Suicide stats = Coroner's judgments

Eg Venkatesh

Eg Becker

Eg Tombs and Whyte

Argue we should generate new research to highlight issues of power and inequality

Marxists/ interactionists/ Feminists

If doing primary research Sociologists can research thousands of things - there is no agreement over what the most important thing to research actually is

Governments/ the new right

Postmodernists believe we should focus on new, transgressive identities and subcultures and people's stories

Immigration data

Education data

Think society is generally ok so might prefer to collect basic data to just regulate and control behaviour

Census

Development data

Crime data

So how can we make the research process value free?

It seems values will always influence what to research and to an extent the methods chosen

Objective research is only possible with quantitative methods

But values still creep in via the imposition problem

Interpretivists claim sharing thoughts and feelings (empathy) is crucial to validity

Thus we can't escape values

So the researcher needs to make their values very clear

But even with qualitative methods steps can be taken to make sure information gained is accurate