2.3E: Value Neutrality in Sociological Research

Value neutrality is the duty of sociologists to strive to be impartial and overcome their biases as they conduct their research.

Learning Objectives

• Reconstruct the tension surrounding the idea of value neutrality in sociological research

Key Points

• Assigning moral values to social phenomena is an inescapable result of being part of society, rendering truly value-free research inconceivable. Despite this fact, sociologists should still strive for value neutrality.

• Value neutrality, as described by Max Weber, is the duty of sociologists to identify and acknowledge their own values and overcome their personal biases when conducting sociological research.

• In order to be value-neutral, sociologists must be aware of their own moral judgments and values, and avoid incorporating them into their research, their conclusions, and their teaching.

• Many sociologists believe it is impossible to set aside personal values and retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias.

Key Terms

• Max Weber: (1864–1920) A German sociologist, philosopher, and political economist who profoundly influenced social theory, social research, and the discipline of sociology itself.
Assigning moral values to social phenomena is an inescapable result of being part of society. This inevitably renders truly value-free research inconceivable; however despite this, sociologists should strive for value neutrality. According to Max Weber, a German sociologist and philosopher who profoundly influenced social theory, value neutrality is the duty of sociologists to strive to be impartial and overcome their biases as they conduct their research, analyze their data, and publish their findings. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study results. While he accepted that some aspects of research design might be influenced by personal values, he declared that it was entirely inappropriate to allow them to shape the interpretation of the responses.

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Sociologists, Weber stated, must establish value neutrality, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results. To do this, they must be conscious of their own personal values. Sociologists are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data, even if results contradict personal views, predicted outcomes, or widely accepted beliefs. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is the duty of sociologists to avoid bringing their ideology into their roles as instructors.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it is impossible to set aside personal values and retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may, by necessity, contain a certain amount of value bias. It does not discredit the results but allows readers to view them as one form of truth rather than as a singular fact. Some sociologists attempt to remain uncritical and as objective as possible when studying cultural institutions. However, this is difficult to obtain. Being a human and studying human subjects results in some degree of subjectivity, due to cultural influences. This is not necessarily negative, but it should be reported in any study being done so people can interpret the results as clearly as possible.

Value neutrality does not mean having no opinions, however. It just means that sociologists must strive to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when analyzing data. It also means that sociologists must avoid
skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Although subjectivity is likely in almost any sociological study, with careful consideration, a good sociologist can limit its effect on any particular study.

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