

Can and “should” Qualitative Research Be Value-Free? Understanding the Epistemological Tussle between Positivists and Interpretivists¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to address the question of value-free research in qualitative methods. The primary argument of the paper is that qualitative research is not value-free because it is not intended to be as such. It analyzes this question by tracing the roots of qualitative research at the ontological and epistemological level. It argues that qualitative research tradition has evolved out of constructivism and interpretivism both of which prioritize people’s interpretation and discount objectivity in social science research. Furthermore, the paper argues that social science research cannot be value-free because of strong ethical considerations. All the cases presented in the paper will fundamentally try to show that all qualitative research is essentially subjective not just because of the impediments but because it is not designed to be value-free.

Keywords: *Value-free, qualitative research, objectivity, social sciences, ontology, epistemology, constructivism, interpretivism, ethical considerations, subjectivity.*

Introduction

The question of ‘values’ has been around ever since social science research formally started. As Becker (1967) says, “To have values or not to have values: the question is always with us” (p. 239). It has been an ensuing battle raging on for centuries. Inducing objectivity in social sciences primarily owes to its success in the natural sciences. For over two centuries, the natural scientists have been using empirical methods, guided by objectivity and have arguably achieved substantial success. Owing to this success, many believe that if the practices of natural scientists are replicated in the social world then the researchers might be able to generate real knowledge. As a result of this, qualitative research has long been undermined and the quantitative approach has been presented as a preferred alternative.

¹ This article has been adopted from a research paper that was written when I was doing my Masters in Politics at the University of Warwick. It has, however, not been published before.

To seek objectivity in the social world is like searching for a goose that lays gold eggs. It is an everlasting quest with no end in sight. This obsession with objectivity has done more damage than good to the overall research in the social world. The researchers are so much obsessed with making their findings objective that they often lose sight of their true objective for conducting research. It is hardly ever realized that qualitative research is not supposed to be objective and value-free, rather it is these very values and subjectivities that define and distinguish the qualitative research methods.

The following paper attempts to highlight various intricacies involving values in qualitative research. It is an attempt to not just show how qualitative research is fundamentally subjective but also that it is purposefully intended to be as such. From interviews to discourse analysis, participant observation to focus groups, methodology to data analysis, qualitative research is laden with dogmas of values. In other words, all aspects of qualitative research, in one way or another, are criticized for being subjective and biased. It will however be argued that values and objectivity can be understood and identified properly if they are traced down to their roots in the ontological philosophy. A formal distinction between positivism and interpretivism is essential to understand value-free research in social sciences. It is for these reasons that I intend to start off with a theoretical and philosophical discussion, by highlighting the underlying ontological and epistemological debate. In order to support my main argument, I will be taking more of a post-modernist and relativist position (though I will distance myself from absolute relativism).

My second main argument involves the ‘ethical dilemmas’ in social sciences. I intend to propose that the ethical issues pose a fundamental challenge to ‘value-free’ and ‘objective’ research in social sciences. Qualitative research in particular is bound by ethical considerations, which are an integral part of the entire research process. However, since my main argument proposes that it is good to have values in social science research, therefore the ethical issues should not be considered a hurdle. Instead, I propose that these ethical values add more meaning (irrespective of how less objective they make the research) and should be treated as part and parcel of the entire research process. Finally, I will briefly discuss Becker’s famous article, *Whose side are we on* since it is a landmark in value-free research discourse. I link Becker’s article to ‘reflexivity’ and discuss both their relevance in social science research.

On the whole, this paper discusses the importance of value-free research in social sciences and how the two are related. I will now start off with the philosophical discussion to build my case that qualitative research is not supposed to be value-free.

The Ontological and Epistemological Contest

‘Objectivity’ and ‘value-free research’ in qualitative research has its roots in the ontological and epistemological discourse. In the study of social sciences, ontology refers to the way the social world is seen and the nature and reality of the social phenomenon, epistemology, simply put, is the theory of knowledge (Matthews & Liz, 2010). Social science research has been open to both ontological and epistemological debates. At the ontological level, scholars tend to disagree as to what really constitutes reality in a social world and as to whether such a reality is oblivious of human behavior and interaction. The ontological and epistemological

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contest (which has been going on for decades in social science research) will be analyzed in detail below.

Objective Positivism Vs Constructive Interpretivism²

Objectivism, an ontological position, simply entails that social phenomena should be treated as external facts that are beyond the reach of influence and interference. Positivism is an epistemological position that advocates the application of natural science methods in the study of social realities (insofar as social sciences are concerned). It further emphasizes that the social reality is independent of the researcher and the research subjects (Bryman, 2008).

Objectivity has long been associated with Positivism. Descartes, followed by David Hume were among the earliest scholars to emphasize objectivity in social sciences. The contribution of Augustus Comte is particularly notable in this context as he formally proposed that the social world could be studied in the same way as natural sciences. He talked about certain discernible ‘general laws’ in the social world that do not vary and are most important in understanding the social world (Matthews & Liz, 2010). The positivists, therefore, discount the role of qualitative research (since a qualitative approach accommodates subjectivity) and instead propose a quantitative and a scientific approach to study the social world. In the words of Rubin (2005), “The language of positivism is a numeric one; the goal is a series of statistical equations that explain and predict human behavior” (p. 19).

Thus, in Positivism, the human behavior and the social world are seen more as variables, observing certain general laws in a system that is stable and resistant to change. This enables the researcher to treat the social world, events and human beings as objects and study them independently and empirically.

Constructionism (or Constructivism) on the other hand, presents an alternate ontological position. It suggests that the social phenomenon (making up the social world) is only real in the sense that it is a constructed idea, which is continually being reviewed and reworked by the social actors (Human Beings) (Matthews & Liz, 2010). All knowledge therefore is ‘contingent upon human practices’ and is primarily constructed out of interaction between human beings and their world (Crotty, 1998).

Interpretivism can be seen as an epistemological extension of Constructivism. This epistemological position emphasizes that since the social phenomenon and world are social constructions, therefore, the subject matters of the social sciences are fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences. It further emphasizes on prioritizing people’s subjective interpretations since the social world and reality are dependent on the social actors. According to Crotty (1998), “According to constructivism, we do not create meaning, we construct meaning” (p. 11).

Immanuel Kant, Max Weber and Alfred Schütz are among the pioneers of Interpretivist thinking. Kant particularly argued that ‘the social world can be known through thinking about and interpreting what is observed and experienced’ (Kant as

² The terms are used separately, but for the convenience of my argument I have decided to treat them as such.

cited in Matthews & Liz, 2010). Weber's '*verstehen*' (understanding the meaning of actions and interactions from the members own point of view) (Weber as cited in King, 1994) and Schütz's '*phenomenology*' (how individuals make sense of the world around them) (Schutz as cited in Matthews & Liz, 2010) played a critical role in developing the modern interpretivist approach.

The Interpretivists, hence, emphasize people's subjective interpretations of themselves and the world around them. Unlike the Positivists, the Interpretivists argue that there is no single truth or reality in the social world; instead they hold that similar events can have different and conflicting meanings. In other words, there are 'multiple realities' in the social world and the best way to understand them is through the qualitative approach. Thus, a researcher in a social world cannot use experiments to study human behavior and interaction, as they are not seen as objects observing certain general laws (as is the case in objective positivism).

Why is Qualitative Approach not supposed to be Value-Free?

The purpose of the debate above was to establish a distinction between positivism and interpretivism. It can now safely be said that positivism is associated with objectivity and therefore encourages a quantitative approach to understand and study the social world. On the other hand, interpretivism draws heavily from constructivism and supports a qualitative approach to study the human behavior and interaction that shape up the social world. Based on this deductive approach, qualitative methods can be seen as an extract of constructive Interpretivism.

Now constructive interpretivism undermines experimentation as it insists that the actors of the social world should not be treated as objects. It further emphasizes that there are multiple realities in the social world. The qualitative approach is designed in such a way so as to accommodate this verity. A qualitative approach emphasizes subjective meanings, personal experiences and individual contexts, each of which tend to reveal a different, yet equally important reality. The qualitative researchers "see this world in action and embed their findings in it" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 5).

It can therefore be established that qualitative researchers seek out subjective realities in a social world characterized by thinking individuals not bound by any general laws. Hence, in a qualitative approach it is implicated that objectivity is not a feature of the social world and its intricacies cannot be sought out through all such approaches that treat individuals and their world as objects.

Having established the fact that qualitative researchers tend to assume multiple realities and treat their respective subjects subjectively, we can now move to the next argument: can the researcher be objective while conducting qualitative research? And more importantly, can and should his research findings be value-free?

The answers to these questions can be sought in the afore-mentioned philosophical debate. By now we have established that the constructive interpretivist approach dominates and guides a qualitative research. It has also been established that individuals and their social world have their own unique identities that cannot be gauged or measured with the laws of natural sciences. Each social problem is unique in its own way and can have numerous different interpretations. The role of the qualitative researcher is to identify these different variations and study them in their own right (giving due wattage to every subjective view).

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Now if the interpretivist approach acknowledges human beings as rational social actors then why should the researchers be any different? The researchers are as much part of the social world as the subjects they study. So basing my argument in the constructive interpretivist approach, it is simply not possible for qualitative researchers to act objectively when their own respective natures are part of the subjective social world they intend to study. As Bryman (2008) says, “...it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in check... values can materialize at any point during the course of research.” (p. 34-35). Secondly, if the interpretivist approach acknowledges the importance and significance of the subjective realities of the social world, then why should it discount the subjective values of researchers that study them? Why should a researcher’s subjective view be any less important than the subjective meaning she is seeking in a particular research problem? I will try to answer these questions in the following discussion.

The Relative Truth and ‘Sensitivity’

The purpose here is not to delve in a philosophical or metaphysical debate but rather to show how “truth” is respectively perceived by constructivists and interpretivists and what it subsequently entails for qualitative researchers. For the interpretivists, there is no absolute truth in the social world. It views truth as subjective to respective individuals, with each variation having its own unique importance. The qualitative approach is the methodology applied to seek out and identify these multiple truths. The subjectivity and subtleties of the social world are studied and researched by those who are part of it and hence it is not possible to be objective.

The qualitative researchers bring their own respective paradigms, including training, knowledge and biases; these perspectives then become woven into all aspects of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The important question to ask is whether this has any negative or regressive implications for research generally.

Sensitivity is often viewed as standing in contrast to objectivity. It expects the researcher to immerse him/herself completely into the research process. Sensitivity primarily means to “present the view of participants and taking the role of the other through immersion in data” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 140). Corbin and Strauss argue that this role as the ‘other’ improves as the researcher gets more experience (Ibid).

There are, however, certain aspects of sensitivity that tend to imply ‘objectivity’ on the part of the researcher. It is true that the purpose of any research is to present the views of the subjects. However, it should not be denounced that the researcher has no or very little role in the research findings because it goes contrary to the epistemological basis of qualitative research. Even though sensitivity is important in its respect and the views of the subjects are of primary importance. However, assuming that there are multiple realities in the social world and each reality has its own significance, therefore, the reality of researcher (who seeks them) should not be undermined or ignored. It is after all, the researcher who brings meaning to the social world. We can best understand her research by understanding her values and accepting her subjectivity.

Unfortunately, most of the literature on qualitative research tries to find/suggest ways in which a social researcher can be as objective and value free as possible,

without realizing the epistemological roots of qualitative research, which accommodates and acknowledges the researcher's values as part of the whole research process.

I will further back my argument by taking up the feminist approach in qualitative research and by showing how the researcher's subjectivity is important and imperative for the overall research process.

The Feminist Subjectivity

Like all other non-scientific approaches, the feminist approach (primarily concerned with empowering women and gender studies) has also been criticized for not being scientific and objective. They have come under increasing pressure to justify their findings and knowledge in terms of validity, rationality and rules of method. To be objective, it is argued that a 'researcher's findings must be impartial, general and free from personal and political biases' (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 48). Now, since a feminist approach is primarily concerned with political and gender biases prevalent in the society, it is often discredited and undermined by different scientific and other academic circles for its underlying subjectivity.

Such claims of objectivity and unbiased knowledge of the social world are always expressed in cultural, emotional and politically loaded terms. Notions such as rights, tradition, family, gender and religion carry perceptions that defy neutrality (Ramazanoglu, 2002). Now, these very notions are at the heart of social problems that the feminist researchers seek to address and research. To induce objectivity in feminism may entail separation from the very problems it seeks to address.

A feminist approach is primarily concerned with the relationship between the researcher and the researched. It particularly addresses various gender issues prevailing in the society. It is not possible to isolate the researcher from the subject because one of the fundamentals of feminism is to understand and interpret different social meanings, which can never be gauged objectively. As Bryman (2008) says, "Particularly among feminist researchers, to do research on women in an objective, value-neutral way would be undesirable because it would be incompatible with the values of feminism" (p. 141). One may therefore argue that a feminist approach is purposefully designed to be subjective so as to allow the researcher to get an insight into the different realities of the social world.

The feminist researchers have thus, undermined the positivist approach of natural sciences, which claims that "reality is directly accessible given the correct methods" (Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 173). The feminist researchers are not only researchers who want to solve a particular research problem, but they are also rational individuals who work sincerely for the emancipation of the suppressed and underprivileged social classes. It is therefore important to not just accommodate but also respect their subjective views, which helps us understand the overall research more effectively.

While it is true that feminist research is often criticized for lacking validity and reliability because it is not objective, but the fact of the matter is (deducing from the aforementioned ontological discussion) that it is not supposed to be objective. As Ackerly, Stern and True (2006) point out in *feminist methodologies for international relations* that

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Unlike those empirical methods that are designed to generate results that can be replicated... feminist methodologies likely yield different results... Yet, this non-reliability need not be viewed as a weakness of feminist scholarship. Rather, it is an important implication that is explicitly recognized and directly addressed by the collective, self-reflective and deliberate nature of feminist methodologies (p. 7).

The Ethical Dilemma

Natural scientist’s strong advocacy of objectivity and positivism can be understood by drawing attention to their research subjects. They are primarily concerned with natural (non-human) subjects. Their subjects have no feelings (such as in Physics, Mathematics etc.) and always tend to respond in the same way. This gives them plenty of room and space to test and experiment objectively without anyone judging or interfering with their mode of research. They can put their subjects to all sorts of tests without any underlying ethical or moral dilemmas. And since their subjects almost always tend to respond in the same way, it is possible to establish general laws about them. Though it can be argued that in natural sciences there are some ethical and moral boundaries (particularly in Biological sciences where the subjects are often animals) yet all such boundaries are minimal or insignificant in comparison to social science research.

On the other hand, ethical issues in social studies are of paramount importance. In comparison with quantitative researchers “The qualitative researchers are more likely to confront and come up with constraints of everyday social world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 12). Consequently, the ethical issues are given due importance in qualitative research methods. In almost all-available literature on qualitative methods, ethical considerations are given thorough consideration. From the notions of informed consent to acceptable levels of deception and from the levels of harm to the participants to invasion of privacy, qualitative research is enclosed with ethical dilemmas. Qualitative research requires the researcher to get close to the subjects, at the same time the researcher is continuously reminded of ethical issues as Welland and Pugsley (2002) point out, “The characteristic connectedness and degree of intimacy that form between the researcher and the researched in qualitative research can generate a range of ethical issues” (p. 2). Even though it is often argued that there are different stances on ethical issues in social research, such as “universalism and situational ethics” (Bryman, 2008, p. 123). The overall importance of ethics in social sciences cannot be undermined. Situational ethics (though it is often criticized) as opposed to universal ethics, tries to accommodate limited deception to facilitate research, covert research in particular. A covert research is usually carried out when there is no other choice and the research itself is for the greater good (for example to investigate the honesty of teachers in a school). However, even if a researcher takes up covert research, where there is no informed consent and often, clear invasion of privacy, there are still strong moral and ethical dilemmas. In fact the whole covert research is often termed as unethical. These ethical and moral dilemmas pose a hurdle for objectivity in social science research.

My intention here is not to make a case for unethical practices in qualitative research (which would arguably make it more objective) but to show the reality of social research. When a qualitative researcher sets out to do research in the social world,

she acknowledges that her subjects are living and conscious individuals (just like her) and she will have to abide by strict rules to observe and study them. Natural scientists often fail to realize this when they insist on stirring objectivity in the real world. They fail to realize that human beings are not variables that can be manipulated at discretion to observe desired patterns. Moreover, assuming that each individual is self-conscious and acts rationally, the results of social research always tends to vary. It is quite normal in social sciences that two very similar researches conducted on the same individual might reveal different variations.

Posed with ethical dilemmas of such proportions, there are clear limitations on qualitative researchers. They might at times be required to let go of their most preferred mode of research (that promises to achieve best results) in favor of an inferior alternative because of ethical constraints. This consequently poses a challenge for objectivity in social sciences, as human beings simply cannot be treated as objects that could be manipulated and exposed to all sorts of tests. Since ethical issues are extremely important for any kind of social science research, therefore we can discount the pursuit of objectivity in the social world.

This should not be taken as a demerit of social sciences as natural and social sciences have different realities and if objectivity best explains the natural world then subjectivity best explains the social world.

Becker's 'Sides' and 'Reflexivity'

Howard Becker's famous 1967 article *whose side are we on?* is highly relevant in any discussion on value-free research. I therefore find it imperative to discuss this article briefly and link it on to my central argument. Becker's central argument is that social science research can never be value free and a researcher always ends up taking some side while conducting research (Becker, 1967). According to him there is no objective viewpoint, and that 'people in different social locations necessarily have different perspectives, and the researcher must simply adopt one or other of these' (Hammersley, 2001, p. 91).

Becker employs four different senses of 'bias' in terms of which researchers cannot avoid being biased. First of all, researchers are in danger of being biased, because of the nature of the situations in which they work. Secondly, researchers are themselves human beings and belong to the society at large; therefore, they often tend to develop sympathy for the people they study. A third sense in which sociologists cannot avoid being biased is that they simply cannot take account of every possible point of view because there are so many social realities. Becker's fourth sense of 'bias' applies to disciplinary theories and methods researchers use such as the Marxist or the feminist theory (Hammersley, 2001). Becker's 'four biases' tend to compliment my central argument in the following ways.

Firstly, I have emphasized the nature of social sciences and how it differs from natural sciences. The subjective nature of the social world compels the researcher to be biased. Secondly, the researchers cannot be isolated from the society they attempt to study, regardless of their research motives. Researchers are after all humans and like all humans they share the common characteristics of empathy and sympathy. Thirdly, the interpretivist and relativist argument that there are many social realities and it is simply not possible for the researcher to study all of them. This however does not undermine the importance and significance of the aspect of social science

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being studied by the researcher. Becker’s last ‘bias’ accounts for the subjectivity of the researcher. The disciplinary theories and research methods cannot be separated from the researcher and are therefore explicit in all social research findings.

Becker’s position on subjectivity in social science research can also be associated with ‘reflexivity’. The term reflexivity entails that ‘social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 712). The culture of reflexivity in social science research owes much to the postmodernist approach. The postmodernists tend to assume more of a relativist approach, as they are fairly skeptical of objectivity and particularly its implications for the study of the social world.

Postmodernists tend to be deeply suspicious of notions which imply that it is ‘possible to arrive at a definitive version of any reality’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 415). It is for these reasons that the postmodernists tend to emphasize the notion of reflexivity in social science research. Reflexivity acknowledges that research cannot be value free, however, to ensure that there is no untrammelled incursion of negative values in the research process it requires the researcher to be self-reflexive about the research process.

The process of reflexivity can be considered as affirmations and confessions on the part of the researcher, who lays out his research plan and strategies bare for his audience and readers. Michael Lynch (who is actually skeptical of the conventional notion of reflexivity) has identified different meanings of reflexivity, two of which are particularly prominent and relevant to the discussion at hand:

- 1) *Philosophical self-reflection*: It involves ‘confessional and self-critical examination of one’s own beliefs and assumption’ (Lynch, 2000, p. 29).
- 2) *Methodological self-consciousness*: It takes into consideration a researchers relationship with the research subjects (usually in cases of participant observation) (p. Ibid).

Although Lynch criticizes the conventional reflexive approach and instead proposes what he calls “ethno-methodological conception of reflexivity” (p. 26) (the intricacies of which are beyond the scope of this essay). Yet, his distinction is important and his classification of different kinds of reflexivity in, *Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged knowledge* is quite helpful in the study of reflexivity.

Now the question is, does reflexivity provide solutions to the problem of subjectivity in social science research? There are varying views regarding this debate in the academic circles with some arguing that it can and others opposing it. Reflexivity is important in the sense that it sees the role of the researcher as part and parcel of the knowledge she constructs. This includes an acknowledgement of the researcher’s views and choices as both an observer and writer (Bryman, 2008). Thus, reflexivity prepares the readers in advance of the choices and biases of the researcher.

It is true that one of the reasons why reflexivity is viewed with suspicion is because it carries the notion of subjectivity. Reflexivity, however, is consistent with my argument (that social science research is supposed to be subjective) in the sense that

it acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and treats the researcher and the knowledge she creates as one. However, it still blatantly tries to induce objectivity in social research by insisting how social science research can be more close to objectivity through a researcher's self-reflection and consciousness. This is where I disagree. Reflexivity tends to see the subjectivity of a researcher as her weakness (and therefore requires the researcher to make it explicit), I on the other hand, see it as her strength. This strength is drawn from the ontological and epistemological roots discussed earlier in the paper.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to quash, hopefully once and for all, the academic obsession of inducing value-neutrality in qualitative methods. By means of a theoretical discussion, it has attempted to understand the nature of qualitative research methods in social sciences, which for all intents and purposes, were found to be inherently subjective. It concludes (perhaps a touch controversially) that qualitative research is not just subjective but that it is purposefully intended to be as such. The main arguments of the paper can be summarized as follow:

- Constructivism and interpretivism, ontological and epistemological positions respectively, lay the foundation of qualitative research.
- A 'Constructive Interpretivist' approach undermines the existence of objectivity in the social world.
- A qualitative approach (drawing from the constructive interpretivist position) is designed to seek out subjective realities in the social world.
- A researcher, is also a part of the subjective social world, therefore, the subjective realities of the researcher should be accepted just as we accept the social realities of the world.
- We accept the social realities of the researcher not because we have no other alternate but because this is accommodated by ontological (constructivism) and epistemological (interpretivism) positions. Moreover, a researcher's subjectivity adds more meaning to social science research.
- An analysis of the feminist approach brings out the importance of a researcher's subjectivity. It goes on to show that a feminist approach is not possible without researcher's values.
- The 'ethical dilemmas' in social science research is one of the primary reasons why qualitative research cannot be value-free.

My last discussion revolved around 'reflexivity' and how it is propagated by many academics. Despite several advantages, I see reflexivity as an effort to stimulate objectivity in the social research. Unfortunately, the obsession with inducing objectivity in the social world has been dominant for over two centuries and is explicit in most of the academic literature on qualitative research.

I instead propose that if we can acknowledge and accept the subjectivity of the social world then we should also accept the subjectivity of the researcher and see the research more as a part of the social process. Moreover, if we accept that humans cannot be treated as objects and are instead rational thinking individuals, then we also need to understand the physical and ethical limitations in social science

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research. The natural scientists may not have to worry about the reaction of their subjects but the social scientists can never ignore this reality, irrespective of how much promising a certain experiment can otherwise be. Thus, it can be concluded that social science research can never be value free because it's these very values that define it.

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