Debates regarding the impossibility of being value free in social sciences

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss about the impossibility of being value-free in social sciences that have developed theoretically and methodologically since the 19th century. Social sciences emerged in the Enlightenment period that has led to many social changes and transformations in western societies. Social sciences which are younger than natural sciences relatively have been influenced by natural sciences crucially in terms of methodology. More-over, it could be seen that social sciences still have intensive debates regarding theory and methodology because of being new sciences. They developed under the influence of positivist philosophy which accepted the knowledge and methodology of natural sciences in the 19th century. Therefore, social sciences have been affected by the ap-proaches of being value-free. In the 20th century, when it is looked at the social sciences' theories that were affected by the interpretive approach, which was supported by M. Weber, asserted that the researcher who studies a society is the object of the society at the same time, and therefore, the researcher cannot be value free while he/she studies on the society. Ernst Nagel (1979), Gresham Riley (1974), N. Robin Williams (1968) etc. social scientists carried out some studies regarding values judgments in social sciences. Classical and contemporary sociological theore-ticians have argued intensively regarding being value or value free of social sciences' methodology. Furthermore, this study is a critique of positivism in respect of its methodological approach that supports to be value-free in social researches. Thus, it is aimed to contribute new aspects to literature for understanding and producing solu-tions for the problems of societies.

Keywords: Social sciences, value, value-free, positivism, methodology

1. Introduction

Social sciences emerged in the 19th century after the intelligence had come into prominence in the Enlightenment period. The Enlightenment altered and passed a new paradigm in western societies. Therefore, many social changes and problems occurred in this period. The power and effect of church on societies started to be eliminated and intelligence was dominant about solving and understanding the demand of societies. Consequently, towards the 19th century, in western societies, enormous social, economic and political transformations appeared. Social sciences arose in the 19th century in order to understand and solve societies' social problems. However, because of being young sciences, social sciences have still dealt with some theoret-ical and methodological debates.

Social sciences have been in constant search of a process since emerging themselves. Par-ticularly, they have had an argument regarding social research method whether it should be "value free" or not. This issue has been discussed since the 19th century due to being of social sciences is quite a recent development. When social sciences started to respond to Western societies, at the first time, their research method was considered under the impact of natural

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sciences because of having close relationship with them. In the period of the 19th century, natural sciences had an intensive effect on the world. Therefore, Social sciences were affected by natural sciences during this era and the result of this impact, social scientists constituted their research ways by using similar methods to natural sciences. From the 19th century to the 20th century, this method was the most common research method for social sciences in order to understand social reality. However, since the beginning of the 20th century, positivist approach has been criticized intensively by new social research philosophies such as, interpretivist approaches and the thoughts of Weber e.g. Although Weber supported value-free in social sciences, his studies show that he supported values in social sciences too. This might be seen as a paradox. However, when it is looked at the 20th century's German social, academic and political conditions, it could be seen that political conditions were very effective on academics' studies and debates. For having students more and showing their support to the dominant political parties, academics used to manipulate their studies based on the order and wishes of the government in this term, and it did not let them put forward true social knowledge for the problems of society. Hence, Weber supported value-free in social sciences in this period (Gouldner, 1962).

On the other hand, Weber supported "verstehen" which is about "understand, perceive" the nature of a phenomenon in his social theory (Elwel, 1996). This also shows that it is quite difficult to be value free while searching a social phenomenon. As a consequence of this, some new approaches were manifested against positivist research method by social scientists so as to research social facts. Accordingly, there are various social theories in social sciences currently. Although there are many theories for this issue, it is quite difficult to examine all approaches in this essay. Consequently, it will be attempted to explain the main approaches and their methods in terms of values. For the reason of that, it will be dealt with the debates between positivism, and interpretivism theoretically, and then their debates will be held methodologically.

2. Debates regarding values in social sciences theoretically and methodologically

When a social scientist researches a social topic, the scientist may approach the subject through some aspects. Thus, the scientist may reduce or not use the other approaches for the research. However, this attitude is sometime inevitable because social reality is majorly complicated and derives from many different ways. Therefore, social scientists use dissimilar social methods in order to research a social issue (May, 1993). The first approach is positivism. Positivism is one of the most popular approach and epistemology in social sciences. It was built in the 19th century as a social research philosophy by A. Comte. He also thought of positivism around natural sciences (Livesey, 2006). In other words, the world consists of things which inspire each other. Hence, the existence of one specific phenomena is explained by identified another phenomenon as its cause, in addition to this, effect of that cause may well in turn case other phenomena to be as they are. Thus, it might be pointed out that every phenomena depends on each other by having a purpose and then, when a researcher observes phenomena, it should not include the values of the researcher during the observation (Jones, 1993).

Furthermore, Positivism is a philosophy which declares the purely "real knowledge is knowledge" that is depended on actual sense of experience in addition to holding a monopoly

of knowledge in science. In positivism, knowledge only comes from confirmation of theories by using the scientific method in which metaphysical speculation is avoided. More clearly, according to positivist theory, social sciences struggle to get predictive and explanatory knowledge of the social world as well as the researcher must establish theories consist of highly general statements, expressing the systematic relationships. Therefore, Social sciences that developed in the 19th century took study topics as their duty to organize societies rationally, perform social progress and try to reach the social laws which provide these (Kızılçelik, 2004, p. 31). Briefly, Giddens examines positivist philosophy under four headings; first, the thesis claims that reality consists fundamentally in what is available to the senses. Second, philosophy whilst a separable discipline is parasitic upon the findings of science. Third, the natural and social sciences share common logical and methodological principles. Fourth, there is a fundamental distinction between fact and value (Hughes, 1987).

Nevertheless, in the early 20th century, even though positivism was seen as the main epistemology in social sciences' understanding and researches, Verstehen, which is supported by Dilthey, and manifested the differences between natural sciences and human sciences, brought new debates theoretically and methodologically. Hence, Weber, who was influenced by Dilthey, highlighted the task of social sciences so;

> "Social sciences should research about understanding social action which emerges as a result of definite awareness and has specific aims, and therefore, they should use specific methods for there. Moreover, he was objected to positivist social science understanding that agreed with the idea of admitting to use natural sciences' methods for social researches. Therefore, he contributed a new debates and aspects to social sciences methodology. As a result of Weber' endeavors, interpretive approaches emerged and they led to new social theories such as, symbolic Intractionism, feminism, postmodern research, hermeneutics, etnometodology and constructivism etc. that brought intensive critics to positivism" (Neuman, 2013, p. 103-105).

When it is looked at interpretive approaches at first glance, briefly, it could be seen that they emerged against positivism as an epistemology. The theorists, who supported this, basically claimed that the topics of social sciences are humanity and social institutions that emerged as a result of humanity relations and their topics are constitutively different from natural sciences. Thus, they asserted that social sciences need to have a different research method for the study of social world (Bryman, 2004). When Weber introduced interpretive approach, he mainly aimed to state put forward the difference of natural and human actions. According to him; "We shall speak of "social action" wherever human action is subjectively related in meaning to the behavior of others. An unintended collision of two cyclists, for example, shall not be called social action. But we will define as such their possible prior attempts to dodge one another. . . . Social action is not the only kind of action significant for sociological causal explanation, but it is the primary object of an "interpretive sociology" (as cited from Neuman, 2014, p. 103).

The argument between Positivism and Interpretivism has continued since the 20th century. But interpretivists have found their expressions through Weber's verstehen concept (Filmer, Jenks, Seale & Walsh, 1998). Moreover, when Weber stated interpretive approach, he did not radically aim to refuse the ideas and methods that positivism supported. Basically, he attempted to complete the inadequacies of positivism in terms of having or creating social knowledge and when a society is searched, using specific method. Interpretive approach deals

with understanding and explanation. Contrary of positivists, it does not approaches social action with meaningless powers. Schutz (1962) highlights the difference between natural and social sciences that "the world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not mean anything to molecules, atom and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist, social reality has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the being living, acting, and thinking within it. By a series of common sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behavior by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be found upon the thought objects constructed by the common sense thinking of men/women, living their daily life within social world". In other words, Livesey (2006) asserts that social action is based around three principles. First is consciousness, people always having a relationship to others unique or individuals, and they are aware of these relations. Second is action, because people deliberately make decisions about how to behave in different occasions or situations. Third is unpredictability, people, as it has pointed out, make different choices in different events, therefore, the behavior of people cannot be predicted directly. As it has mentioned above the differences between natural and social sciences, topics, issues and approaching to them are different, and therefore, according to interpretive approaches, social action has meaning. Social researcher's approach to a social issue may influence it and be influenced by it. Hence, it could be asserted that in case of this, a social researcher cannot be value free easily during his/her study because the object that he/she researches creates meanings and values in their daily lives.

Methodologically, positivism is principally based on "hypothetico-deductive" method. Accordingly, it is supported to be used quantitative research method for collecting data, because it is believed as Jones (1993), asserts in positivist philosophy that the levels in the methodology are from existing knowledge "what is" the scientific speculates regarding what might also be, and Jones calls this the deduction of a hypothesis. For the purpose of presenting this, Jones (1993) gives an example that it is supposed, "On average men catch lung cancer more than women, and bear it is also known that, on average, it is smoked cigarettes by men than women" (p. 125). Therefore, knowing these facts, it might well be speculated "hypothesis" that smoking is a one cause of lung cancer. Nevertheless, it does not mean there are no other possible explanations. For instance, it could be another possibility that men tend to work at jobs which cause lung cancer more expected. Thus, there are always many alternative explanations for social sciences, and they have to choose the explanation considered most probably.

Turning to alternative research philosophy is called interpretivist theories or qualitative research. They have been constituted since the 20th century due to the intense criticism of positivism. It is argued by positivists that nature and society have similarities; thus, science must explain and understand social life by using natural sciences methods. On the contrary of positivists, action interpretivists believe that social life has a significant difference from natural life. Therefore, they discuss the methods of social sciences should abandon the methods of natural science (Jones, 1993). In other words, interpretivists mainly think that the social world is substantially dissimilar to the natural world because the social world is meaningful in a way in spite of not having of the natural world anything so. This difference comes from thinking of the difference between human action and the behavior of entities or systems found in the

natural world because human action always has some meanings (William, 2010). As a consequence of these, Interpretivist approaches are interested in understanding the meanings in social life. According to them, knowledge is not independent in contrast to the claims of positivists. Consequently, it is asserted that not only does social world consists of meanings, but it is also constructed through meanings. In order to proof this claim, Livesey (2006) gives an example; "every time you go to school" there may be many answers, the researcher would encounter because responding for this inquiry might be changed by depending on the person's answers. Consequently, it is believed that social action is always available to interpretation, unlike natural action (p. 6).

Interpretivist approaches support to use qualitative research in order to obtain social knowledge. "Interpretivist methodology leans towards the collection of qualitative data and uses methods such as unstructured interviews and participant observation that provides data" (Livesey, 2006). Therefore, as methodological, interpretivist approaches support to have a particular research method for social sciences by being independent of natural sciences. For this, Jones (1993) highlights the advantage of being human that social scientists should consider themselves replacement of the actors they study, and attempting to solve how their theories. What is more, interpretivists maintain that the researcher should be far being objective, and should be subjective as possible as. For interpretivists or action theorists; a social scientist is a member of the subject matter he figures, because it should be sought to solve how to react to someone's action, and it should be understood. They call this "verstehen", which Weber proclaimed in order to understand social actions (Ritzer, 1996).

Social sciences have had a critical problem around research methods since they existed. In particular, this question has been examined if "social science should be value-free or not?" For the purpose of this, as it has been pointed out that positivism has considered this issue since the 19th century. Nevertheless, it is clear that social sciences are not exactly the same with natural sciences, because the matters of social sciences are utterly different, and social scientists are a part of the subjects they analyze. Therefore, it may be asked "how can a researcher be objective to the subject that he/she studies?" Thus, it is conducted that values are inevitable. For this, Becker asks "how do values play their part in human conducted?" (Becker, 1950, p. 6), and after that, he claims man is an animal that has values. Therefore, He compares human with animals in order to present his thesis, and he states that all animals have instincts, and they thus act without thinking of the results of their actions. Nonetheless, man does everything by learning and taking responsibilities of the actions. Hence, it might be asserted as an only talker, mankind uses the words, establishes networks, such as, families, groups e.g. human also uses these networks effectively in transmitting socially defined values. Consequently, it is considered values are everywhere, and even if a social scientist attempts to be objective, it is inescapable because Becker marks that the researcher is surrounded by values in effect.

Although positivist philosophy plays highly significant roles in social research methods, it had some key problems. Positivism particularly has challenged many criticisms around objectivity. Hessler (1992) radically examines positivism, and he asserts that objectivity is just partly possible in a social research. As it will be seen below, he believes that social scientists cannot be value free. In order to proof this assertion, He says

   "At best, the researcher may be able to control the subjectivity aspects of thinking, but the researcher cannot get rid of the bias. Observation and even theory cannot be purely objective

or value neutral. Even if this were not the case, the researcher is still faced with the possibility that the relatively small number of observations made do not represent all the existing objects or even the undiscovered objects under study. Always lurking around the corner might be the observation that just does not fit" (p. 15).

Moreover, positivists insist that if researchers observed the same social topics, they might normally gain similar results. Nevertheless, the results of investigations have shown that it is impossible to achieve the same outcomes due to having values. For the purpose of demonstrating this idea, the example of Bailey may be appropriate. He compares the research of Malthus and Marx. According to him, when Malthus investigated population growth and its results, he presented that population grew highly, and it would lead to starvation, so as to solve this problem, he suggested controlling the growth of the population, and he was opposed to socialism and welfare programs. In contrast, Marx said that there was not any natural law of the population but everyone produced own law of population, and he blamed capitalism for the growth of overpopulation because according to Marx, overpopulation would disappear with a transition from capitalism to socialism. As it can be understood from the example, although two schools of thought, Malthusian and Marxist, researched the same phenomena, they had different conclusions. The reason of this clear that when they began their researches, they had values by being a part of the subject in spite of the fact that they might not be aware of all their own values because Malthus's values were a union of conservative Protestantism. On the other hand, Marx's values were against capitalism, and for him, capitalism was the evil (Bailey, 1994).

Furthermore, Weber's thoughts are valuable for social sciences and the 20th century's interpretivist approaches. Weber examined positivism due to its methodology and being value-free social sciences like natural sciences. He was interested in the question of casualty in order to understand social reality. He never used a simple one way for obtaining social knowledge. In contrary positivists, his thoughts on "verstehen" were derived from a field as known hermeneutics. Weber applied hermeneutics approach in order to understand and interpret published writings. Weber's aim was both understand the thoughts of the author and the basic structure of text, In other words, with this method, he sought to use hermeneutics so as to understand actors, interactions and totally all of human history. Thus, Weber believes that "Meaningfully" interpretable human conduct or action is identifiable by reference to "valuations" and meanings. Therefore, even if a social scientist has causal knowledge, it is different from natural scientist. As mentioned above, Weber's view regarding values might be seen ambiguous. He neither operated a simplistic way that values should be eliminated from social research. He considered a role for values in a specific way of social research process. According to him, firstly, when researcher begins his collection data, the researcher should be objective. However, when the researcher interprets the data, then values play a key role, because the social facts of all societies have different values (Ritzer, 1996).

3. Conclusion

Social sciences have tended to point out the best research method for achieving social reality for more than 200 years in order to perform social sciences as an independent science of natural sciences. Hence, they have sought to establish many theories and approaches for this.

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Among these approaches, positivism was a quite significant philosophy during the 19th century. However, in the 20th century, it has been criticized around being value-free. Therefore, new approaches emerged, in particular, interpretivist approaches to social sciences. Subsequent approaches were affected by Weber's thoughts, and they have established their research methods depending on the thoughts of Weber and examining of positivist philosophy. Particularly, from the 20th century to present, social sciences have started to discuss other researches method as alternatives to positivist research philosophy regarding values whether social sciences should be value-free or not. However, it is clear that social sciences are different from natural science in terms of values. Furthermore; a social scientist might not be objective because the researcher is a component of the society he searches. Therefore, it could be expected that the researcher may behave under the impacts of his values.

One of the main reasons why values have started to be important in social sciences debates is seen that during the social relations of actors who create society, they are involved in some activities, various interactions and create common meanings that organize their social relations. Therefore, social sciences' methods for the investigation of social relations cannot avoid values completely.

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