

## Values and Neutrality in the Humanities

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In an earlier edition of the *Pacific Curriculum Network* Hindson (1993) outlined an investigation into ni-Vanuatu teacher trainees' views of teaching values clarification in schools. The article looked quite precisely at a particular curriculum exercise carried out at the Vanuatu Teachers' College but did not intend to address the broader questions surrounding neutrality and values in humanities and social science teaching and research.

This article looks at some of the literature on values and objectivity in the social sciences. It considers whether imparting and investigating knowledge is merely informational or whether our aim in understanding knowledge is in order to change society. Is a value-free social science possible? If so, is it desirable? If a value-free social science is not possible, in what ways and at what points do values enter into social scientific research? Finally, if value-free social science is a myth, is objective social science also a myth?

The criticism surrounding such a discussion is whether the 'proper' goal of social science is social and political 'action' or part of the quest for a 'neutral' scientific understanding. Questions such as these have continued to involve social scientists in lively debate for many decades. Echoing out of the past is Marx's frequently quoted critique which can be applied to the role of values in the humanities: 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it' (Marx, 1964: 69).

### Neutrality in the social sciences

One position taken by those who would argue for 'neutrality' in the social sciences could be seen as implying that scientists have nothing to say about value judgments and practical policies in specific decisions. However, conflicts arise in such cases when there is a clash between 'moral' positions. The scientific

expert who stands aside from the clashes of policies and 'moralities' could be described as either irresponsible or taking that completely indifferent, negative position which, as Black (1971) states, results in scientists 'having no choice about taking sides on the agonising personal and social problems of our time'. However, if there can be no scientific choice, it logically follows that there can be no scientific neutrality either, in which case science has no direct bearing on anything except 'purely' scientific issues.

Bourke (1970) states that 'the process of education needs to embrace not only the things which can be proved by measurement, sampling and accurate observation' but also needs to be involved in the choice of situations, responses and preferred courses of action. Like Bourke, Black refutes arguments for neutrality, showing the logical gap which exists in cases where, because of a certain set of circumstances, certain conclusions i.e., *ought* or *ought not*, are proposed. Black thus questions whether we should conceive of science as exclusively concerned with approximating to knowledge or whether we should take some 'broader view'.

Furthermore, we could argue that values enter into the very selection of scientific questions and answers, and can and do contribute to the linking of cause and effect. Hesse (1980) also argues that facts are never theory-independent and that social sciences are based on explicit ideologies. Reinhartz (1985) advocates that since interest-free knowledge is logically impossible, researchers, writers, social scientists and others should feel free to substitute explicit interests for implicit ones.

From this it would be fair to claim that as the accumulation of knowledge involves selection of material and the elimination of all irrelevant facts, human choice cannot be divorced from the knowledge aspect of social science.

*Hence, a completely objective or neutral social science is non-existent because all human choice and decision-making involves value judgments i.e., choices of significance and relevance, choices of importance and fruitfulness and above all, choices involved with the ultimate worth of human beings.*

### **Determining values to be used in the humanities**

If, as the writers quoted above would indicate, impartiality in the humanities is unacceptable, the question remains: what set of values are to be used in the social sciences? Some would argue for a 'universal morality which transcends party squabbles'. In fact, most of the second-year teacher trainees in the Hindson (1993) study believed that teachers should present both sides of the issue and then let students decide. Some also thought (and some readers might agree) that we should aim for a situation where human beings can agree upon certain fundamental ethical principles. However, writers like Black would argue that if we see 'science' as something which human beings 'do' i.e., a system of human activities, we must also agree that every human action is, in principle, subject to practical and moral evaluation. If all action is directed towards ends which are 'right', then some evaluation makes sense including questions as to whether or not certain actions have been misguided or evil.

The classical ideal of the independent scholar who separates the 'pure' science from society then becomes unacceptable. In a society where research is harnessed into production, scientists must realise that their research and findings may transform both individual lives and, to some extent, the very shape of society. Again Black would argue that scientific neutrality is merely moral irresponsibility, a dead survivor of an earlier and safer era.

### **Values - to teach or not to teach, that is the question**

We could argue for improving valuation. Perhaps the moral vision of the artist and scientist is part of the greatness of their work. We could argue for teaching scientific measurement but at the same time teaching ways to value, judge and criticise so that at least we could rest on a sense of shared culture. This position of shared culture would suit social scientists who criticise as morally irresponsible, positions which hold it is not the business of the social scientist 'to be influenced by consideration of how his/her conclusion will coincide with existing notions or what will be the effect of the findings on the social order'.

In conclusion, this writer believes that the accumulation of knowledge demands selection and choice of material which therefore implicates value judgements. We would support the view that a value-free or neutral social science is not desirable as this destroys the nobler function of science i.e., of enlarging human understanding and relieving human misery and injustice.

Science and human action are bound closely together for, as Merleau-Ponty says, 'human behaviour is neither a science of blind reaction to external stimuli, nor the project of acts which are motivated by the pure ideas of disembodied, wordless minds. It is neither exclusively subjective nor exclusively objective but a dialectical interchange between man (woman) and the world which cannot be adequately expressed in traditional causal terms' (1963: xv).

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