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BIAS

Definition

Generally regarded as a negative feature of research, as something that can and should be avoided; occasionally the term is used in a neutral or even a positive sense, referring simply to the fact that the researcher has adopted a particular angle of vision.

Distinctive Features

Even in its negative sense, there are broader and narrower interpretations of the term. Sometimes it refers to any systematic deviation from the truth, or to some deformation of research practice that produces such deviation. Thus, quantitative researchers refer to 'measurement bias' and to 'sampling bias', by which they mean systematic failure in measurement or sampling procedures that produces erroneous results. The contrast here is with random (or haphazard) error. However, another influential usage of the term 'bias' refers to a particular source of systematic error: a tendency on the part of researchers to collect data, and/or to interpret and present these data in such a way as to favour false results that are in line with their presuppositions and/or their political and practical commitments. This may consist of a positive tendency towards a particular, but false, conclusion; or it may mean the exclusion from consideration of some set of possible conclusions that happens to include the truth.

Evaluation

'Bias' is part of a set of terms - 'validity' and 'objectivity' are others - that were once an

uncontested central component of social science methodology. In recent years, however, especially under the influence of constructionism and postmodernism, there has been growing debate, especially among qualitative researchers, about the meaning and usefulness of these terms (see, for example, Lather, 1986; Kvale, 1989; Harding, 1992; Altheide and Johnson, 1994). In part, this reflects the fact that they had previously often been interpreted in ways that depended on a form of positivism that is now largely discredited. The latter presented research, when properly executed, as producing conclusions whose validity follows automatically from the 'givenness' of the data on which they are based.

On this view, the course that inquiry should take is clearly defined and, as a result, deviation from it - whether caused by prior commitments or by some other source of error - is also straightforwardly identifiable. What is required to avoid bias is for researchers to be objective; in other words, they must pursue research in the way that 'anyone' would pursue it who was committed to discovering the truth, whatever their personal characteristics or social position, appealing only to data that are observable by 'anyone'.

The influence of positivism meant that a clear distinction was not always drawn between, on the one hand, a researcher having potentially biasing commitments, for example particular political views, and, on the other, these commitments impacting negatively on the research process. In other words, researchers were (and sometimes still are) described as biased simply because they have commitments pertaining to the topic on which research is being carried out. This follows from the false assumption that, in order

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to be objective, a researcher must strip away all his or her assumptions until the bedrock of empirical givens is reached, and then build up true knowledge from that foundation solely by logical means. Modern philosophy of science has rendered this view indefensible.

It is worth pointing out, however, that, in effect, some of the critics of the concepts of truth, objectivity and bias have taken over this idea. They rely on it in their denial that research can ever be unbiased (see, for example, Gitlin et al., 1989). If we adopt a more realistic conception of what objectivity and bias involve, this sceptical conclusion can be avoided. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that, once we abandon positivism, error becomes much more difficult to identify. Given that there is no bedrock of absolute givens, and no method that guarantees valid findings, what constitutes systematic deviation from the rational pursuit of inquiry (that is, bias) is not always clear. In the course of inquiry about any topic, we necessarily take other matters for granted; and in the absence of a foundation of absolute givens these can only be matters about which we believe our knowledge to be sound but less than absolutely certain. If we did not make such assumptions, we would have no ground at all on which to stand, and we would indeed lapse into a thoroughgoing scepticism. Judgements have to be made, then, about the validity of presuppositions; but in the absence of any prospect of absolute proof. Where, previously, procedural error was thought to be a matter of logic, it now becomes deviance from communal judgements about what is and is not reasonable behaviour in pursuit of knowledge in the relevant context, with these judgements being open to dispute and to subsequent revision.

So, while all research is not necessarily biased, there is always the potential for bias. Furthermore, some of this will be non-culpable, in the sense that the researcher could not have known that what was being relied on was erroneous or dysfunctional. At the same time, some systematic error *will* be culpable, in that researchers were in a position to recognize that an assumption on which they

were relying had an unacceptable chance of being wrong and might therefore lead them astray. In short, they did not take the proper methodological precautions to avoid error, for example by assessing the relative validity of alternative interpretations.

In conclusion, then, while the abandonment of positivism requires us to recognize that research will inevitably be affected by the personal and social characteristics of the researcher, and that this can be of positive value as well as a source of systematic error, it does not require us to give up the guiding principle of objectivity: in other words, the commitment to avoiding bias.

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Associated Concepts autoethnography, constructionism, error, measurement, positivism, postmodernism, qualitative research, quantitative research, validity

Key Readings

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