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BETWEEN VALUE NEUTRALITY AND CONTEXTUALITY: NAVIGATING THE TENSION

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Abstract

There has been a raging debate among scientists on which approach should be the best in a scientific investigation between value neutrality and contexuality. Both value neutrality and contextuality offer a significant contribution in scientific research. The aim of this paper is to argue that the perceived tension does not actually exist since the two methods or approaches can be accommodated in research. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how Value neutrality and contextuality can be accommodated in research with the aim of examining how different perspective shape research outcome. This paper also examines the limitations of each approach, in order to establish a research balance. This paper argues that an integration of value neutrality and contextuality will provide a solid ground for a scientist or researcher. This paper is a qualitative research. This work will adopt the methods of philosophical analysis, textual exposition, and evaluation.

Keywords: Contextuality, Social Norms, Culture, Objectivity, Value Neutrality.

Introduction

There is no doubt that in the realm of philosophy, social theory and scientific studies, there is a debate on the critical tension between value neutrality and contextuality with regards to the way they shape our understanding of knowledge, societal progress and scientific investigation. At the heart of this tension is whether human or scientific inquiry can be truly Value Neutral or whether it is inevitably shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts. Value neutrality suggests that research, especially in science should be conducted and evaluated without influence of personal bias, values, interest or societal pressure. In the contrast, contextuality argues that knowledge and value system are inherently tied to the particular context from which they emerge. This means that no inquiry can escape the influence of its environment. The perceived tension between these two perspectives raises some fundamental questions: Is it possible to separate knowledge from the subjective values and interest of those producing it? Or is all knowledge inherently shaped by the lived realities and cultural circumstance of the individuals or communities involved? In the paper we argue that there is indeed no tension between value neutrality and contextuality, because each has its unique nature that makes it such that they can be used in a research.

Value neutrality emerged as a significant concept in the early 20th century through the work of the sociologist Max Weber. He argued that researchers should strive to maintain objectivity and Value neutrality and avoid allowing personal interests and values to influence their

analysis. The implication of Weber's thought on value neutrality is that knowledge should be pursued dispassionately, free from moral and political consideration of the researcher.

Recently, the idea of contextual knowledge has gained prominence, recognizing that knowledge is not only produced within a specific context, but also that this context contributes to the richness and complexity of understanding. Contextuality has been embraced in various interdisciplinary fields such as anthropology, history, philosophy and so on. Contextuality projects the view that to understand the world, one must take into account the particular experience, histories and power relation that shape knowledge production.

Therefore, in this paper, we are primarily going to expose the two perspectives. This will help us to have a firm grasp of the two views. We will also interrogate the tension that exists between value neutrality and contextuality, and discover that it is not merely an academic one but carries real-world consequence. We are also going to evaluate the two views in order to identify their pros and cons. This paper argues that an integration of value neutrality and contextuality will provide a solid ground for a scientist or research.

Value Neutrality: Exploration of its concept and implication

Conventionally, it is believed that the reason why scientific research is considered 'pure' is because of value neutrality. It is said that the white coat of the scientist is a sign of the purity of knowledge for its own sake (Stevenson, 2008). This is because a scientist is tasked with searching for the truth irrespective of the person's interest. As a concept, value neutrality is often discussed within the context of social science, philosophy and ethics. It refers to the idea that the researcher or professional should approach their work and decisions without letting personal beliefs, values or biases influence their judgment. The aim of value neutrality is to maintain objectivity and impartiality, ensuring that the outcome of research or any professional practice are not skewed by subjective opinion or ethical inclination. Value neutrality, therefore, advocates for a neutral stance when engaging in any research or complex issue.

Value Neutrality as a concept refers to the duty and obligation of the researcher to overcome his/her biases in the process of conducting research. It is therefore a methodological principle that holds that researchers should not impose their personal judgment on their researcher topic. Thus, value neutrality seeks to dichotomize scientific facts from personal values and emotions in order not to interfere with research findings and result. Michael Root (1996) is of the opinion that even though researchers should be value neutral, in the discovery phase of research process, values cannot be overruled. He further stated that the kind of problem researcher decides to look into or investigate is selected on the bases of the interest or value. Ilamar Waldner (1974) understands value neutrality as an attitude of indifference. To show what attitude of indifference means, Waldner suggests that we do this by identifying a value neutral attitude towards A with indifference between A and not A. Since intuitively to be indifferent towards something is to not care whether it exists or not.

The idea of value neutrality has its origin in the works of Max Weber, a German sociologist who is often credited with introducing the concept into the field of sociology. According to Weber (1919), value neutrality is the duty of the sociologist to strive to be impartial and overcome their biases as they conduct their research, analyze their data and publish their

findings. Weber understands that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study result. While he accepted that some aspects of research might be influenced by personal values, he declared that it was entirely inappropriate to allow them to shape the interpretation of the response. Weber (1919) sees value neutrality as the practice of remaining impartial without bias or judgment. To achieve this then, one must be conscious of one's own personal values. He is of the opinion that researchers are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data, even if the result contradict personal views, predicted outcome or widely accepted beliefs. It is therefore, the duty of the researcher to avoid bringing ideology into their role as instructors. Value neutrality, according to Weber does not mean having no opinion, it just means that the researcher must strive to overcome personal bias, particularly subconscious biases when analyzing data.

It is to be noted that one of the reason Weber argues for value neutrality is because he wants social sciences to strive of objectivity just like in natural science. He acknowledges that social sciences which has its subject matter as human beings are inherently more complex and less objective than natural science. This complexity is as a result of the subjective nature of human experience, culture and societal norms. From this, we see that Weber recognizes the importance of value but wishes that social scientists should not allow their value dictate their research process or outcome. Thus Weber's (1919) understanding of the role of values can be understood when contrasted to other theorists, such as the positivist philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte. Comte (1893) argues that social sciences be entirely value neutral and any intrusion of personal values into research will undermine the scientific nature of the discipline. However, Weber considers Comte view overly simplistic. He is of the opinion that human actions are influenced by meaning, interpretations and subjective experiences that cannot be seen form objective observation. Therefore, Weber's view on value neutrality can be understood from an epistemological framework, when he distinguishes between facts and values. Facts are objective and observable elements of social world, whereas, values are subjective and based on the individual's worldview (Weber, 1904). Notwithstanding this distinction, Weber insists that personal values should not lead the researcher to make unwarranted or unsubstantiated claims about the social world. Weber's thought on value neutrality is as a result of his intent to defend the autonomy of science with respect to religion and politics. As it is often said, value neutrality for Weber was in part, a shield against the accusations of socialism in social science (Raatikainen, 2006).

Having looked at what Value neutrality is all about, we are going to ask two questions; Is value neutrality achievable? and, Is value neutrality desirable? In response to the former, we know that philosophers of science believe that values influence scientific progress. Values play a significant role in data collection (Zahle, 2018), value play an important role in measurement procedures (Reiss, 2013), value also is important for evaluating evidence, and value is significant for organizing scientific results. The point is that values are inescapable in doing science. Van den Berg and Jeong (2022) acknowledge the presence of value influence in scientific investigation. Form all these points on the importance of value, we can agree that one can appreciate value neutrality as an ideal but in terms of the practice of science, it is almost impossible to achieve. In response to the later, even though we have made the point that value neutrality is unachievable, but the ideals of value neutrality remain one of the desirable options. Value neutrality is desirable in that it puts our emotions, biases, and other personal influences in check when engaging in scientific research. Value neutrality ensures

that research finding is based on evidence other than personal beliefs and values. In other words, the desirability of value neutrality lies in the fact that it helps maintain scientific integrity and acceptability.

Critique of Value Neutrality

Cultural and Historical context in research: There are researches that are conducted with a specific cultural, historical and social context. Hence what one deems objective may be as a result of dominant value of a particular time and place. H. G Gadamer (1975) speaks of the historicality of understanding. He argues that it is our prejudice that constitutes the historical realities of our being. Gadamer further points out that it is our prejudice that guarantees our participation in our historico-cultural tradition. The point is that man is situated within a cultural, historical and social context. Therefore, scientific investigation must reflect the human biases and context. Hence, value neutrality will not be possible given all these contexts.

Argument from Critical theory: Critical theorists argue that social science cannot be value neutral because they are embedded with existing structures. Researching social issues are often shaped by political and ideological considerations. Researcher often reflects the interest of powerful groups in society, whether it is intentional or not intentional. By pretending that research can be neutral, scholars often ignore the political and ideological implication of their works. The implication of this is that it may reinforce existing system of oppression, inequality and exploitation. Critical theorists also challenge the idea that objectivity in social sciences is possible. They argue that what is often presented as a value neutral research may simply be a reflection of dominant worldview and serve the interest of those in power. Building on Marxist thought, critical theorists argue that all knowledge is historically situated and shaped by the material conditions of the society. Therefore, what is deemed neutral is often product of a particular historical moment and social order. The implication of this is that knowledge production must recognize the context in which it occurs.

Argument from Post-Modernist Philosophers: Post-Modernist thinkers like Michael Foucault and Thomas Kuhn highlighted how scientific knowledge is shaped by social, political and historical context. Michel Focault (2006), argues that knowledge production is always entwined with power dynamics. The truth produced by institutions such as science are shaped by the interest of those in power, thus rendering any claim to value neutrality as inherently suspicious. For Kuhn (1992), the scientific community itself operates within a paradigm that defines the types of question asked, the methods used and even the interpretation of data. According to Kuhn, paradigm shift in science, such as transition from Newtonian mechanics to quantum theory demonstrates how context and social factors influence what is considered scientific truth.

Argument from Feminists scholars: Feminist scholars such as Sandra Hardings and Donna Haraway have also critiqued the concept of value Neutrality. Hardings (1995) argued that knowledge is shaped by social positions of the knower, and what is considered objective knowing often reflect the perspective of dominant group. Haraway's (1988) concept of the 'Situated Knowledge' further asserts that all knowledge is context dependent and subjective. Objectivity for her does not mean universally detached perspective but one that is aware of and acknowledges its situation.

Understanding Contextuality

Contextuality as a method of research emphasizes the importance of the social, political, cultural and historical context in shaping knowledge. Contextuality challenges the assumption that knowledge can be completely objective or free of any condition in which is it produced. Contextuality recognizes that research and scientific investigation are not done in a vacuum, rather they are embedded within specific socio-cultural and historical setting that influence how questions are posed. Contextuality consists of the sets of circumstances and conditions which surround and determine idea, theory, proposition or concept. These circumstances and conditions can be spatial, temporal, situations, personal, social, cultural and ecological (Gershenson, 2002). One of the most important aspects of contextuality is the idea that all knowledge is situated within particular framework. These frameworks include societal norms, institutional priorities, the cultural and political climate and the values of the researcher. Carlos Gershenson (2002) while highlighting on the framework of contextuality argues that in an open system, context cannot be completely described. This is because context is dynamic. For instance, the context of dog will be determined by the context in which it is used. It can be context of veterinary medicine, naught pet, humans' best friend and cute animal. Contextuality is necessary because it makes information implicit.

Niladri Sekhar Dash (2008) understands contextuality as an immediate linguistic environment in which a particular word occurs. This definition means that we can extract the meaning of a word by looking at the immediate environment for which the word is used. This view is similar to the view of ordinary language philosophers who argued that philosophical problems are linguistic problems, and as such the meaning of a word is in the use. Tim Black (2011) defines contextuality from an epistemological point of view when he says that, the truth value of knowledge attributions and knowledge denials depends in some significant ways on the context in which sentences are uttered. From all these definitions we see that contextuality is all about putting in place some conditions, situation, circumstances and personal biases in research. For us to further appreciate contextuality as a method in research we are going to look at how different philosophers contribute in understanding context.

Gadamer's discussion on context can be understood in his theory of context dependence, even though Anders Odenstedt (2017) claims that Gadamer never intended to call it theory of context dependence. Gadamer's discussion on context revolves around his understanding of Tradition. He sees tradition as a continuity of meaning that is transmitted by the presupposition of the historical context in question (Gadamer, 1975). This implies that the researcher or interpreter must approach research or text with certain expectation and a pre-given understanding of the historico-cultural tradition. Gadamer (1975) calls this 'preunderstanding' prejudice. Therefore, for him, it is this prejudice that constitutes the historical reality of our being. Gadamer (1975) insists that it is our prejudice that guarantees our participation in our historico-cultural tradition and that defines the limit and the potentialities of our horizon of understanding. Prejudice, therefore, is a sine qua non for all understanding. It is good for us to note that Gadamer did not support a blanket endorsement of all prejudice, that is why he demarcates legitimate prejudice from the prejudice that hinder understanding. The former, he argues, makes understanding possible, while the later leads to misunderstanding. With this distinction, Gadamer (1975) argues that for us to genuinely understand a text, we need to suspend our unproductive prejudices.

According to Gadamer (1975), when there is a suspension of unproductive prejudice, hermeneutic dialogue occurs. In this hermeneutic dialogue, the interpreter suspends his/her unproductive prejudice and successfully arrives at an authentic understanding of the text, a fusion of horizons. In this fusion, the interpreter expands his/her own horizon of prejudices to incorporate the horizon of the text. As Mueller-Vollmer (1985: 39) observes, this fusion of horizon requires "an awareness of effective-history or a historically effected consciousness which makes the interpreter conscious of 'the effective historical continuum' to which he/she belongs". Gadamer concludes by arguing that this fusion of horizons take place through the medium of language. Habermas (1990) critical hermeneutics is an attempt to transform Gadamer's hermeneutics. Habermas agrees with Gadamer that interpretation can proceed on the basis of a hermeneutic horizon constituted through the interpreter's prejudices. He, however, disagrees with Gadamer on his conflation of the unavoidability of prejudice, thus accepting the legitimacy of all such prejudice. For Habermas (1990), not all such prejudice should be accepted as legitimate. This is because, for him, tradition is not something that is simply 'lying out there' waiting for us to pick passively and make our own. Tradition is, rather, what we construct through critical self-reflection. It is this self-reflection that confirms and rejects prejudices.

In *Philosophical Investigation,* Ludwig Wittgenstein discussed contextuality when he sets out to develop the view that knowledge has both historical and social character through his 'language game philosophy'. Wittgenstein (2009) argues that language (as well as knowledge) is at first a public phenomenon and social creation before it is being learnt and used by the individual. FitzPatrick (2005) commenting on Wittgenstein's philosophical project observes that since after Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* "philosophy moved out of doors, away from the notion of knowledge as something that is privately acquired by the individual on his own before being shared with other. In Language game, Wittgenstein argued that language is separated from reality. The main point in the language game theory is that the meaning of a word depends on the context or use. Hence, Wittgenstein (2009) stated that words get their meaning from their use in language game and they have no intrinsic value. As a result, a word's meaning is determined by its usage in the language. For instance, water could be an order, the answer to a question or some form of information. From this, we see that the meaning of a word is no longer determined by its relation to some anomic realities, rather, the meaning of a word is determined by its application (Agetue, 2022). This shows that people use language in different ways and in variety of context like religion, politics, art, culture, science and so on. Language games are reflection of human activities. Words meaning are generated from their role in language game such as scientific language game, religious language game, and aesthetic language game and so on (Agetue, 2022).

Bernard Lonergan discourse on contextuality can be traced to his conception of knowledge and hermeneutics. When Lonergan argues for the polymorphism of human knowing, Lonergan wants us to understand that knowing is not just on thing, but there are different contexts in which knowing can take place. Lonergan (2005) points out that human knowing involves many distinct and irreducible activities, such as seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, reflecting, weighing the evidence, judging etc. The point is that Lonergan does not see each of these different ways of knowing as knowledge, rather it is a combination of these different perspectives or context of knowing that make up knowledge. Human knowing, therefore, is a set, a structure of different activities

(Lonergan, 1972). Lonergan believes that human knowing involves three levels; experience which involves seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, feeling and so on. The second is understanding. At this level, people ask questions like 'what is this?', 'why is it there?', 'why this?'. The third is judgment. Here people weigh evidence and take side or make decision. By distinguishing these levels, Lonergan wants us to understand that the process of knowing is not just about passively receiving data but it involves dynamic structure. And this dynamic structure is embedded in a concrete, historical and personal context. Therefore, contextuality for Lonergan means that knowledge is situated. It depends on the questions asked, which arises from our background, interest and concerns.

Lonergan uses hermeneutics to highlight the immediate context of the universal view point. Lonergan (1972) argues that hermeneutics and the study of history are basis to all human science, because meaning enters into the fabrics of human living but varies from place to place and from one age to another. By this Lonergan draws attention to the contextual nature of meaning. To highlight the importance of hermeneutics in understanding reality, Lonergan brings in the idea of expression as an important tool. Hence Lonergan (2005: 586) opined that "an interpretation is the expression of the meaning of another expression". Hence he understands expression as instrumental acts of meaning that externalizes and exhibits for interpretation by other potential, formal, full, constitutive or effective acts of meaning of the subject (Lonergan, 1972).

Jonathan O. Chimakonam idea of contextuality arises from his justification of Ezumezu methodology as context dependence of value. Chimakonam (2019,120) argues that "credible value judgment are the ones based on context", because truth depends on the context in which propositions are asserted. 'Ezumezu' as a methodology begins on the "premise that realities are sorted in terms of 'nwa-nsa' and 'nwa-nju', though independently existing in a network of interrelation in which the ideas of difference and equality are inherent and not as isolated unit (Chimakonam, 2019, 121). The point is that 'Ezemezu' methodology tends to relocate truth from fact that are expressed in statement to context that are in propositions. The reason why context dependent of value is possible is because of the apparent fluctuations in history (Chimakonam, 2019). This according to Chimakonam (2019) is so because what is true in one generation or age may be false in another generation or age and this is as a result of new fact and circumstance that can be discovered as the years go on. He offers example of the geocentric and the heliocentric understanding of the universe and also the fact that colonialism and slavery were just at one time and unjust at another epoch in history. The point is that Chimakonam understands that knowledge and the question of truth must be understood within a context. This context does not remove the idea of objective truth, rather it brings one to understand that even though reality is one, it reveals itself to people depending on one's context and circumstance.

Critique of Conxtextuality

Risk of Epistemological Relativism: Epistemological relativism is when one argues that all knowledge is context dependent. In other words, it denies the possibility of objective knowledge. One of the challenges of epistemological relativism is that there is difficulty in distinguishing valid claims across different cultures or ideological frameworks. If truth is entirely local, the possibility of universal or cross-cultural standard for evaluation disappears. One of the challenges of contextuality with regards to epistemological relativism is that it

creates an environment where anything goes. This creates challenges for critical evaluation and normative judgement. For instance, if practices like gender based violence are interpreted purely with cultural context, scholars may hesitate to critique them, which can lead to ethical dilemma.

Navigating the tension: Integrating Value Neutrality and Contextuality

Resolving the tension between value neutrality and contextuality is not an easy one. Value neutrality is important for ensuring that research is reliable, consistent and universally applicable. On the other hand, contextuality allows for a more nuance and critical understanding of how knowledge is constructed. Value neutrality is concerned with the ethics of research and maintaining neutrality of values, while contextuality is interested in the cultural, historical and political generation of knowledge. Notwithstanding their different approach to research, it is good for us to note that value neutrality and contextuality are not mutually exclusive. Researcher can strive for objectivity while being critically aware of their context in which research is embedded. Therefore, we are going to look at approaches in which the tension between value neutrality and contextuality can be resolved and integrated. Reflective practice is the first approach we are going to adopt in integrating value neutrality and contextuality. Reflective approach emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in the research process. It acknowledges the potential influence of the personal values and social context on research. According to Donald Schön (1992), reflective practice requires researches and professionals not only to act but also to think about how and why they act, critically assessing the assumptions, values and biases that inform their decision. Schön (1992, 31) also points out that reflective practice requires a "dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilful". His idea of reflective practice comes against the background of his dissatisfaction with technical rationality which comprises instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique. As a response Schön (1992) argues that reflective practices are essential for practitioners to not think back on what they have done, 'reflection – on –action', but also to think while doing the action, 'refection – in – action'. Reflective practice, therefore, is not simply about reviewing past experiences but about cultivating an ongoing sensitivity to context and one's role within it.

Having looked at what reflective practice is one may ask in what way does reflective practice help to resolve our subject matter? The first point we are going to make is about positionality. Reflective practice demands that individuals acknowledge their own positionalities- their social locations, biases and preconceptions. Joy Amulya (2011) supports the idea of positionality when she points out that reflective practice is an active process of witnessing one's own experience. By recognizing that no perspective is wholly neutral, researcher can more honestly assess the ways in which their background influences their interpretations and actions. This does not abandon the idea and aspirations of value neutrality rather it situates it within an honest appraisal of personal limitations and perspective. So instead of a naïve neutrality, reflective practice fosters a critical neutrality- one that is conscious of the impossibility of total objectivity but committed to minimizing distortion. The second point is about ethical responsiveness. Reflective practice enables a dynamic ethical responsiveness. Researchers are often confronted with ethical dilemmas that cannot be resolved simply by applying general rules. Context differ and what is appropriate in one situation might not be in another. Reflection on values, the potential consequences of actions, and the interest of

different stakeholders enable researcher to act in ways that are both value neutral and contextually appropriate. In this way, researchers balance the detachment required for ethical universality with the responsiveness demanded by ethical particularity.

The second approach to resolve this tension is through methodological pluralism. According to Barker and Pistrang (2005), methodological pluralism involves finding value in a variety of sources of information including believing that no research method is inherently superior to any other. This definition tends to highlight that each method is unique and that there is no method that is more viable than the other. Creswell, Plano, Gutmann and Hanson (2003) attempts to define methodological pluralism as the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially. It also involves giving priority and involving the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) gave a similar definition of methodological pluralism when he defines it as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts and language techniques in a single study. One thing about methodological pluralism as seen from the above definition is that it gives room for the use of different research methods in a single research, even though it does not suggest indiscriminate mixing of methods, but requires thoughtful, critical engagement and appropriate application of each.

To resolve the tension between value neutrality and contextuality, methodological pluralism offers ways in which the tension can be resolved. Methodological pluralism allows researchers to respect the ideals of objectivity - such as precision, transparency and replicability – when and where they are appropriate without insisting that these ideals are universally applicable in all context. For instance, a quantitative study might be designed with strict protocol to minimize bias (supporting value neutrality), while being complemented by qualitative interviews that situate those finding within the lived realities of participants (respecting contextuality). Neither value neutrality nor contextuality is wholly sufficient on its own. Together they offer a richer, more balanced understanding. Also the use of methodological pluralism reflexivity. Reflexivity is a methodological tool in that involves continuous self-awareness and critical self-reflection by the researcher on their potential biases, preconceptions, values, positionality and relationship to research (Mcleod, 2024). Reflexivity supports a more sophisticated form of value neutrality; not the naïve belief in pure objectivity, but a transparent, self-critical stance that seeks to minimize undue influence while recognizing its inevitability. Furthermore, methodological pluralism guards against epistemological and methodological dogmatism. This is the belief that there is one way of knowing that is inherently superior. Methodological pluralism counters this tendency by promoting humility. No single method can capture the full complexity of human life. This humility protects against the imposition of value –laden assumptions under the guise of neutrality, because it insists that different approaches may reveal different equally valid insight depending on the context.

The third approach is through critical realism. Critical realism as a philosophical trend was first developed by the English philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar. Critical realism was formed to contrast the naïve positivist realism. Realism generally is the view that accepts the existence of the world independent of the subject and belief that knowledge of it is possible.

Hence knowledge is a picture of the real world (Jamali, 2020). Critical realism is a philosophical system that has progressed by other scholars and it is positioned as an alternative to positivism and interpretivism paradigms (Archer et al, 2013). Critical realism leverages aspects of both to offer new approaches to developing knowledge by recognizing the role of subjective information of social actors in a given context while taking note of the independent structure that constrains and facilitates these actors to carry out certain activities in that context (Lawani, 2020). Jamali (2020) distinguished critical realism into three namely: **Ontological realism** posits that there is a reality independent of our perceptions, beliefs and theories, **Epistemological relativism** which states that while the world exists independently, our knowledge of it is always a mediated social, cultural and historical context and **Judgmental rationality** which states that despite the contextual nature of knowledge, critical realism maintains the we can evaluate and compare different theories based on evidence and reasoning.

Critical realism can help to reconcile value neutrality and contextuality by recognizing values without abandoning objectivity. Critical realism does not deny the fact that values influence research. Researcher makes choice about what topic to study, how to frame questions and how to interpret data. All these are shaped by personal and societal values. However, critical realism does not conclude that all knowledge is merely subjective or relative. It holds that while all knowledge is fallible and situated, it is still possible to make evidence-based judgement. Critical realism provides tools for studying an open system by focusing on generative mechanisms rather than regularities. This approach acknowledges context as essential to understanding causality in the social world. It does not view context as a contaminant but as a constitutive part of causal explanation. This allows researchers to embrace contextuality without abandoning value neutrality.

Pragmatism is a research approach which suggests that there are in fact many different ways of interpreting the world and reality which combines different approaches in order to broaden our understanding of the phenomena being investigated. As a research paradigm, pragmatism strives to disengage from metaphysical argument pertaining to concepts such as truth and reality. It however contends that there may be single or multiple realities in the world of inquiry (Creswell and Clarke, 2011). Pragmatism accepts that there is objective reality that exists in the world but that reality can only be realized through human experience, action and perception (Dube, Nkomo and Thokweng, 2024). This points out that pragmatism acknowledges that both value neutrality and contextuality are relevant in understanding reality. Pragmatism approach in dealing with value neutrality and contextuality is unique in the sense that it understands the role each plays in research. For instance, pragmatics believes that values or context are not necessarily sources of bias but tools for inquiry. John Dewey supports this point when he argues that values help define what counts as a problem worth investigating, shape the methods we use to investigate it, and guides how we assess the outcome. Pragmatism embraces fallibillism when it comes to integrating value neutrality and contextuality. Fallibillism is the idea that all knowledge is provisional and subject to revision. This makes us to accept the point that knowledge arises in context, but value neutrality brings out objectivity through intersubjectivity.

Conclusion

So far, we have argued that there is actually no tension between value neutrality and contextuality as some scholars or researches have made us to believe. One thing we have recognized so far is that the pursuit of knowledge is inherently a political and ethical endeavour. Whether in science, social sciences, humanities, and so on, research is often driven by questions that have societal implications. By acknowledging the value-laden nature of research, scholars can work towards more inclusive and responsible knowledge production. Value neutrality and contextuality are both viable research options and each has its strength and weakness. No research approach or method exhausts all there is about research. Even though both research approaches vary in their objective, understanding and application, yet they are not exclusive.

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