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Research in Humanities: Objectivity, Reliability and Durability of Knowledge

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Abstract:

In comparing with Science and Social Science Researches, this paper explains the nature of research in Humanities, specifically in Literature. The issues of durability and reliability of knowledge outputs, objectivity vs. subjectivity and systematization of creativity in Humanities, are discussed thoroughly here. The paper seeks to reiterate the situated nature of knowledge and inevitable subjectivity of knowledge regardless of the nature of the disciplines and, thus, challenges the commonly perceived superiority of Science and Social Science over the Humanities. It concludes that Humanities research is mostly an engagement with meanings and, like any other human sciences, the knowledge in Humanities is also relatively durable, moreover, the process of mining of meanings is relatively objective, reliable and systematic.

Keywords: Research, Humanities, Science, Social Science, Knowledge, Reliability Durability, Objectivity, Subjectivity, Engagement with meanings, Creativity vs. Criticism, Situated knowledge, interpretive turn.

Any intellectual exercise which can add to the existing body of knowledge can be called a research. An academic research is a systematic enquiry directed towards the production of communicable knowledge (Archer). The subject matter of inquiry, tools employed, outcome expected, and the purpose for which the research is done; define whether a research is in Science (i.e. Natural Science), Social Science or Humanities. Research in Science is generally understood as the study of the physicality of the world (Kundu; Abhijit). It explains how and why a thing is, or works, in a specific way. It also tries to replicate the conclusion with experiments. Social Science research deals with people and society, and its interconnections (Kundu; Abhijit). Research in Humanities, on the other hand, is an interrogation and dialogue with meanings to make the possibilities of human existence clearer (Kundu; Abhijit; Gibbons; Ghazzālī). The engagement with meaning, in Humanities, results in expressions in an appropriate media, creative reflection on human experiences, qualitative interpretation of human expressions, judgment of worth, exploration of truths and values in a given text, categorization of ideas, people and events (Archer).

The researches in Science and Social Sciences are commonly perceived to be using more objective and easily verifiable tools which can ensure the objectivity of research

findings, than the researches in Humanities. Science is claimed to be on a safer zone in terms of objectivity than Social Science. Social Science often overlaps with Humanities because it has to deal with values, beliefs, morals, ethics and behaviours in a society (Kundu; Abhijit). Unlike Science and Social science, research in Humanities does not expect the concrete facts in the findings. Rather, it aims to keep dialogues going and vibrant. “A hallmark of humanistic study is that research is approached differently than in the natural and social sciences, where data and hard evidence are required to draw conclusions. Because the human experience cannot be adequately captured by facts and figures alone, humanities research employs methods that are historical, interpretive and analytical in nature” (“How Is Humanities Research Conducted?”).

Humanities Research and Engagement with Meaning

The Humanities can broadly be classified into two: 1) Metaphysics, 2) Art. The Metaphysics includes theology, philosophy, epistemology, ethics etc. The Arts includes language, literature, performing arts, architecture, painting, music and so on. (Archer). Any research in these fields explores the untapped multiplicity of meaning so as to facilitate better understanding of the world and how a person experiences the world. Researches in the Metaphysics connect both physicality and the meaning of the universe . While theology and philosophy try to address this connection between matter and meaning (Ghazzālī, Johnston) from two different frame works, (i.e., faith and reason), researches in epistemology and ethics deal with construction, preservation and validity of knowledge, and how knowledge is becoming a code of human conduct.

Researches in the Arts include both the enquiry into a piece of an artistic work and the creation of an artistic product, though the former is generally agreed upon and the latter is still being debated over. Investigation into the artistic product includes exploring and analyzing symbols, techniques, narration, in language, literature, music, painting, and movies, so that the meaning and its conveyance could be clearer. There are a host of research tools developed in last three decades in order to make the mining of the meanings easier. The tools range from data collection tools to meaning production tools, to data or meaning verification tools — a detailed description of which is beyond the scope of this essay.

What makes Humanities researches distinct is the fact that it deals with the abstract concept of the meaning. The meaning by nature is a complex reality. To achieve the “positivist” objectivity in the engagement with meaning is palpably very difficult. The meaning shapes and reshapes the way a person views and experiences things around him. At the same time, the meaning is being shaped and reshaped according to the source, channel, receiver and context. That is to say, the real repository of meaning is always beyond what is already known to us. It can be with speaker and his intention. It can be with text (channel used for communication). It can be with person who tries to read or interpret it. It can be with the context. It can also be with all or some of the above (Lodge). The complexities in understanding the meanings and their elastic nature force a Humanities-researcher to explicitly mention an interpretative (often called theoretical) frame-work within which s/he is

going to look into the meaning of the text (Archer; Kundu; Abhijit). Hence, the question what is your theoretical position?' is very important for a researcher in Humanities. In the absence of such an interpretative framework, one can hardly validate the meanings. All of the available theoretical perspectives are grounded in some or other ideologies such as religious, political or social. Ideology is defined as a set of ideas which provides a theoretical and operational framework for thought or action by its adherent (Kundu, Abhijit).

Reliability, Durability and Objectivity

The elasticity, plasticity, abstractedness, multiple possibilities and indefiniteness of the meaning largely threaten the reliability, durability and objectivity of the Humanities research outputs. As I indicated above, the Science and Social science researches are generally understood to be producing more solid, useful, durable and tangibly beneficial outputs. However, this general understanding needs to be rechecked in a comparative perspective between these three areas of knowledge. There is an apparent issue of subjectivity in the analytical tools of Humanities researches, compared to the Science and Social Sciences (Rorty; Bollnow). However, the potential subjectivity does not necessitate the Humanities to be less verifiable, less reliable, less valid, and less durable source of knowledge, because, even the claims of the reliability, objectivity and durability of information in both Science and Social Science researches are proved to be equally flimsy. In other words, similar to the Humanities outputs, Science and Social science outputs are also argued to be relevant and limited to the theoretic frame-work (Hawking; Ghazzālī; Gibbons). If at all, the exception may be found in the fundamental researches. Even the fundamental researches are not free from the falsification; because any new findings quite often falsify existing principles and notions, and nullify many of the generally agreed fundamental principles.

A good example to prove this point is the dichotomy between Newtonian physics, general relativity and quantum mechanics. To illustrate it further, the incompatibility of Newton's theory and general relativity theory which paved the way for the quantum mechanics is well known in Science. The language, measurements, approaches, perspectives to look at the universe in Newtonian physics is quite different from the modern quantum theories. Newton's theory looks at things from individual/micro level whereas the quantum theory looks at it from a broader level. Hence, some quantum scientists view Newton's theory as old, obsolete, and truncated. All the same, few questions are important to be considered: Aren't the Newton's laws still valid, even today? Is it not widely used in physics because it explains certain things in immediate situations of life, though it has been disproved by quantum scientists?

By and large, Newton's theory of relativity was fundamentally questioned by Einstein's general theory of relativity and, consequently, by quantum mechanics, although all of them are still considered to be valid and used. After discussing this issue of dichotomy between these theories, at length, Stephen Hawking says: "we still use Newton's theory for all practical purposes because the difference between its predictions and those of general relativity is very small in the situations that we normally deal with. (Newton's theory also has

the great advantage that it is much simpler to work with than Einstein's!)". Even though the theory is proved to be wrong at broader level, we still use it considering "situations that we normally deal with".

Another example is dichotomy inside Einstein's general theory of relativity and modern quantum mechanics. Maddox in his article says: "the central problem in fundamental physics is that quantum mechanics and Einstein's theory of gravitation are incompatible with each other". Moring explains further:

If we could look through a microscope at this tiny universe, we would see random quantum undulations resembling something looking like a storm on the North Atlantic Ocean. And if we took this into outer space, into the smooth gravitational field of a planet, you would no longer have the smooth warp of space-time described by the spatial geometry of general relativity. At this microscopic level, the gravitational field would be warped by the frenetic energy of the *quantum foam*. So this fundamental incompatibility of quantum mechanics and general relativity occurs not on the level of everyday life, or even in the vastness of the universe, but at the most fundamental level where the building blocks of matter have their existence.

These incompatibilities do not stop the scientists for completely rejecting either of it. Neither do they argue that one theory is absolutely true and objective as compared to the other. In reality, quantum mechanics came in to existence to address the problems of general relativity. In other words, even the Fundamental Science researches don't produce permanently valid communicable knowledge free from all kinds of subjectivity. It does consider the immediate "practical" "situations" of life, and such situations of life, no doubt, are part of a broader subjectivity.

Further, taking the mining, production, and disseminations of meanings from a standpoint or perspective to a new realm, Haraway argued that knowledge is never pure simple and it cannot be taken from a no viewpoint, (i.e., it always come from a/ several view points). Knowledge, regardless of disciplines, can never be value-free or context-free. It is always "situated" in time and space. Even the natural science "constructed" from, say, a "masculinist", or "euro-centric" paradigms are not ahistorical. According to her, Science which relies on "sensual perceptions" (empirical methods) to validate knowledge, is indispensably historical, contextual and situated because senses are unavoidably situated in time and space. She said that the "vision" in science has been, "used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere." This is the "gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.

Furthermore, the subjectivity is inextricably intertwined in all the human acts. And the knowledge which is produced, preserved and carried forward through thought, articulation, and interpretation can never be free from the subjectivity. Ratifying this fact, Mottier says, natural science has already "crusaded" the positivism and its "orthodox consensus" of objectivity and "rehabilitated subjectivity into the research". Post-positivist approaches are

still concerned with problems such as verification or prediction; nevertheless, they clearly accept that scientific inquiry is largely of a hermeneutic nature. Mottier adds:

Interpretation and explanation, objectivity and subjectivity, cannot be clearly separated within natural science research. As Bachelard stressed long before Kuhn, Hanson or Feyerabend, the objective observation of pure data is impossible. All scientific data are already interpreted at the same time as they are being observed.

This interpretive turn has not only transformed the Natural Science research but also revolutionized Social Sciences and Humanities researches with innovative tools of research. For instance, Clifford Geertz has come up with the theory of “thick description” which specifies many details, conceptual structures and meanings in cultural studies, as opposed to “thin description” which is a factual account without any interpretation. Among the four parameters he puts forth for the study of a culture, he lists out the “interpretative study” and tells that anthropology is a semiotic endeavour, so the cultural analysis should be an interpretative practice which traces the manner in which meaning is ascribed.

There has been a multiplication of new perspectives that have been loosely grouped together under the label of "the interpretive turn in the social sciences" such as hermeneutics, ethno methodology, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical analysis, poststructuralism, and discourse theory. Interpretive approaches share a common emphasis on the analysis of constructions of meaning, of the ways people make sense of their everyday activities and surroundings. In contrast to positivist and post-positivist perspectives, subjectivity is seen as a crucial and positive component of research in interpretive approaches. Indeed, interpretive perspectives do not define social reality as an exterior object. The social world is seen instead as a subjectively lived construct. Interpretive perspectives consequently abandon claims to objectivity to emphasize instead the reflexive nature of the research process and the subjective nature of constructions of meaning, both by the research subjects and by the researcher (Mottier).

As the dichotomy between Newtonian physics, general relativity and quantum mechanics disprove the claims of the reliability, durability, absolute absence of subjectivity in Science, the concepts such as “situated knowledge” and “interpretive turn” redefine the reliability and objectivity in Social Sciences as well. This understanding about the limitation of the reliability, durability and objectivity of knowledge in Science and Social Science researches has significantly reduced the long-existing gap between the ‘scientificity’ of Humanities researches and Science or Social Science researches. Consequently, Science and Social Science has become less reductionist and Humanities have tried to form itself more ‘scientific’ (Archer, Bollnow).

Systematization of Creativity in Literature and Arts

Another significant point raised against the Humanities researches is the difficulty in systematizing the process of enquiry, whereas, by definition, the academic research must be an exercise of systematic enquiry. If the output is not the result of systematic enquiry, it is classified as serendipitous knowledge in research methodology. This criticism can be well understood, if the Science research is compared to the Humanities research. For example, the creation of a new product (as an invention or discovery) is undoubtedly a characteristic of Science researches, provided that it happens as a result of systematic enquiry. However, the creation of Humanities (more specifically in Arts and Literature) is not unanimously recognized as part of Humanities research, because the systematization of enquiry is not done in most of the creative writings. The artistic creation is traditionally understood to be inspirational and intuitive, though it is not always the case. It is argued that the systematization is hardly possible in inspirational or intuitive writings and therefore the systematic enquiry is at stake.

The above discussed issue leads us to the following questions: a) whether researches in the Literature and Arts are all about criticism and interpretation to understand the meanings; and b) whether the original creative works can be considered as a research output. A close study of the creation in Literature and Arts reveals that the creation can be relatively systematized at several levels. Furthermore, even the process of productions (of knowledge or thing) in Science and Social Science are only systematized in relatively. As interpretive approach has sought to establish, no text is not so systematized and neatly arranged. Neither is the world, nor the meanings, nor the process of research, in its strict sense. However in its relative sense, the creative writings can be taken as result of systematic enquiry, even with the rigorous positivist benchmarks, as Archer opined, if the process of creation is viewed as “a research for creations” or “research through creations”. There are several ways to ensure the systematization of the process of creative writing. For example, gathering data for an “artistic creation” can be systematized. Further, analyzing the data, determining the relationships between facts, and formulation of casual explanation can be well systematized in the creative writing process. In other words, the argument that the creativity in Humanities does not have any place in research categories does not sound reasonable.

Conclusion

The Humanities research is largely an engagement with meaning of, more evidently so, literary researches. To deal with meanings without the subjectivity, is hardly possible, but putting a text into generally accepted frame work of theories will ensure validity and reliability of the knowledge outputs. More than producing concrete facts and figures, Humanities researches aim to keep the dialogues going and vibrant. The generally perceived superiority of Natural Science and Social Science does not make any sense, because the reliability, objectivity and durability of knowledge across the disciplines are purely relative and situated to/in context. The argument that the creative production in Humanities cannot be

considered as research output, because of the difficulty in systematization of enquiry; is not entirely true. Even the creative works or productions can be systemized in the process of writing.

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