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EXPLORING STUDENTS' POSITION REGARDING OBJECTIVITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT: *For driving societal change, the knowledge produced by social sciences plays an important role. But whether social sciences should contribute directly to promoting social change is up for discussion. One such contribution is towards achieving social justice, which has generated some discussions and attracted criticism. Nevertheless, some social scientists are interested in engaging in this form of activism. Others criticize it for lacking objectivity and letting political beliefs influence research. While such debates reveal where specific social scientists stand on these topics, less is known about students' perspectives and what factors play a role in shaping their views. To address this, the paper aims to explore how students in social science faculties stand when it comes to objectivity and activism, and to examine whether there is a relationship between their position and their gender and political orientation.*

Key words: *Objectivity; normativity; scientific activism; social justice activism;*

Introduction

By investigating different aspects and phenomena in society, social sciences can provide the necessary knowledge for strategies, interventions or policies that can bring societal change. But whether social sciences should directly contribute to promote such change and engage in what can be called scientific activism is up for discussion. Going on this path raises some concerns about the objectivity of scientific research. Furthermore, if social science is to embrace scientific activism, which form should it prioritize? One such answer, that the paper is concerned about is centered around the ideal of social justice.

Social justice has become a visible theme in social sciences, as reflected in academic conferences, educational programs, courses, research centers, studies or book series dedicated to it [Oltmann, S., Dowell, M., 2024; North, C., E., 2008; Hammersley, M., 2000; Spencer, D., 2022]. Social scientists have shown interest in promoting social justice within educational contexts [Clancy, K. A., & Bauer, K., 2018, Banister, S., & Reinhart, R. V., 2011; North, C. E., 2008], and doing research advancing social justice [Fassinger, R., Morrow, L., S., 2013; Hammersley, M., 2000]. Research promoting this ideal has received criticism for lacking objectivity [Romero, M., 2020; Hammersley, M., 2000], or for drawing from only one theoretical approach [Campbell, B., 2001], namely conflict theory. These criticisms are coming mainly from sociologists and are part of broader discussions about the move towards the left side of the political spectrum that the discipline has experienced since the 1960 [Horrowitz, I., L., 1994; Martin, C., C., 2016]. A study on 479 sociologists provides more evidence in this sense, and shows links between sociologists' positions on activism and their political orientation and gender [Horrowitz, M., Haynor A., & Kickham, K., 2018].

While such discussions reveal how researchers and professors stand when it comes to these issues and how gender and their political beliefs play a role, there is a limited understanding of students' perspectives. Building on this, this paper explores how social science students position themselves when it comes to maintaining objectivity in research and advocating for social justice, and examine whether there is a relationship between their position and factors such as gender and political orientation. I will begin by defining what I understand by social justice and explore afterward how social justice has integrated into the social sciences.

What is social justice ?

The concept of social justice arises as a response to inequalities and injustices that characterize all societies, in order to address and correct them. Social justice is connected to distributive justice, which already interested philosophers from ancient times [Miller, D., 2001].

Distributive justice refers to the fair and appropriate distribution of benefits, risks, and costs within a society [Fisher, O.M. et al, 2020]. While it focuses on ensuring that benefits are fairly shared within particular groups or associations, social justice is broader and includes a wider range of benefits [Miller, D., 2001].

For John Rawls [1999], social justice represents the guiding principles of how social institutions distribute benefits in society [Rawls, J., 1999]. There are two principles in Rawls' theory. The first refers to equality in the assignments of such rights and duties. The second principle asserts that if there are inequalities in these assignments, they are just only if they result in benefits for everyone, especially the least advantaged members of society [Rawls, J., 1999, p13]

In summary, social justice addresses inequalities of all kinds [Barry B., 2005], from economic to political inequalities, and refers to the fair distribution of resources, benefits, and rights and the creation of equal opportunities for everyone.

Social justice in social sciences

Social justice seems to have gained some visibility within social sciences, especially in the north american context. There are growing claims that social research should be done in the service of this ideal [Hammersley, M., 2000]. It appears frequently as a central theme in various educational settings, where it has been gradually included in courses, programs and academic disciplines [North, C. E., 2008; Oltmann, S., Dowell, M., 2024]. There are articles and book titles, teacher activist organizations, teacher education policy documents or mission statements, and academic conferences dedicated to social justice [North, C., E., 2008].

Big publishers such as Routledge and Sage have book series on to the topic. Routledge describes its series simply as critical and interdisciplinary that advances theoretical discussion on social justice [Routledge, n.d.]. Sage frames it as challenging "the Ivory Tower of academia – in which Black, Asian and minority ethnic voices are underrepresented – by defining the "expert" not as someone who extracts data from a community, but someone who works within and alongside communities, gives back, and amplifies voices" [SAGE Publishing., n.d.].

Universities have developed several educational programs focused on social justice. For example, students in the U.S.A. have a diversity of programs to choose from, such as "Social Justice Anthropology" minor which is offered by Tufts University, „Social Justice and Human Rights Concentration" Master of Arts offered by George Mason University, "Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education" Master of Arts offered by University of Michigan Marsal Family School of Education, "Social Justice and Social Change" Bachelor offered by Hamline University, "Equity and Social Justice Education" Master of Arts offered by San Francisco State University and many more. Such diversity of educational programs can be partly attributed to the efforts of academic professors and researchers who were influenced by the wave of social protests in the 1960s and went afterward into academic careers in the social sciences and continued fighting for social justice [Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G., 2018, p110]. These efforts have contributed to the growing commitment of American students to social justice causes [Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G., 2018].

Furthermore, while some universities focus on educational programs, others are creating research centers studying and promoting social justice. To name a few, Georgetown University has its own "Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching, and Service" (CSJ), The University of Oxford has the "Center for the Study of Social Justice" (CSSJ),

University of Westminster has the "Centre for Social Justice Research" (CSJR), Durham University has the "Centre for Social Justice and Community Action".

But the integration of social justice into academia has not been without criticism, though there are only a few voices coming mainly from sociologists. There have been discussions that sociology has a "social justice bias" [Horrowitz, M., Haynor A., & Kickham, K., 2018], that sociologists identify the discipline with pursuing

social justice [Campbell, B., & Manning, J., 2018], or that sociology has a social justice tradition [Romero, M., 2020]. These discussions are part of a broader discussion about the left-wing "turn" that (mostly american) sociology has taken after 1960 [Horowitz, I., L., 1994; Martin, C., C., 2016]. Research serving social justice has been criticized for lacking objectivity [Romero, M., 2020; Hammersley, M., 2000], and that it draws from only one theoretical approach, namely conflict theory, and by doing so can alter efforts of social change [Campbell, B., 2021].

Furthermore, a study done by Horowitz, Haynor, & Kickham (2018) on 479 sociologists shows that there are links between their positions on activism and political orientation and gender. For example, women, (left) radicals and liberals disagree more with the statement that activism and research should be separate to protect objectivity [Horrowitz, M., Haynor A., & Kickham, K., 2018]. Or, only 16% of women, 7% (left) radicals and 12% of liberals disagree with the statement that pursuing social justice is not incompatible with accurate research [Horrowitz, M., Haynor A., & Kickham, K., 2018].

Finally, all of these examples highlight the visibility that social justice has gained and how it has been integrated into academic programs in the social sciences, especially in North America, but they represent only a portion of broader efforts that exist. The extent to which social justice has been integrated into the social sciences is not easily quantifiable. The examples also showcase how researchers stand when it comes to social justice activism and objectivity, and the relationship between their political beliefs and position on these issues.

However, there is a limited understanding of how students view these matters and what factors play a role in shaping their views. Building on this, the paper will look at how students in social sciences position themselves when it comes to these issues, and whether there is a relationship between their position and their political orientation and gender.

Methodology

To explore how social science students position themselves on issues related to social justice and objectivity, data was collected through an online survey. The survey was designed originally to capture students position on more topics relating to scientific controversies, post-modernism, objectivity and activism, by asking them to indicate their level of agreement with various statements. For the purpose of this paper's aim, 5 statements were selected that address the topics of objectivity and social science activism in the form of social justice:

- Social sciences should strive to make the world a better place;
- A central aim of social sciences should be to pursue social justice [fair distribution of resources, benefits or rights and equal opportunities for everyone];
- Social science faculties should put more emphasis on social justice rather than objectivity.
- Activism and research should be separated one from another so we can protect research objectivity;
- Maintaining objectivity in research is important for the accuracy of explained phenomena;

Furthermore, students we're asked about their political orientation, by positioning themselves on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means left-wing and 5 means right-wing. The answers show that 44% of students are located on the left side of the political spectrum (1 and 2 on the scale), 40% on the center (3 on the scale), and 16% on the right side (4 and 5 on the scale).

The final sample consisted of 115 Romanian respondents, out of which 30% are male and 70% are females, with ages between 19 and 53 years old, and with an average age of 23 years. Most of the students study sociology (39%), followed by psychology (10%), social work (10%), political sciences (10%), economy-related domains (5%), communication (5%), history (3%) and the rest (18%) in diverse areas such as philosophy, education, international studies, philology, anthropology, human resources, geography or law.

To assess whether there is a relationship between gender and students' positions, a chi-square test with adjusted residuals was used. To examine the relationship between political orientation and students' positions, Kendall's tau-b correlations were applied.

Results

First, respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with a general statement that

social sciences should strive to make the world a better place. Even if students would agree that social sciences should have such a normative role, they may disagree with what direction this role should take. One direction is towards social justice. By looking at the first two tables, results show that while both male and female respondents generally support a normative role for social sciences, nearly half of the male respondents indicated some disagreement with applying this role specifically to social justice. Still, some male students agree (Table 1, 2).

traditional one characterized by gender inequalities [Magyari-Vincze, E, 2004] this could explain why most female students are concerned with social justice. At the same time, we find that women are less likely to disagree and more likely to agree with the statement that social science faculties should put more emphasis on social justice rather than objectivity, even though there is a significant proportion of female students who disagree (Table 3).

In Table 4, we see that there is a general agreement between all genders that there should

Table 1. Respondents position regarding a normative role of social sciences

			Social sciences should strive to make the world a better place					Total
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Female	Percent	1.3%	5%	12.5%	36.3%	45%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	-.6	-.7	-.3	-.7	1.4	
	Male	Percent	2.9%	8.6%	14.3%	42.9%	31.4%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	.6	.7	.3	.7	-1.4	

$\chi^2 = 0.680 > 0.05$

Table 2. Respondents position towards social sciences pursuing social justice activism

			A central aim of social sciences should be to pursue social justice (fair distribution of resources, benefits or rights and equal opportunities for everyone)					Total
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Female	Percent	5%	13.8%	16.3%	43.8%	21.3%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	**-3.9**	.3	-.1	.9	**2.1**	
	Male	Percent	31.4%	11.4%	17.1%	34.3%	5.7%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	**3.9**	-.3	.1	-.9	**-2.1**	

$\chi 2 = 0.002 < 0.05$

Furthermore, there is a significant relationship between gender and agreement with the assertion that a central aim of socia sciences should be pursuing social justice. Male students are more likely to strongly disagree and less likely to strongly agree with the statement. When it comes to female students, things go the other way around. Female students are less likely to strongly disagree and more likely to strongly agree. Considering that the Romanian society is a more

be a separation between activism and research to protect objectivity, although there are more male students than female students who agree with the statement. But responses seem contradictory. Most students agree that social sciences should strive to make the world a better place and some agree with this goal moving in the direction of social justice, but believe that activism and research should be separated. It is possible that they do not perceive making the world a better

Table 3. Respondents position on whether social science faculties should put more emphasis on social justice

			Social science faculties should put more emphasis on social justice rather than objectivity					Total
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Female	Percent	26.3%	13.8%	18.8%	32.5%	8.8%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	**-3.2**	-.8	1.0	**2.7**	1.1	
	Male	Percent	57.1%	20%	11.4%	8.6%	2.9%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	**3.2**	.8	-1.0	**-2.7**	-1.1	

$\chi 2 = 0.05 = 0.05$

Table 4. Respondents view towards the separation of activism and research

			Activism and research should be separated one from another so we can protect research objectivity					Total
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Female	Percent	11.3%	11.3%	15%	36.3%	26.3%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	1.5	.9	.9	.5	**-2.6**	
	Male	Percent	2.9%	5.7%	8.6%	31.4%	51.4%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	-1.5	-.9	-.9	-.5	**2.6**	

$\chi 2 = 0.083 > 0.05$

Table 5. Respondents position towards maintaining objectivity for accuracy

			Maintaining objectivity in research is important is important for the accuracy of explained phenomena					Total
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Gender	Female	Percent	2.5%	3.8%	8.8%	31.3%	53.8%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	-.1	1.2	1.1	.3	-1.2	
	Male	Percent	2.9%	0%	2.9%	28.6%	65.7%	100%
		Adjusted Residual	.1	-1.2	-1.1	-.3	1.2	

$\chi 2 = 0.524 > 0.05$

place or pursuing social justice as activism, since the knowledge produced by social sciences is implicitly relevant to society and contributes to bringing positive change. Another possible explanation could be that activism may be considered a term that has a negative connotation. Such explanations though, remains only a speculation since there is not enough evidence to confirm them.

Moreover, even though some agree that social sciences should engage in activism, objectivity remains important for the accuracy of explained phenomena. As seen in table 5, a majority of students agree with the statement that maintaining

Table 6. Kendall tau-b correlations between the political orientation of the respondents and their position on all 5 statements

		Social sciences should strive to make the world a better place	A central aim of social sciences should be pursuing social justice	Activism and research should be separated to protect objectivity	Maintaining objectivity in research is important is for accuracy of explained phenomena	Social science faculties should put more emphasis on social justice rather than objectivity	Political orientation
Kendall tau-b	Political orientation	-.108	-.143	.122	-.037	-.146	1.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

objectivity in research is important is important for the accuracy of explained phenomena. After all, inaccurate or unreliable explanations can alter any attempts at producing change and can result in undesirable outcomes for social policies or programs that address different social problems.

Moving on, table 6 below displays correlations between all the assertions and students' political orientation. Results show no significant relationship between political orientation and any of the statements. Only gender seems to play a role in how students position themselves regarding these aforementioned issues. These results can be explained by the under-representation in this sample, of students that are on the right-side of the political spectrum.

Conclusions

The present paper highlights the relationship between students' gender and political orientation and their position on social justice activism in social sciences and objectivity. Results show that political orientation does not play any role in how they stand on these topics, but there are some slight gender differences.

While both genders generally agree that social sciences should aim to make the world a better place, there are more women than men who agree that this aim should be taken in the direction of social justice. Even though there are male students who agree also with social justice activism, most of them support a separation between activism and research to protect objectivity. Maintaining objectivity for the accuracy of explained phenomena is important, as most students agree regardless of gender, because lack of objectivity remains important showcasing that objectivity and activism can go hand in hand. Gender differences can be explained by the can bring inaccurate explanations and alter any efforts of social change. But even for those that would pursue social justice activism, objectivity traditionalist culture and gender inequalities present in Romanian society. Since women are more prone than men to experience injustices and get different treatment in such a society, it is expected for them to value social justice.

However, the paper has limitations since certain categories are under-represented, male students and especially students that position themselves on the right side of the political spectrum. The lack of more right-wing students in the sample explains why there is no relationship between students' political orientation and their position on the presented statements. In reality, there could be a relationship.

Thus, conclusions drawn from this study should be interpreted with caution, as they do not fully capture the complexities of students' views across the political spectrum and at the same time overrepresentation of female students in the sample may skew the findings, potentially leading to an incomplete understanding of how male students stand. Future studies can focus on having a more equal distribution when it comes to gender and political orientation, and also focus on students' experiences with injustice and inequalities since personal experience probably plays an important role in explaining their position on these matters. Additionally, the inclusion of more genders could offer more nuanced perspectives, as this sample included only male and female students.

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