

The Oxford Dictionary Word of the year

post-truth

Adjective

DEFINITION: *Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief: 'in this era of post-truth politics, it's easy to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire' 'some commentators have observed that we are living in a post-truth age'*

I was certainly not up with politics, as I had never before heard the word and nor had people around me. However, when I saw the definition I knew what it was all about, even if I still don't think it's a good word to use.

Now that our attention has been drawn to it, what does it mean for sociology? Sociology sets out to gather the real facts of particular social issues but if we are not going to be believed, what is the point? But then emotions are short lived and personal beliefs can change at any moment. Francis Bacon in the 16th century pointed out that human understanding, once it adopts a theory, tends to interpret everything else as supporting it. Even though there is far more evidence against it, which is ignored, or rejected, so their ideology remains inviolate. We can see this in the way some of our politicians behave. However, my research experience tells me that most people don't have a dominant theory and they are open to changing their position after they have been asked a question in a questionnaire that they have never thought about previously. Their initial response is to answer with what they think the questionnaire writer wants but if given the chance they will tell you that having thought about it their first answer is not what they think. (See the Group Attitudinal Threshold Exchange Research Method that allows this response to be made.) I will mention this in my presentation on questionnaires at the Conference (Next Week).

For sociology, the idea of "post-truth" diminishes the whole idea of Truth. If people are going to be stirred to actions by ideas or explanations that are untrue, even impossible and dismiss real truths, how do we deal with that? I think it gets credence in the political sphere because traditional politics has not seen issues as other people have seen them. Take our local politicians response to Climate Change, Refugees, and Indigenous peoples. Many in the population see these issues differently and look for different actions. Responding emotionally is one way of rejecting old fashion politics. But if neither side wants to understand the real truth, the future looks bleak.

At the Conference session on Speed Dating for Sociological Researcher, I will be taking up the issue of the dangers of dominant theories, which is also about the rejection of the truth in favour of following someone's immovable, usually wrong, idea. See you there.

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