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Q2(b)

Examine the problems of maintaining objectivity and value neutrality in social science research.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology as Science

Sociology as Science: Science, scientific method and critique; Major theoretical strands of research methodology; Positivism and its critique; Fact value and objectivity; Non-positivist methodologies.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the problems of maintaining objectivity and value neutrality in social science research
- Keep the examination within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Weber split value-relevance in problem choice from discipline in proof.

Objectivity is strained by official coding, interaction, and access.

Neutrality is strained by class ideology and unnamed standpoint.

Marx, Mead, Merton, **Oakley**, and **Harding** name those strains.

The remedy is named values plus public evidence, not pretended nowhere.

Introduction

Objectivity is disciplined demonstration. Value neutrality is the attempt not to smuggle a moral verdict into the proof. In social science both are problems, because the object talks back and the researcher already lives in the same moral world.

Body

Weber's split, and why it is hard

- **Max Weber** separated value-relevance, which selects the problem, from value-freedom in the demonstration. The ideal type is a tool, not a sermon.
- The problem is that selection already frames what will count as a fact. Neutrality at the end cannot fully undo a loaded beginning.

Practical problems of objectivity

- Official records, as **Emile Durkheim** used for suicide, are already coded by offices. The researcher inherits a standpoint.
- George Herbert Mead and later interactionists show that interview and observation are social relations, not a one-way mirror. Ann **Oakley** made that point for the interview.
- Funding, caste, gender, and nation shape access. Hidden groups reached by snowballing carry the first seed's bias.
- **Reliability can be high while validity is poor:** a consistent scale may miss meaning.

Problems of value neutrality

- **Karl Marx** treated knowledge as tied to class location. Pretended neutrality can be the ideology of the powerful.
- Robert K. Merton's ethos of science names organised scepticism, yet science itself is a social institution with rewards.
- Talcott Parsons's system language can hide conflict as "tension management."
- Sandra **Harding**'s strong objectivity argues that unnamed standpoint is a bias, not a virtue.

What can still be done

- Name values, triangulate sources, compare cases, and keep the demonstration public.
- Do not confuse advocacy with evidence, and do not confuse silence about values with science.

Flow diagram

Value-relevance -> Problem choice
Demonstration -> Objectivity
Standpoint records interaction -> Demonstration
Problem choice -> Demonstration

Conclusion

Objectivity and value neutrality are regulative aims, not possessions. **Weber**'s split remains the best starting rule. **Marx**, Mead, Merton, **Oakley**, and **Harding** show why the rule is always under strain in social research.

Facts & figures

Weber

Value-relevance selects questions; demonstration must still follow evidence and ideal-typical clarity.

Durkheim

Used official suicide files that were already administratively constructed.

Harding

Strong objectivity: making standpoint explicit can yield more disciplined knowledge.

Oakley

Showed the interview as a gendered social relation, not a neutral extraction.