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Q3(c)

Examine epistemological foundation of qualitative methods of social research

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Research Methods and Analysis

Research Methods and Analysis: Qualitative and quantitative methods; Techniques of data collection; Variables, sampling, hypothesis, reliability and validity.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the epistemological foundation of qualitative methods of social research
- Keep the examination within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Qualitative epistemology:** social reality is meaningful and situated.

Weber, Schutz, and Blumer supply the foundations.

Methods follow people into context rather than only into items.

Reflexivity and saturation are checks, not ornaments.

Indian ethnographies of village, mill, and SHG rest on this claim.

Introduction

Qualitative methods rest on the claim that social reality is meaningful, situated, and historically produced. Knowledge of it comes from interpreting action in context, not only from counting standardised items. That is an epistemology, not a dislike of numbers.

Body

Foundational claims

- **Max Weber's Verstehen:** to know a social fact is to grasp meaning adequate to the actor and then to compare.
- **Alfred Schutz's life-world:** the everyday stock of knowledge is the first given, not a residual.
- **Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism:** meaning arises in interaction; methods must follow people into that process.

What follows for method

- Participant observation, unstructured interview, and case study are justified because closed items can miss the object.
- Grounded theory, after Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, builds categories from cases until saturation.
- Reflexivity, after Ann Oakley and feminist standpoint work, treats the interview as a relation, not a tap.

Relation to positivism

- The foundation is anti-reduction, not anti-evidence. Documents and talk are still public enough to dispute.
- Indian village studies, mill ethnographies, and SHG life-histories rest on this epistemology.

Flow diagram

Meaningful reality -> Verstehen

Verstehen -> Observation interview case

Reflexivity -> Observation interview case

Observation interview case -> Situated knowledge

Conclusion

Qualitative methods are founded on meaning, context, and interaction as real. **Weber**, **Schutz**, and **Blumer** justify why a codebook can be too early. Reflexivity keeps the account checkable rather than private.

Facts & figures

Verstehen

Weber's epistemological requirement of meaning-adequacy.

Schutz

Life-world as the ground of social knowledge.

Blumer

Meanings are made in interaction; methods must be exploratory enough to catch them.

Oakley

The interview is a social relation; epistemology includes that power.

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