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Q2(b)

Examine the basic postulates of positivism and post-positivism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the basic postulates of positivism and post-positivism
- Keep the examination within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Positivism:** external reality, general laws, social facts as things, value-free proof.

Comte and Durkheim are the sociological anchors.

- **Post-positivism:** fallible, theory-laden knowledge, falsification, paradigms, named standpoint.

Popper, Kuhn, Bhaskar, and Harding mark that shift.

Practice becomes mixed methods without abandoning public tests.

Introduction

- **Positivism holds that social science can copy the success of natural science:** observation, law, and value-free proof. Post-positivism keeps the demand for evidence but drops the mirror theory of knowledge. Both still organise how suicide rates and Census cells are read.

Body**Positivist postulates**

- Reality is external and knowable through the senses and instruments.
- Science seeks general laws. Auguste Comte's three stages end in the positive stage.
- **Emile Durkheim's rules:** social facts as things, comparative method, rejection of introspection as the main path.
- Value-freedom in demonstration, as Max Weber also wanted, even if he was not a Comtean.
- Quantification, operational definitions, and probability sampling as the gold path, later seen in NFHS-style surveys.

Limits already inside the classics

- Weber insisted on meaning and ideal types. That is a crack in thin positivism.
- Marx treated appearances as ideological. Surface facts are not the last word.

Post-positivist postulates

- Karl Popper replaced verification with falsification. Laws are conjectures that survive tests.
- Thomas Kuhn described paradigms and normal science, so "the facts" arrive inside a community.

- Willard Quine and later critical realists, such as Roy Bhaskar, denied a clean theory-observation split.
- Knowledge is fallible, theory-laden, and still about a real world. Sandra **Harding**'s strong objectivity names standpoint instead of pretending none.

In sociological practice

- **Post-positivism allows mixed methods:** rates plus ethnography, as in studies of informal labour.
- It does not license "anything goes". Claims still need public checks.

Contrast

- **Positivism:** correspondence, verification, spectator observer.
- **Post-positivism:** approximation, test, reflexive observer.

Flow diagram

Positivism -> Laws verification
Positivism -> Facts as things
Post-positivism -> Falsification fallibilism
Post-positivism -> Paradigm standpoint
Evidence still required -> Positivism
Evidence still required -> Post-positivism

Conclusion

Positivism postulated a lawful, observable social world and a value-clean method. Post-positivism keeps reality and evidence but treats knowledge as fallible, theory-laden, and standpoint-aware. **Durkheim**'s files remain; the philosophy of those files has shifted.

Facts & figures

Comte

Positive stage: science of observable relations, not theology or metaphysics.

Popper

Falsifiability as the mark of scientific statements.

Kuhn

Paradigms organise what counts as a fact in a research community.

Harding

Strong objectivity: making standpoint explicit can improve, not ruin, science.