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Q2(a)

Is non-positivist methodology scientific? Illustrate.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2018 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- Is non-positivist methodology scientific? Illustrate
- Keep the illustration within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Non-positivist method studies meaning, context, and domination.

It is scientific when claims are checkable and comparative.

Weber, Geertz, Marx, and Harding illustrate disciplined versions.

Oakley's housework interviews corrected official work variables.

It is unscientific as private story or as a fake national rate.

Introduction

Non-positivist methodology studies meaning, context, and critique rather than copying a thin natural-science model. It is scientific when it makes public, checkable claims. It is unscientific when it treats empathy as proof.

Body**What non-positivist method is**

- **Max Weber's interpretative sociology:** Verstehen plus causal adequacy.
- **Phenomenology and ethnography:** Alfred Schutz's life-world, Clifford Geertz's thick description.
- **Critical traditions:** Karl Marx's critique of appearance; feminist standpoint after Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith.
- **Historical comparison:** Barrington Moore, not a laboratory.

Why it can be scientific

- Science here means disciplined inference, not a sacred physics costume.
- **Karl Popper's falsifiability can apply to interpretative claims:** a reading can fail against documents.
- Triangulation, respondent checks, and prolonged fieldwork, as in William Foote Whyte, reduce private projection.
- Weber's ideal type is a tool of comparison, hence of test.

Illustrations

- **Weber's** Protestant Ethic is non-positivist in method and still an evidenced historical argument.
- Village ethnography that maps who eats with whom is checkable by another observer.
- Ann **Oakley's** interviews on housework produced a finding that **Census** work-status had missed, later echoed in time-use files.

When it is not scientific

- Unchecked storytelling, or using standpoint as a veto on evidence.
- Treating a single life-history as a national rate, which NFHS and the **Census** still own.

Verdict

- Non-positivist method is scientific as interpretative and critical discipline.
- It is not scientific as a licence to skip comparison.

Flow diagram

Non-positivist method -> Verstehen critique ethnography

Verstehen critique ethnography -> Public checks

Public checks -> Scientific

Unchecked empathy -> Not scientific

Conclusion

Yes, non-positivist methodology can be scientific if claims are public, comparative, and open to failure. **Weber**, **Geertz**, and feminist standpoint illustrate that path. It fails when meaning is only the researcher's wish.

Facts & figures

Weber

Science of meaning with ideal types and causal adequacy.

Popper

Falsifiability as a mark that interpretative claims can still meet.

Geertz

Thick description as a public, contestable reading of symbols.

Oakley

Qualitative work that exposed a bias in official labour measurement.