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Q2(b)

Bring out the significance of Ethnography in social research

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · 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

- Bring out the significance of Ethnography in social research
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Ethnography is prolonged observation of everyday worlds.

Malinowski, Geertz, Whyte, and Srinivas show organisation and thick meaning.

It operationalises verstehen and members' methods.

Informal labour and village studies need it.

It complements, and does not replace, Census and NFHS rates.

Introduction

Ethnography is prolonged, first-hand study of a group's everyday world through observation, talk, and records. Its significance is not colour for a survey. It is a way of seeing meaning, practice, and power that a questionnaire often misses.

Body**What it uniquely yields**

- Bronislaw Malinowski's Trobriand fieldwork set the standard of living among the people and seeing the imponderabilia of actual life.
- Clifford Geertz's thick description ties public symbols to local sense, so the account can be disputed.
- William Foote Whyte's street-corner study showed organisation in a world that official files called disorganised.

Significance for theory

- **Emile Durkheim's rates need a complement:** how suicide or worship is done in situ.
- Max Weber's verstehen is operationalised as watching action with intended meaning.
- Herbert Blumer's symbolic interaction and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology both live on ethnographic attention to members' methods.
- M. N. Srinivas's village studies and Sanskritisation came from staying, not from a one-shot poll.

Practical uses

- Informal labour, caste panchayats, and SHG meetings are poorly counted until someone sits there.
- Policy failure, as in clinic queues or school midday meals, shows in practice what NFHS cells only hint.
- Multi-sited work now follows migrants and apps across places.

Limits and ethics

- Small N, researcher effect, and the colonial history of the gaze are real.
- Ann Oakley and feminist ethnography demand that the relation of interview be named.
- It cannot replace **Census** totals. Its significance is validity of meaning, not a national percentage.

Why it still matters

- Without ethnography, variables float free of the life they name.
- With only ethnography, structure and comparison thin out.

Flow diagram

Ethnography -> Prolonged presence
Prolonged presence -> Meaning practice power
Meaning practice power -> Theory building
Survey Census -> Rates
Ethnography -> Validity of meaning

Conclusion

Ethnography matters because it recovers practice, meaning, and the hidden organisation of everyday life. **Malinowski**, **Geertz**, **Whyte**, and **Srinivas** show the yield. Pair it with surveys and archives. Do not treat it as a soft extra.

Facts & figures

Malinowski

Argonauts: living in situ and recording the imponderabilia of actual life.

Geertz

Thick description: meaning in public symbols that other readers can contest.

Srinivas

Fieldwork-based village sociology and the idea of Sanskritisation.

Whyte

Street Corner Society: structure among men official sociology had called unorganised.

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