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Q6(c)

Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of social survey method in social research.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · 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

- Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of social survey method in social research
- Keep the analysis within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Surveys estimate population rates with known error.

NFHS and NSSO illustrate Indian strengths.

- **Weaknesses:** thin meaning, missing frames, social desirability, weak process.

Blumer, Weber, and Oakley name those limits.

Use for prevalence; pair with fieldwork for why.

Introduction

The social survey asks standardised questions of a sample to describe a population. NFHS and NSSO are Indian strengths of the method. Weakness begins when meaning, power, and absence from the frame are forced into a tick.

Body

Strengths

- Probability surveys estimate rates with known error, which ethnography cannot.
- **Comparison over time and regions:** fertility, work, and education become public facts, as Emile Durkheim needed rates.
- Policy can be checked. Anonymised large N reduces some interviewer whims.
- Mixed with a census frame, it can represent hidden rural interiors better than a city anecdote.

Weaknesses

- Max Weber's meaning thins in a closed option. Herbert Blumer warned of frozen variables.
- Frames miss pavement dwellers and some migrants. Informal labour is undercounted.
- **Ann Oakley:** the interview is a relation; a schedule can still extract.
- Social desirability on caste, violence, and income. Translation fails across languages.
- Causation is weaker than a well-chosen comparison of processes.

Analysis

- Use surveys for prevalence and gradients.
- Do not use them as the whole of verstehen or of class struggle.
- Strength is at its peak when the question matches a well-defined indicator.

Flow diagram

Social survey -> Rates comparison error
Social survey -> Meaning frame gaps
NFHS NSSO NSSO -> Rates comparison error
Ethnography -> Meaning process

Conclusion

Social surveys are strong for population rates, comparison, and democratic publicity of facts. They are weak for meaning, unlisted lives, and causal process. **Durkheim** needs them; Geertz cannot live on them. Analyse by matching tool to claim, as **NFHS** versus a village ethnography shows.

Facts & figures

NFHS

Large household survey of health, fertility, and gender indicators.

NSSO / PLFS

Survey architecture for work and consumption, still strained by informality.

Durkheim

Showed why rates matter; also showed dependence on official classification.

Blumer

Variable analysis can miss how actors define the situation.

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