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Q2(b)

How far are sociologists justified in using positivist approach to understand social reality ? Explain with suitable illustrations

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · 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

- How does a researcher explain social phenomena using positivist approach? Illustrate
- Keep the explanation within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Positivism:** observe, operationalise, compare, seek laws.

Comte named it; Durkheim illustrated it with suicide and division of labour.

Census and NFHS are contemporary illustrations of measurable constraint.

Lockdown rates can test anomie if coding is stable.

Weber and Garfinkel show the meaning and assembly that numbers miss.

Introduction

A positivist approach treats social reality as observable, law-seeking, and independent of the researcher's wish. The researcher states a concept, operationalises it, collects comparable facts, and tests relations. Auguste Comte named the programme. Emile Durkheim gave its classic sociological form.

Body

The positivist sequence

- Discard prenotions. Define the phenomenon as a social fact, external and constraining, not as a sermon.
- **Build indicators:** rates, ranks, and yes-no codes that another worker could apply.
- **Seek regularities:** comparison across groups, times, or places, in the spirit of Comte's statics and dynamics.
- Prefer correlation and concomitant variation over introspection as the first proof.

Durkheim as illustration

- **Suicide** was not explained by the private poem of despair. Official counts were classified as egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic, then related to integration and regulation.
- The Division of Labour used law types as an indicator of solidarity. That is operationalisation, not a photograph of feeling.

Contemporary illustrations

- **Census** work-participation and household type are positivist files on structure, if definitions are held stable.
- **NFHS** anaemia, fertility, and decision-making items test claims about gender inequality as measurable constraint.
- Crime and accident series, used carefully, can test anomie after a shock such as lockdown, when rules of work collapsed for migrants.

How explanation is written

- **The form is:** variation in X (integration, class, education) is associated with variation in Y (**suicide**, fertility, mobility), other things held as comparable.
- Ideal types in a loose Comtean sense are not required; variables and hypotheses are.

Limits that still belong in the answer

- **Max Weber** insisted that meaning of action is not a thing. Positivism underplays Verstehen.
- Harold Garfinkel and Cicourel show that the "fact" is assembled in talk and offices.
- Illustration does not mean the approach is sufficient. It means it can explain rates and patterns that common sense cannot see.

Flow diagram

Positivist approach -> Define operationalise
Define operationalise -> Rates Census NFHS
Rates Census NFHS -> Regularities
Regularities -> Explain phenomena
Weber meaning -> Limits

Conclusion

Positivist explanation operationalises social facts, compares, and tests regularities. **Durkheim's** **suicide**, **Census** and **NFHS** indicators, and shock-period rates illustrate the method. **Weber** and ethnomethodology mark what rates miss: meaning and the making of the record.

Facts & figures

Comte

Positive stage: knowledge of invariable relations among observables, not of first causes.

Suicide (1897)

Classic positivist sociological explanation using official rates and types of solidarity.

Operational definition

A rule that turns a concept such as work or household into a countable indicator.

NFHS

Repeated survey indicators used to test hypotheses on health, fertility, and gender.

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