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Q1(b)

How does a researcher achieve objectivity in interpretative research?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 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

- How does a researcher achieve objectivity in interpretative research?
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Interpretative research studies meaning, not only counts.

Weber kept value-relevance in problem choice and demanded value-discipline in proof.

Harding's strong objectivity names the researcher's location.

Geertz, prolonged fieldwork, triangulation, and respondent checks test the reading.

Empathy without evidence is not objectivity.

Introduction

Interpretative research seeks the meaning of action, not only a count of behaviour. Objectivity here is not a pretence that the observer has no standpoint. It is a disciplined way of checking that the account is of the actor's world, not only of the researcher's wish.

Body

What objectivity can mean in interpretation

- **Max Weber** split value-relevance, which selects the problem, from value-freedom in the demonstration. The ideal type is a tool, not a moral sermon.
- **Verstehen is controlled understanding**: the researcher reconstructs motives and then tests them against documents, talk, and comparison.
- Sandra **Harding's** strong objectivity asks the researcher to name her location, because hidden standpoint is a bias, not a virtue.

Practical checks

- Prolonged fieldwork, as in William Foote Whyte's street-corner study, reduces one-shot projection.
- Clifford **Geertz's** thick description ties meaning to public symbols, so the reading can be disputed by other observers.
- Triangulation of interview, observation, and record, and respondent validation, catch the researcher's favourite story.

- Reflexive notes record how the interviewer shaped the talk, which Ann Oakley showed is never a one-way extraction.

What it is not

- Objectivity is not the deletion of meaning. That would return to a thin positivism that Weber already rejected.
- It is not empathy without evidence. Feeling with the actor is a start, not a proof.

Flow diagram

Interpretative research -> Weber verstehen
Interpretative research -> Named standpoint
Weber verstehen -> Triangulation
Named standpoint -> Triangulation
Triangulation -> Checked account

Conclusion

In interpretative work, objectivity is achieved by naming values, reconstructing meaning with Weber's tools, and checking the reconstruction against several sources. Harding's reflexivity and Geertz's public symbols keep the account testable.

Facts & figures

Weber

Value-relevance selects the question; demonstration must still follow evidence and ideal-typical clarity.

Harding

Strong objectivity: making standpoint explicit can yield more, not less, disciplined knowledge.

Geertz

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

Oakley

Showed that the interview is a social relation; pretending otherwise hides the researcher's power.