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Q3(a)

What are the shortfalls of positivist philosophy that gave rise to the non-positivist methods of studying social reality ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · 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

- What are the shortfalls of positivist philosophy that gave rise to the non-positivist methods of studying social reality?
- Keep the answer within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Positivism treated social reality as external things and laws.

It missed meaning, standpoint, everyday rule-use, and emancipatory knowledge.

Weber, Schutz, Mead, Garfinkel, **Habermas**, **Harding**, and Oakley named those gaps.

Interpretative, ethnomethodological, and critical methods rose in reply.

Counts remain useful; they are not the whole of social reality.

Introduction

Positivist philosophy, from Auguste **Comte** to a strict reading of **Durkheim**, treated social reality as external facts to be observed like nature. Non-positivist methods grew where that picture failed: meaning, values, power in knowledge, and the agency of the subject could not be recovered as things.

Body

What positivism promised

- **Comte** sought laws of social statics and dynamics and a hierarchy of the sciences.
- **Durkheim's** Rules asked the sociologist to discard prenotions, treat social facts as things, and prefer rates and correlations.
- **The laboratory ideal travelled into survey measurement:** reliability, variables, and the observer as outsider.

Shortfalls that forced other methods

- **Meaning:** **Max Weber** argued that social action is defined by the actor's intended meaning. A rate without verstehen is a black box.
- Alfred Schutz showed that the everyday life-world already interprets; the sociologist is a second-order interpreter, not a chemist of the street.
- **Values:** the researcher's standpoint selects problems. Sandra **Harding's** critique of value-blind science, and feminist method after Ann Oakley, treated pretended neutrality as a male public

standpoint.

- **Process and indexicality:** Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology showed that rules are accomplished in talk. They are not only external things.
- **Critique and emancipation:** Jurgen **Habermas** argued that positivism collapses knowledge into technical control and ignores the practical and emancipatory interests of communication.
- George Herbert Mead's self, formed in interaction, cannot be read as a billiard ball of stimulus.

Methods that rose in reply

- Interpretative interview, participant observation, and thick description recover meaning.
- Standpoint and participatory work recover whose knowledge counts.
- Historical and critical comparison recover structure without pretending that the observer is nowhere.

What not to throw away

- **Durkheim**'s demand for evidence and comparison remains. Non-positivism is not a licence to invent.
- Mixed designs still use **Census** and NFHS counts, then interpret them.

Flow diagram

Positivism facts as things -> Shortfalls
Shortfalls -> Missing meaning
Shortfalls -> Hidden values
Shortfalls -> Agency and talk
Missing meaning -> Non-positivist methods
Hidden values -> Non-positivist methods
Agency and talk -> Non-positivist methods

Conclusion

Positivism fell short on meaning, values, everyday accomplishment, and the politics of knowledge. **Weber**, Schutz, Mead, Garfinkel, **Habermas**, **Harding**, and Oakley opened interpretative, interactionist, and critical methods. The gain is a fuller social reality. The duty of proof remains.

Facts & figures

Comte

Founded a positivist programme of social laws and scientific hierarchy.

Weber

Required interpretative understanding of intended meaning as the object of sociology.

Habermas

Criticised positivism for reducing knowledge to technical control of objects.

Harding

Argued that unexamined standpoint is a scientific failure, not a guarantee of objectivity.

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