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Q1(a)

What is the distinctiveness of the feminist method of social research? Comment

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · 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

- What is the distinctiveness of the feminist method of social research? Comment
- Keep the comment within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Feminist method starts from women's everyday work and treats gender as power, not as an extra variable.

Smith, Harding, Oakley, and Collins made standpoint, reflexivity, and intersection the core tools.

It criticises **Durkheim**-style distance that treated the male public actor as the normal subject.

Indian care work, dowry, and the **double day** show what occupation surveys miss.

The method stays empirical. It is not a substitute for evidence.

Introduction

The feminist method treats gender as a relation of power that shapes what is asked, who is heard, and how knowledge is certified. Its distinctiveness is not only that it studies women. It is a critique of methods that took the male public actor as the normal subject.

Body

What makes the method distinct

- **Dorothy Smith** argued that sociology had been written from a ruling standpoint and that research must start from women's everyday work of care, not from official categories alone.
- **Sandra Harding** and Nancy Hartsock treated standpoint as a claim that those who live subordination can see relations that the dominant group treats as natural.
- **Ann Oakley** showed that the textbook interview, which pretends to be a one-way extraction of facts, hides the interviewer's power and silences talk of housework, violence, and the body.
- **Patricia Hill Collins** added that race, class, and gender intersect, so a method that samples only middle-class women still misses Black and Dalit standpoints.
- The method therefore prefers reflexivity, the naming of the researcher's location, and methods that let respondents speak as knowers, not only as cases.

Contrast with older research rules

- **Emile Durkheim**'s Rules of Sociological Method asked the sociologist to treat social facts as things and to keep the observer outside the fact.
- **Max Weber** allowed verstehen, but his ideal types still often centred the public career of the male actor.
- Feminist work keeps systematic comparison and evidence. It rejects the claim that value-freedom is achieved by ignoring gender in the design of the study.

Comment

- Distinctiveness lies in the research question, the ethics of voice, and the reading of private labour as public structure.
- Indian illustrations include studies of unpaid care, dowry violence, and the **double day** of employed women, which survey items on occupation often miss.
- The method is not a licence to invent data. It is a demand that sampling, coding, and theory name gender instead of burying it in the household residual.

Flow diagram

Feminist method -> Standpoint of everyday work
Feminist method -> Reflexivity and voice
Feminist method -> Intersection of gender class race
Durkheim social facts -> Male public actor as normal
Standpoint of everyday work -> Gendered knowledge
Male public actor as normal -> Gendered knowledge

Conclusion

The feminist method is distinctive because it starts from gendered everyday life, treats the researcher as located, and treats private labour as a public fact. It remains scientific when it keeps evidence and comparison. It ceases to be distinctive if it only adds women as a variable and leaves the old standpoint unchanged.

Facts & figures

Dorothy Smith

Argued that sociology's concepts were written from a ruling standpoint and that enquiry should begin in women's everyday world.

Sandra Harding

Developed standpoint epistemology: knowledge is situated, and subordinated positions can yield stronger objectivity when made explicit.

Ann Oakley

Showed that the supposedly impersonal interview conceals power and is a poor tool for studying housework and reproduction.

Patricia Hill Collins

Stated that Black feminist thought requires intersection of race, class, and gender, not a single women's sample.

Double day

Paid work plus unpaid care, a pattern that standard occupational codes often fail to record as labour.

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