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Q2(b)

Do you think 'objectivity' is an over-hyped idea in sociological research? Discuss the merits and demerits of non-positivist methods

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 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

- Define objectivity as disciplined control of bias, not as a god's-eye view
- Discuss whether the idea is over-hyped in sociological research
- **State merits of non-positivist methods:** meaning, context, reflexivity
- **State demerits:** reliability, generalisation, power of the interpreter
- Keep **Weber**, **Durkheim** and later interpretive schools in view

Revision summary

Objectivity as a view from nowhere is over-hyped in sociology.

Objectivity as disciplined honesty toward evidence remains necessary.

Durkheim's thing-like social facts and **Weber's** value-neutrality mark the classical debate.

Non-positivist methods recover meaning, context and everyday methods.

Their demerits are reliability, small cases and the interpreter's power.

Standpoint theory and the **double hermeneutic** explain why purity fails and why method still matters.

Introduction

Objectivity in sociological research is the effort to let evidence constrain the researcher's wishes. **Emile Durkheim** wanted social facts treated as things. **Max Weber** asked for value-neutrality in the handling of data, while admitting that values shape the choice of problem. Some later writers treat objectivity as a myth and praise only interpretation. The question asks whether objectivity is over-praised, and what non-positivist methods can and cannot do.

Body

Is objectivity over-hyped?

A strong positivist version says that the sociologist can stand outside society like a chemist outside a compound. That version is over-hyped. Alvin Gouldner attacked the myth of a value-free sociology. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Dorothy Smith and Sandra Harding showed that a view from nowhere often hides a view from a powerful somewhere. Anthony Giddens's **double hermeneutic** states that people already interpret the world that sociologists

study. If objectivity means the erasure of the knower, the idea is inflated.

A weaker and more useful version remains necessary. Weber's demand was honesty about evidence, ideal types that can be checked, and a refusal to smuggle a political programme into a table. Karl Popper's stress on criticism and falsification, even if born in a different debate, supports this modest sense. Without some such discipline, ethnography becomes autobiography and theory becomes sermon. Objectivity is over-hyped as purity. It is not over-hyped as a working ethic of accountability to data and to alternative explanations.

Merits of non-positivist methods

Non-positivist methods include Weberian understanding, phenomenology after Alfred Schutz, symbolic interactionism after G. H. Mead and Herbert Blumer, ethnomethodology after Harold Garfinkel, and much of ethnography and qualitative interviewing. Their merit is access to meaning, motive and the taken-for-granted. They can show how a census category is used in daily life. They suit the study of stigma, ritual, caste honour and social movements. Clifford Geertz's thick description is a famous statement of this strength. In India, Srinivas's field view of the village could not have been replaced by rates alone.

Demerits of non-positivist methods

The same methods struggle with reliability, comparison and public check. Two observers may tell different stories of one neighbourhood. Samples are often small. The researcher's class, caste and gender can silently write the account. Howard Becker noted that we tend to take sides. Power-laden interviews can produce pleasing narratives. Policy still needs counts of poverty, crime and enrolment that non-positivist work does not replace. The demerit is not that meaning is fake. The demerit is that meaning is hard to discipline.

A balanced view therefore uses non-positivist methods for what they do well, and keeps a modest objectivity as the habit of showing the path from evidence to claim.

How to use both without hype

In a concrete research programme the two sides can sit in sequence. A census or NFHS table shows that women's work is under-counted. Interviews then show how a household names a woman as "not working" while she runs a farm and a shop. The table is a check on the anecdote. The interview is a check on the official category. Objectivity here means showing both steps, not claiming that the sociologist has no caste or gender. Non-positivist work that refuses any check becomes a sermon. Positivist work that refuses meaning becomes an administration of other people's lives. The over-hype is the claim of purity. The remaining task is a public trail from field to claim that another scholar can contest.

Flow diagram

Objectivity -> God-eye myth over-hyped

Objectivity -> Accountability to evidence

Non-positivist methods -> Meaning context

Non-positivist methods -> Reliability and generalisation problems

Conclusion

Objectivity is over-hyped when it pretends that the sociologist has no standpoint. It is still needed as honesty toward evidence. Non-positivist methods are strong on meaning and weak on easy generalisation. Good research holds both the critique of purity and the ethic of checkable claims.

Facts & figures

Weber on value-neutrality

Values shape topic choice, but the handling of evidence should not smuggle the researcher's politics as if it were data.

Double hermeneutic

Giddens's term for sociology's interpretation of a world that is already interpreted by actors.

Standpoint critique

Feminist argument that claimed neutrality often encodes dominant social positions.

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