

# Significance of social facts for Durkheim's work



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Why is the concept of social facts so significant for Durkheim's work? This essay will set out to explore Durkheim's concept of social facts, and will seek to explain the importance of these facts in relation to his work. Durkheim identified a group phenomena within society which he claimed could be studied independently. These phenomena referred to the different acts that we all engage in within society, such as values, beliefs, and laws that we follow, he referred to these as social facts. (Giddens, 1971)

Durkheim called social facts things as they acted outside of the individual, they emit pressure upon an individual to act in a particular, predictable way. As Durkheim put it: A social fact is identifiable through the power of external coercion which it exerts or is capable of exerting upon individuals (Durkheim, 1938) Durkheim saw this as being passed on through socialisation in children. These beliefs are what can govern our behaviour within society, and ensure that all within it behave in well established ways in order to maintain social order.

A social fact is defined in two ways; first is that they are external to the individual, and secondly they have some sort of control over the individual, such as a law that the individual knows exists and therefore certain behaviour will result in some sort of penalty.

Social facts were an important aspect of Durkheim's work, as he was attempting to see a role for the social which was distinguished from the psychological and biological aspect of life and the individual. He identified that these facts are rooted within society in group beliefs and values; they are not something that affects us in a psychological or biological way, such

as eating and sleeping, as although these are done by all within society they are a natural biological process. (Morrison, 1995)

Durkheim identified two different types of social fact; material and non-material. Durkheim saw material social facts as stemming from institutions such as religion, the governments, and law institutions. These are the physical structures within society that exert influence on individuals within society. The nonmaterial social facts come from areas that form our moral codes, beliefs and values which do not have a physical presence. Durkheim's view was that sociologists should study these social facts in an attempt to find the cause and also the functions of them; whether they are used to pass on values to children to maintain social order, or as a form of control for the institutions. (Durkheim, 1938)

Durkheim's theory of social facts was initially a breakthrough, as it gave way to study entire societies rather than just the individual. Durkheim developed the idea of studying social facts through many studies of his own.

Durkheim theorised that through the study of statistical data it would be possible to view society in an objective manner. One of Durkheim's most famous studies was the study of Suicide. He sought to explore this as a social fact, and not one which most consider to be a very personal, if not very anti-social act.

He saw suicide as being a social current which are characteristics of society, but may not be as stable as other social facts such as citizenship and work.

The social currents in the case of suicide are shown as suicide rates, a statistical representation of social facts according to Durkheim.

Durkheim's study showed that there was a pattern within suicide rates amongst different societies and different groups within those societies. This pattern was clear amongst different societies and although the pattern changed, it stayed apparent across all societies that he studied. (Durkheim, 1951)

One of the main patterns that emerged was in religion. Durkheim saw religion as a social fact, which was a controlling factor amongst those who followed it. Therefore to have a pattern amongst suicide emerge due to this control was a breakthrough in terms of his research within social facts.

Durkheim's research illustrated that there was a difference in suicide rates within Protestant and Catholic countries and communities. There were a higher number of suicides within Protestant society than Catholic ones. All branches of religion have a negative view of suicide and condemn it in various ways, therefore Durkheim theorised that there must be some other factor within these two that causes the difference in suicide rates, such as social organisation and family structure. In further studies Durkheim finds that when a family is more integrated the suicide rates drop. (Durkheim, 1951)

Durkheim's studies led him to believe that differences in suicide rates can be attributed to the degree of integration into society and the regulation of society. Durkheim considers the degree to which collective sentiments are shared (Ritzer, 1992) to be the key to the level of integration. As Catholics  
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have a more integrated society and family then Protestants this can be the key attribute as to why Protestants have a higher suicide rate; the main difference being the social organisation between the two religions and how this differs greatly. Durkheim also acknowledged that those who have larger families are less likely to commit suicide then those in smaller families. As Catholics are renowned for having large family organisations this can be seen as another cause for the differences in suicide rates.

The conclusion that Durkheim came to from this study is that the social suicide rate can be explained sociologically. He argued that different groups within society have different consciousness and it is these that can produce different social currents which lead to a difference in suicide rates. Durkheim claims that by studying these different groups within society some of the differences can be analysed which then means the effect on suicide rates can be seen, and also changes within the society in the collective conscious can lead to a change within these currents in society, which again can lead to a difference in the suicide rate patterns within these different groups.

(Durkheim, 1951)

Durkheims Suicide study was groundbreaking in the sense that it showed how social aspects of life can be used in order to explain the actions of individuals as opposed to the psychological and biological causes. The study illustrated Durkheims ideas behind social facts and showed how suicide rates can be an expression of the social currents that can affect the social facts that occur within society.

Durkheim's method was seen as radical at the time as it made sociology a standalone subject amongst the social sciences. With his method of research and his theories he managed to distance the social from the psychological and biological and be seen as a true subject in its own right. The empirical studies that he did showed that social facts based on the collective consciousness couldn't be categorised within psychological or biological as they existed outside of the individual conscience.

The work he did was important for anthropological studies as well as sociological ones as many researchers after him gathered empirical research of social facts in order to explain different social phenomena.

Durkheim's work and method of analysis paved the way for analysis today as his method is still used. Social causes are now recognised within causes of suicide and are often used in new studies of suicide rates. Durkheim's work helped researchers in understanding the social factors that can help explain the phenomena of social facts, and how a social explanation now needs to be found when studying different aspects of society.

Durkheim had created a theory based around the collective consciousness which he had reinforced with his social facts, and with this he had created a way to study the effect of these social facts on social phenomena. The methods he had created had completely revolutionised the way in which research could be conducted, and the theories could interpret the behaviour seen in different societies. He had made way for different thinking in regards to anthropological research and made it possible to study entire societies instead of an individual lost within a society. Many theorists since Durkheim

have developed further his ideas in their own research into social facts and explaining the difference causes for behaviour within our society.