

Social facts

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Social Facts Durkheim defined social facts as things external to, and coercive of, the actor. These are created from collective forces and do not emanate from the individual (Hadden, p. 104). While they may not seem to be observable, social facts are things, and "are to be studied empirically, not philosophically" (Ritzer, p. 78). They cannot be deduced from pure reason or thought, but require a study of history and society in order to observe their effects and understand the nature of these social facts. In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim begins by noting features such as the following (quote 3): Social Facts.

When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom. Even if they conform to my own sentiments and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited them through my education. (Rules, p. 1). As examples of social facts, Durkheim cites religious beliefs, currency used to undertake transactions, and factors such as "the practices followed in my profession" (Rules, p. 2).

These types of conduct or thought are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of his individual will. (Rules, p. 2). While obligations, values, attitudes, and beliefs may appear to be individual, Durkheim argues that these social facts exist at the level of society as a whole, arising from social relationships and human association. They exist as a result of social interactions and historical developments over long periods of time, and come from "varying collective representations and diverse

forms of social organization" (Hadden, p. 04). As individuals who are born and raised in a society, these social facts are learned (through socialization) and generally accepted, but the individual has nothing to do with establishing these. While society is composed of individuals, society is not just the sum of individuals, and these facts exist at the level of society, not at the individual level. As such, these social facts do exist, they are the social reality of society, a reality that constitutes the proper study of sociology (Cuff et al. , p. 33). The study of social facts is the " distinct object or subject matter of sociology" (Hadden, p. 105). Durkheim distinguishes social facts from psychological, biological, or economic facts by noting that these are social and rooted in group sentiments and values. At the same time, he distinguishes the study of social facts from philosophy by noting that the real effects of social facts are " manifested in external indicators of sentiments such as religious doctrines, laws, moral codes" (Hadden, p. 105) and these effects can be observed and studied by the sociologist. The study of social facts is thus a large part of the study of sociology. In order to do this, the sociologist must " rid themselves of preconceptions" (Hadden, p. 07) and undertake objective study which can " focus on objective, external indicators such as religious doctrines or laws" (Hadden, p. 107). Each social fact is real, something that is constraining on the individual and external to the actor. The social fact is not just in the mind of the individual - that is, these facts are more than psychological facts. That these exist in society as a whole, over time, and sometimes across societies, provides some proof of this. At the same time they are in the minds of individuals so they are also mental states.

Ritzer notes that social facts can be considered to be mental phenomena that are external to and coercive of psychological facts, such as human instincts. The individual mental state could be considered to intervene between social fact and action (Ritzer, p. 105). Durkheim may not have provided a sufficient analysis of the assumptions underlying, or the characteristics of, these mental states. For Durkheim the study of sociology should be the study of social facts, attempting to find the causes of social facts and the functions of these social facts.

Social facts regulate human social action and act as constraints over individual behaviour and action. They may be enforced with law, with clearly defined penalties associated with violation of the sentiments and values of the group. Sanctions may be associated with social facts, for example as in religion, where resistance may result in disapproval from others or from spiritual leaders. Individuals may be unaware of social facts and generally accept them. In this case, individuals may accept the values and codes of society and accept them as their own.

Two types of social facts are material and non-material social facts. Material social facts are features of society such as social structures and institutions. These could be the system of law, the economy, church and many aspects of religion, the state, and educational institutions and structures. They could also include features such as channels of communication, urban structures, and population distribution. While these are important for understanding the structures and form of interaction in any society, it is nonmaterial social facts that constitute the main subject of study of sociology.

Nonmaterial social facts are social facts which do not have a material reality. They consist of features such as norms, values, and systems of morality. Some contemporary examples are the norm of the one to three childfamily, the positive values associated with family structures, and the negative associations connected to aggression and anger. In Durkheim's terminology, some of these nonmaterial social facts are morality, collective consciousness, and social currents. An example of the latter is Durkheim's analysis of suicide. Social facts can also be divided into normal and pathological social facts (Hadden, pp. 08-9). Normal social facts are the most widely distributed and useful social facts, assisting in the maintenance of society and social life. Pathological social facts are those that we might associate with social problems and ills of various types. Suicide is one example of this, where social facts ought to be different. For Durkheim, the much greater frequency of the normal is proof of the superiority of the normal. Durkheim later modified the notion of a single collective consciousness, and adopted the view that there were collective representations as part of specific states of substrata of the collective.

That is, there may be different norms and values for different groups within society. These collective representations are also social facts because they are in the consciousness of some collective and are not reducible to individual consciousnesses (Ritzer, p. 87). The social structures, institutions, norms and values that have become part of the study of sociology can be derived from Durkheim's approach, and today there is little difficulty distinguishing sociology from psychology. B. Suicide

After Durkheim wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he tackled the subject of suicide as an example of how a sociologist can study a subject that seems extremely personal, with no social aspect to it - even being anti-social. It could be argued that suicide is such a personal act that it involves only personal psychology and purely individual thought processes. Durkheim's aim was not to explain or predict an individual tendency to suicide, but to explain one type of nonmaterial social facts, social currents.

Social currents are characteristics of society, but may not have the permanence and stability that some parts of collective consciousness or collective representation have. They may be associated with movements such as "enthusiasm, indignation, and pity." (Ritzer, p. 87). Hadden notes that Durkheim wished to show that sociological factors were "capable of explaining much about such anti-social phenomena" (Hadden, p. 109). In the case of suicide, these social currents are expressed as suicide rates, rates that differ among societies, and among different groups in society.

These rates show regularities over time, with changes in the rates often occurring at similar times in different societies. Thus these rates can be said to be social facts (or at least the statistical representation of social facts) in the sense that they are not just personal, but are societal characteristics. This can be seen in the following quote (quote 12): *Suicide Rates as Social Facts*. At each moment of its history, therefore, each society has a definite aptitude for suicide. The relative intensity of this aptitude is measured by taking the proportion between the total number of voluntary deaths and the population of every age and sex.

We will call this numerical datum the rate of mortality through suicide, characteristic of the society under consideration. ... The suicide-rate is therefore a factual order, unified and definite, as is shown by both its permanence and its variability. For this permanence would be inexplicable if it were not the result of a group of distinct characteristics, solidary with one another, and simultaneously effective in spite of different attendant circumstances; and this variability proves the concrete and individual quality of these same characteristics, since they vary with the individual character of society itself.

In short, these statistical data express the suicidal tendency with which each society is collectively afflicted. ... Each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths. This predisposition may therefore be the subject of a special study belonging to sociology. (Suicide, pp. 48, 51). Durkheim takes up the analysis of suicide in a very quantitative and statistical manner. While he did not have available to him very precise or complete data or sophisticated statistical techniques, his method is exemplary in showing how to test hypotheses, reject incorrect explanations for suicide, sort through a great variety of possible explanations, and attempt to control for extraneous factors. Some of the factors that others had used to explain suicide were heredity, climate, race, individual psychopathic states (mental illness), and imitation. As an example of Durkheim's method, consider how he analyzes cosmic factors, such as weather or season. Durkheim (Suicide, p. 107) notes that in all countries suicide is greater in the summer months, that no country is an exception to this, and that the

proportion of suicides in the six warmer months to the six colder months is very similar in each country.

Durkheim notes that this has led some commentators to say the "heat increases the excitability of the nervous system" (Suicide, p. 108). But suicide may result from depression as much as from over-excitement, and heat cannot possibly act the same way on both causes. Further, a closer analysis by Durkheim considers temperature variations and shows that while suicides increase in number as temperature increases, suicides reach a peak before the temperature does. In addition, if temperature is a cause of suicide, warm countries might be expected to have more suicides than cold countries, but the opposite tends to be the case.

A related explanation that Durkheim considers is that great changes in temperature are associated with suicide, but again he finds that there is no correlation between suicide rates and the fact of temperature change. Rather, the causes must be in some factor that has continuity over time. He then notes that the rates are more closely connected to the length of day, with suicides increasing as the days grow longer, and decreasing in number as the length of day declines. But it is not the sun itself which is the cause, because at noontime there are fewer suicides than at other times of the day.

What Durkheim finds is that the factors associated with higher numbers of suicides must be those that relate to "the time when social life is at its height" (Suicide, p. 119). The time of day, the day of week, the season of the year, and so on, are not in themselves the reason for the changes in the number of suicides. Rather, the times when social life and interaction among

people are greater, are also those associated with increased suicide. Durkheim concludes this section by saying (quote 13): Four Types of Suicide

The manner in which social integration and regulation work can be better seen by examining the four fold classification of suicides that Durkheim developed. Durkheim ends his discussion of the organic-psychic and physical environmental factors by concluding that they cannot explain " each social group[s] ... specific tendency to suicide. " (Suicide, p. 145). By eliminating other explanations, Durkheim claims that these tendencies must depend on social causes and must be collective phenomena.

The key to each type is a social factor, with the degrees of integration and regulation into society being either too high or too low. (The following discussion is drawn from Ritzer, pp. 90 ff.). 1. Egoistic Suicide. This is the type of suicide that occurs where the degree of social integration is low, and there is a sense of meaninglessness among individuals. In traditional societies, with mechanical solidarity, this is not likely to be the cause of suicide. There the strong collective consciousness gives people a broad sense of meaning to their lives.

Within modern society, the weaker collective consciousness means that people may not see the same meaning in their lives, and unrestrained pursuit of individual interests may lead to strong dissatisfaction. One of the results of this can be suicide. Individuals who are strongly integrated into a family structure, a religious group, or some other type of integrative group are less likely to encounter these problems, and that explains the lower suicide rates among them. The factors leading to egoistic suicide can be social currents such as depression and disillusionment.

For Durkheim, these are social forces or social facts, even though it is the depressed or melancholy individual who takes his or her life voluntarily. " Actors are never free of the force of the collectivity: 'However individualized a man may be, there is always something collective remaining - the very depression and melancholy resulting from this same exaggerated individualism. "' Also, on p. 214 of *Suicide*, Durkheim says " Thence are formed currents of depression and disillusionment emanating from no particular individual but expressing society's state of disillusionment. Durkheim notes that " the bond attaching man to life relaxes because that attaching him to society is itself slack. ... The individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance because the state of society has made him a ready prey to suicide. " (*Suicide*, pp. 214-215). 2. Altruistic Suicide. This is the type of suicide that occurs when integration is too great, the collective consciousness too strong, and the " individual is forced into committing suicide. " (Ritzer, p. 91). Integration may not be the direct cause of suicide here, but the social currents that go along with this very high degree of integration can lead to this.

The followers of Jim Jones of the People's Temple or the members of the Solar Temple are an example of this, as are ritual suicides in Japan. Ritzer notes that some may " feel it is their duty" to commit suicide. (p. 91). Examples in primitive society cited by Durkheim are suicides of those who are old and sick, suicides of women following the death of their husband, and suicides of followers after the death of a chief. According to Durkheim this type of suicide may actually " springs from hope, for it depends on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life. " 3.

Anomic Suicide

Anomie or anomy come from the Greek meaning lawlessness. Nomos means usage, custom, or law and nemein means to distribute. Anomy thus is social instability resulting from breakdown of standards and values. (Webster's Dictionary). This is a type of suicide related to too low a degree of regulation, or external constraint on people. As with the anomic division of labour, this can occur when the normal form of the division of labour is disrupted, and " the collectivity is temporarily incapable of exercising its authority over individuals. " (Ritzer, p. 92).

This can occur either during periods associated with economic depression (stock market crash of the 1930s) or over-rapid economic expansion. New situations with few norms, the regulative effect of structures is weakened, and the individual may feel rootless. In this situation, an individual may be subject to anomic social currents. People that are freed from constraints become " slaves to their passions, and as a result, according to Durkheim's view, commit a wide range of destructive acts, including killing themselves in greater numbers than they ordinarily would. " (Ritzer, p. , 92).

In addition to economic anomie, Durkheim also spends time examining domestic anomie. For example, suicides of family members may occur after the death of a husband or wife. 4. Fatalistic Suicide. When regulation is too strong, Durkheim considers the possibility that " persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" may see no way out. The individual sees no possible manner in which their lives can be improved, and when in a state of melancholy, may be subject to social currents of fatalistic suicide. Summary. Durkheim's analysis of suicide

shows the manner in which the social as opposed to the psychological and biological can be emphasized, and how it results in some useful ways of analyzing the actions of individuals. Suicide rates as expressions of social currents are social facts that affect societies and individuals within those societies. The study of psychology is still useful in attempting to determine individual motives and the manner in which the specific circumstances can lead to an individual deciding to voluntarily end their life. But an analysis of these circumstances should be set within the context of the social currents to which that individual is subject.

The method of analysis of Durkheim should prove useful even today. In terms of suicide, the social causes are now well recognized, and any analysis of suicide would have to include these. Some combination of egoistic, anomic, and fatalistic types of suicide may help explain and understand this phenomenon. More generally, the method of Suicide is exemplary in providing researchers with a means of understanding the social factors that are associated with particular phenomena. Durkheim examines patterns on the data in an attempt to determine how social factors can play a role in explaining these phenomena.

This might be applied to sociobiological arguments today. The trends themselves are not the cause, but indicative of a cause, a social explanation has to be found. C. Conclusions about Durkheim 1. Contributions a. Social Facts and Social Aspects. These are real things that do affect people. He had a strong structural view of society, and the manner in which each of us is influenced by these social facts and how we must fit into these. Durkheim

attempted to see a role for the social as distinguished from the economic, psychological and biological.

This can be seen in his view of the social influences on suicide rates, where he takes a wide variety of factors and considers their influence on the tendency or aptitude for suicide. The effect of each of these factors is not a simple connection between the factor and the tendency to suicide, but must be mediated by social factors. In particular, the social factors that he identified were the degree of integration and the degree of regulation. For modern theories of sociobiology, and the influence of genetics, Durkheim's approach could prove a useful counter.

Social Explanation. If voluntary deaths increase from January to July, it is not because heat disturbs the organism, but because social life is more intense. To be sure, this greater intensity derives from the greater ease of development of social life in the Summer than in the Winter, owing to the sun's position ... , the state of the atmosphere, etc. But the physical environment does not stimulate it directly; above all, it has no effect on the progression of suicide. The latter depends on social conditions. Suicide, pp. 121-122). While this is not a proof or determination of what causes suicide yet, Durkheim notes that the causes must relate to collective life and must be such that these time factors can be incorporated into an explanation. But the explanation must be social in nature, and cannot be simply related to natural factors, these natural factors must work socially, and affect some social aspects which are related to suicide. Note that Durkheim's method here is very empirical, and he searches through various sorts of data and evidence to find factors associated with suicide.

But the explanation is not simply a relation between these data and suicides. Rather he is searching for social causes or conditions that are expressed through these. That is, he uses data to discover patterns, but the patterns themselves are not the cause of the phenomenon. Rather the cause is social, and the observed, empirical patterns constitute a means of finding underlying causes. Another factor that Durkheim considers is religion. While he does find that religion is associated with suicide, in the sense that

Protestant countries and regions have higher suicide rates than do Catholic ones, religious doctrines are not an important factor in explaining these differences. That is, suicide is condemned more or less equally in each religion, and doctrinal statements concerning suicide are all negative. If there is a difference between the two religions with respect to suicide rates, it must be in some aspect of social organization that differs between the two churches. But if this is the factor related to suicide, then it is the social organization that is the cause of the difference, not religion in itself.

Giddens notes (p. 83) that Durkheim finds further proof of this in other factors related to social organization, that is, family structure. Where there is more integration in family structure, the suicides are lesser in number. Durkheim argues that the most important aspects of social organization and collective life for explaining differences in suicide rates are the degree of integration into and regulation by society. For Durkheim, integration is the "degree to which collective sentiments are shared" and regulation refers to "the degree of external constraint on people. (Ritzer, p. 90). Catholicism is a more highly integrated religion than Protestantism, and it is in this that the difference in suicide rates is expressed. That is, it is not the religious

doctrines themselves but the different social organization of the two religions. As Giddens notes (p. 83), degree of integration of family structure is related in the same way to suicides. Those in larger families are less likely to commit suicide, whereas those in smaller families, or single, are more likely. Over time, various social factors also make their influence felt.

Durkheim notes that there was a decline in the number of suicides in all the European countries in 1848, a year of revolution and political change throughout Europe. Times of political crisis, war, and economic change are also associated with changes in the rate of suicide. Each of these great social movements could be considered to be examples of social currents that have widespread impact within and across societies. Ritzer (p. 89) notes that Durkheim was making two arguments. First, he argued that different collectivities have different collective consciousness or collective representation.

These produce different social currents, and these lead to different suicide rates. By studying different groups and societies, some of these currents can be analyzed, and the effect of these on suicide can be determined. Second, changes in the collective consciousness lead to changes in social currents. These are then associated with changes in suicide rates (quote 14): Sociological Explanation. The conclusion from all these facts is that the social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically.

At any given moment the moral constitution of society established the contingent of voluntary deaths. There is, therefore, for each people a collective force of a definite amount of energy, impelling men to self-destruction. The victim's acts which at first seem to express only his

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personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally. ... Each social group really has a collective inclination for the act, quite its own, and the source of all individual inclination, rather than the result.

It is made up of the currents of egoism, altruism or anomy running through the society under consideration with the tendencies to languorous melancholy, active renunciation or exasperated weariness derivative from these currents. These tendencies of the whole social body, by affecting individuals, cause them to commit suicide. The private experiences usually thought to be the proximate causes of suicide have only the influence borrowed from the victim's moral predisposition, itself and echo of the moral state of society. (Suicide, pp. 299-300).

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