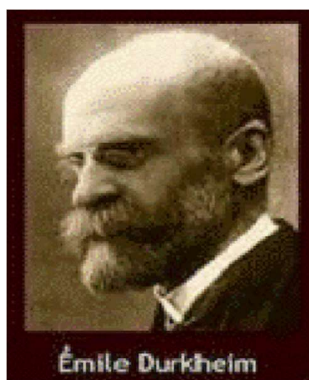


Level	Undergraduate (CBCS)
Subject Name	Sociology
Paper Name	Sociological Thinker I (CC11/GE3)
Subtopic	Emile Durkheim
Module	Social Fact
Prerequisites	Background knowledge about the basic approaches of Durkheim: conservative, positivist, and functionalist
Objectives	This module explains Durkheim's argument about sociology as a separate discipline and comparison with biology
Keywords	Social fact, sui generis, external, objective, coercive, independent, material fact, non-material fact

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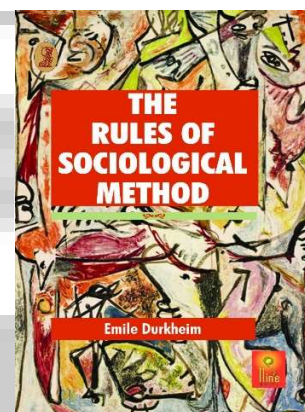
Durkheim's Social Fact

1. Introduction:

Durkheim has contributed a lot to the recognition of sociology as a new separate discipline from other age-old social sciences like philosophy, psychology, economics, political science. As a positivist, he thought that it was possible to study society using scientific methods such as: measurement, observation, etc. So, according to him, sociology is a science and like other disciplines it has its own subject matter. He talked about “social fact” during the time of discussing the subject matter of sociology. In his book "The Rules of Sociological Method", in 1895 he talked about “social facts”.

2. Learning Objectives:

- 1) Which facts are social facts?
- 2) In which way did Durkheim try to study society?
- 3) How is sociology different from other social sciences and natural sciences?



3. Difference with other social sciences:

When trying to establish sociology as a separate subject, the biggest objection comes from psychology and philosophy. If these two subjects discuss everything in society, then there is no need for another new subject. Durkheim opposes this and explains how the subject of sociology differs from these two.

Philosophy studies society with logically connected abstract notions, it is not studying the real world empirically by observing social situations. Comte and Spencer consider this philosophical approach of abstract theorizing about society to be correct. But Durkheim said that society needs to be studied through empirical research, so sociology as a separate discipline is necessary to know society.

And sociology has been separated from psychology. In psychology, the mental state of a person is analyzed. Understanding an individual member or some individual members of a society does not mean understanding the whole society. When individuals involved in a web of relationships form a society together, the society rises above the individual and a separate entity is formed. Social conditions create external coercion not controlled by the internal drive and it is general in the whole society. So, to understand the social situation a new subject “sociology” is needed which will study society in a scientific way.

Here he draws a comparison from the world of biology that living cells are a combination of many molecules. When these molecules are specially arranged, we go to a level and see living cells that are completely different from those molecules. Molecules are studied by sciences like physics and chemistry but only biology studies living cells created by molecules. Biology, for example, deals with living cells created from the combination of molecules. Sociology studies the new unique social facts which are created by the association of human beings which cannot be studied by the science of individuals like psychology. It can be studied only by dedicated science to study social facts i.e., sociology.

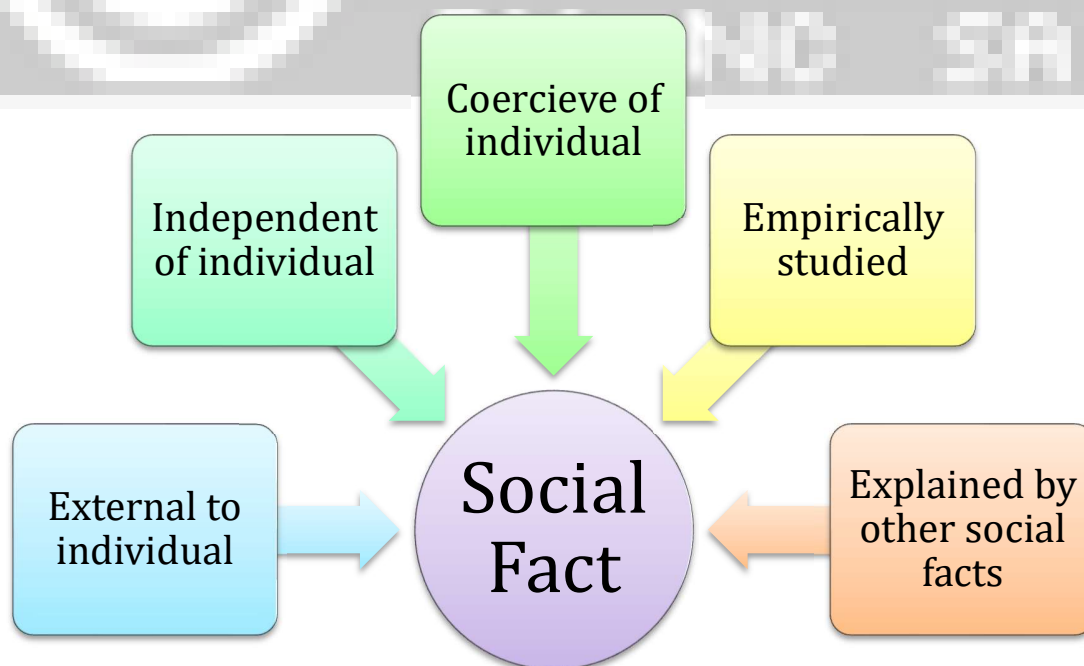
4. Which facts are social?

Sociology understands society through the study of social phenomena. Society can never be studied with personal incidents. Then we need to know which facts are social.

Social facts are constituted by the beliefs, tendencies, and practices of the group taken collectively. “The whole is more than the sum of the parts” (Aristotle, Book VIII, 1045a.8–10). Opponents can easily ask here, when a group of people has formed a team, to think of the team as something other than a group of individuals is to serve as a real mystery. He replied that the collective possesses characteristics, and has some peculiarities that cannot be found in the individuals which constitute them. Examples: density, cohesion, regulation, birth rate, suicide rate, etc. When people come together as a larger social entity, this process of unification creates a completely new phenomenon that is not found in the individual identity that makes

up the social fact. Durkheim called it in Latin "sui generis" meaning unique. So, it is not something mysterious or metaphysical. Social facts are a thing, not abstract. It can be studied empirically with observation and measurement. A social fact can only be known by other social facts. For example, social fact suicide rates of a society can be studied with other social facts social cohesion of that particular society.

Facts are 'social' when the subject creates an external compulsion on the person's thoughts and behaviour. When I perform the duties of a brother/sister, husband/wife, and citizen, I have certain obligations by custom, law, etc. Even if it suits my own instincts, it is objective and controlled by my behaviour. All social actions are external to and independent of actors. The way to act, think and feel in this way is beyond one's consciousness. These social events force coercion on a person's behaviour. It doesn't feel like an obligation to do what you like, but if you oppose in any way, you can understand how much resistance is being felt. In short, social facts are social structures and cultural norms and values that are external to, independent of, and coercive to individual actors. For e.g. Religion is a social fact. Religion is a thing that must be studied empirically. It is external to individuals; its main function is to maintain cohesion in society. It is coercive of an individual's thinking and activities. Religion can be explained only by other social facts suicide rate, birth rate, etc.



5. Types of social facts:

Durkheim stated that there are two types of social facts: material and non-material. Direct observation of material social facts is possible. Examples: the style of architecture, forms of technology, and legal codes. These material social facts are manifestations of some even greater moral power. They are objective social phenomena.

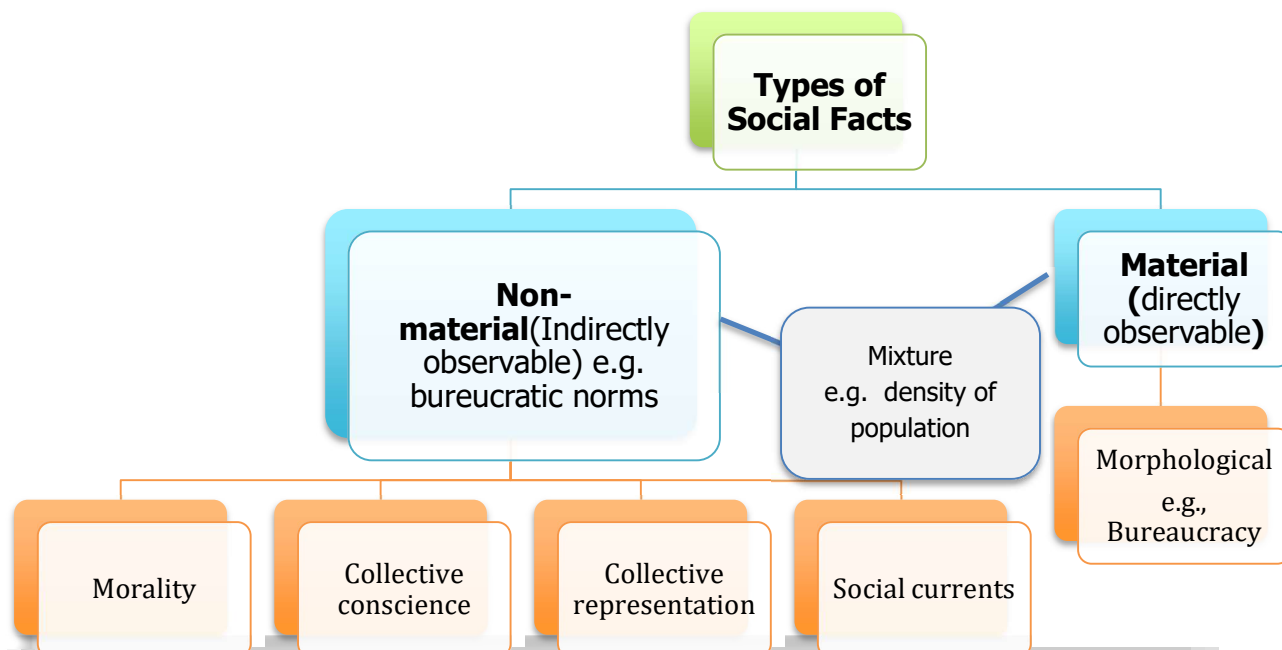
About non-material facts indirect observations i.e., reflection on an individual's behaviour is possible. Examples: norms, values, and culture. There are four different types of non-material social facts: morality, collective conscience, collective representations, and social currents.

Morality can be reflected as institutional obligations which are related to the social good.

The collective conscience is the “totality” of people’s beliefs and sentiments. It is a general structure of shared understandings, norms, and beliefs.

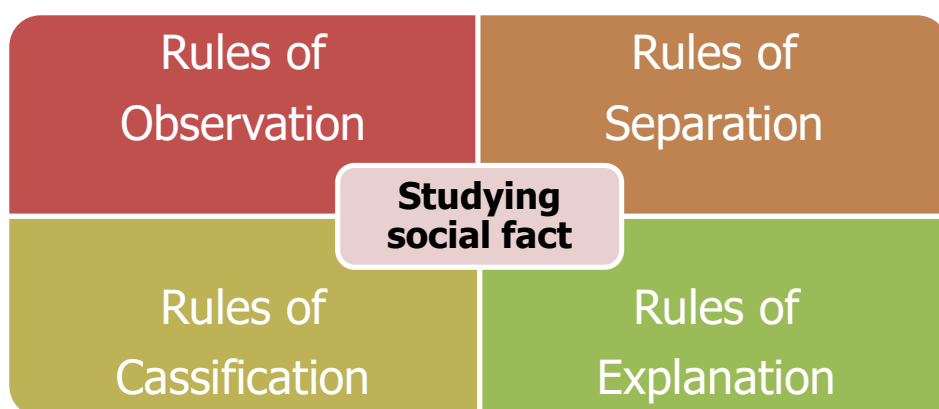
Durkheim used collective representations to refer to both a collective concept and a social “force”. For e.g., symbols like flags, icons, pictures etc.

Some social facts cannot exist without a specific social organization. But some facts are not in such crystalised form. Durkheim called these social currents. No one is aware of the huge amount of excitement, anger, and sadness that is generated in public gatherings. “Social currents are less concrete than other social facts” (Ritzer,2010, p.83). But for some reasons like when we struggle against common feelings resistance can be felt. Social currents can only be explained in terms of the interactions between individuals.



6. Four rules for studying social Facts:

- I) Rules of observation: Directly observable/Indirectly observable
- II) Rules of classification: Material/Non-material
- III) Rules of separation: Normal (functional to society)
and pathological (non-functional to society)
- IV) Rules of explanation: We can causal explanations of social facts.



7. Conclusion:

We can study social facts by applying these scientific methods. Therefore, Sociology can be studied scientifically and its subject matter is social facts.

Self-check exercise:

1. What is social Fact?
2. Which facts are social facts?
3. How can social facts be studied?
4. Why is sociology a distinctive discipline from philosophy and psychology?
5. Why do we need sociology to study society?
6. Why did Durkheim compare sociology to biology?

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