



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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ALLISON L. HURST

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
CORVALLIS, OR



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I. Rules of Method (1895)

“Social facts are something more than the actions of individuals.” – Durkheim

NOTE ON SOURCE: These passages are from Durkheim's *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, published in 1895 in Paris by Alcan Press. This book was first translated as *The Rules of Sociological Method* in 1938 by Solovay and Mueller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), republished in 1950 by the Free Press (Glencoe, Illinois). The preferred translation today is by Lukes/Halls, published in 1982 by the Free Press (Glencoe, Illinois). The first section here is a synthesis of the Introduction and Chapter 1: *What is a Social Fact?* The second section covers points raised in the second and third chapters.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In this book, Durkheim sets out to establish sociology as a research discipline. In the section you have before you, he introduces readers to sociology and its methods. In particular, he describes the proper subject matter of sociology as “social facts.” The method presented here, analyzing social facts, is what distinguishes sociology from other pre-existing disciplines such as history and philosophy and sets it apart from other newly emerging disciplines of the day, such as psychology.

Part I: The Rules of Sociological Method (introduction)

Introduction

Until recently, sociologists have little cared to explain and define the method they use to study social facts. This shouldn't surprise us. So far, sociologists such as Spencer, Mill, and Comte, don't go much farther than talking about societies very generally. We still don't have a method for doing sociology. I have been fortunate to have the time to think about this subject and to come up with a method that I think will prove useful. Some of these were used and discussed in my previous book, *The Division of Social Labor*, but here I make them a bit more explicit. In this way, you, the reader, can see the way we are going in this new field of sociology.

What is a Social Fact?

Before getting to the method, we need to know what facts are “social.” This is an important question, because we need to know what is unique about the subject matter of sociology. We all drink, sleep, eat, and think, and perhaps society has an interest in making sure we do these things in a regular manner. But are these really social facts? Or are they simply things individuals do? How is sociology different from, say, biology and psychology, both of which are also interested in these things?

In reality, there is in every society a certain group of things which are different from what the natural sciences study.

When I do my duty as a brother, as a wife, or as a citizen, when I fulfill my obligations, pay my debts, take the actions expected of me by law and custom, I am acting in ways outside of my own creation. I might want to take care of my children, but this isn't all up to me. I have specific duties that I in no way created all by myself. In a way, I inherited them, through being a member of society. You could say I was socialized into them.

The system of signs and words that I use to communicate my thoughts to others, the form of currency I use to pay my debts, the credit card or bank check I use, the practices I follow in my chosen profession – all these things and many more function independently of my use of them.

Here we have the actions, the thoughts and the beliefs which uniquely exist outside each individual's own consciousness, and so provide a worthy subject for the study of sociology. Not only are these types of conduct outside the thoughts of the individual person, but they have a certain coercive power. If I try to resist it, I notice this quite readily.

Here then are an order of facts which present a special character: They consist in ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external to the individual person, and endowed with a power of coercion.

These social facts are the proper subject matter for sociologists.

To confirm these, let's take a look at the way we raise our children. It is quite obvious that all education has consisted of a continual effort to impose on the child manners of seeing, sensing, and acting that they would not otherwise have acquired. From the very first hours of her birth, we force her to eat, drink and sleep at regular times, and we train her to be neat, calm, and obedient. Later, we socialize her to be considerate of others, teach her to respect our customs, and prepare her for work. The goal of education is thus all about socializing each member of society to be proper members of that society.

So, we should not define a social fact as something that is universal – while everyone eats and drinks those things are still not social facts. What makes something a social fact is the collective aspect of the beliefs, tendencies and practices of a group.

Collective habits don't exist only in the actions of individuals, but rather express themselves over and over in a form passed on by word of mouth from person to person, by education, or by the written word. Such is the origin and nature of laws, morals, aphorisms and popular sayings...all of these are still social facts and true even when someone is not following them!

Social facts are something more than the actions of individuals.

Let's take the examples of marriage or suicide. These are things that are done by individuals and they can appear quite private in nature. But we also know that certain groups get married at different rates, and that the suicide rate is higher at one point in history than other, and that it varies by age of person as well. Statistical measures allow us a way to isolate the collective aspect from the individual case, by comparing rates across groups and times. If we look at the averages, we get a certain state of the collective soul.

Sociology is the study of social facts. A social fact can be recognized by the coercive power it exercises (or is capable of exercising) on individuals. We can recognize this coercive power by the existence of sanctions – what happens when someone doesn't follow the rule, practice, or custom? Note that this includes whole ways of being, not just ways of acting. Everything we do and are that is not biologically determined can be considered a social fact.

A social fact is every way of being and acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising an external constraint on the individual; in other words, it is that which is general in the whole society, independent from individual manifestations.

Part 2

Chapter 2: Rules for the Observation of Social Facts

Section 1. Treat Social Facts as Things

The first rule, and the most fundamental, is to consider social facts as things.

People inevitably think about what is going on in their environment. They form concepts about such things as marriage, the state, the relationships between parents and children. The problem is that we can mistake these concepts for the things themselves. Thus, two people can argue about the definition of marriage without actually examining marriage in reality. Sociologists have to do better than talk about the concepts – they have to study the actual existing social facts. This is what it means to treat social facts as things, with their own reality, and not as concepts in our minds only.

Such it is that reflection occurs before science, while science makes use of this reflection in a methodical manner.

The goal of the rest of this book is to describe what that methodical manner is. Up until now, sociology has really only dealt with concepts, not with the things themselves. Anyone who looks at society teleologically, for example, trying to discover how progress evolves, takes things quite backwardly. This is what Comte tried

to do. How can one look at a perfect future society when it doesn't yet exist? How can one be scientific about that? Or consider those concerned with ethics. Here, one is discussing ideas (what is good? What is just?) but not things in reality.

Putting all that aside, I have to reiterate that social phenomena are actual things and they should be treated as things when we study them. *Social facts as things are the unique subject matter of sociological study. They are our data.*

To treat phenomena as things, as data, is the point of departure for the science of sociology.

We can't study the idea people have of what is valuable, but we can study the values they establish. We can't grasp the concept of goodness or rightness in the abstract, but we can examine the rules put in place for governing good or right behavior. We can't study the concept of wealth itself, but we can look at the details of how our economy is organized.

We must consider social phenomena in themselves, not the ideas people have of them; we must study them objectively, from the outside, for it is that quality that presents itself to us as sociologists.

How do we do this? If we want to study law, we can look at the codes. If we want to understand daily life, we can look at all the recorded facts and figures about our attitudes and behaviors. We can see and evaluate fashion through costume, "taste" in works of art. Compared to psychology, the data we study as sociologists might be more difficult to analyze because of their complexity, but they are much easier to get hold of.

Section 2. Guidelines for Sociologists

The fundamental rule for sociologists is to treat social things as things, but there are several corollary rules and guidelines for how to do that.

First, systematically rid yourself of all preconceived ideas.

You are a human being yourself and hold ideas and prejudices about the world. When you are a sociologist, however, you have to be objective, neutral about the facts you are studying. Really, that is the essence of the scientific method.

Second, operationalize your data in advance and then examine all cases that fit your definition.

For example, we group together all those acts which produce a certain social reaction, punishment, and call them crimes. We don't pick and choose what is or is not a crime based on what we personally think should be one. By doing this we assure ourselves that we are grounded in reality.

Third, consider social facts from a point distinct from their individual manifestations.

Section 3. Rules on the distinction between Normal and Pathological

We must be careful to distinguish between observing things that are as they ought to be and observing things that are not as they ought to be – what I am calling “normal” and “pathological” phenomena. Some people say that it is not the place of science to say whether something is as it ought to be or otherwise. There is no “good and evil” in science. But if science cannot help us in selecting the best goals to pursue, how can it help us arrive at the goal?

Here is my solution to the problem. Just as with individual people, societies can be healthy, or they can be sick. Sociology can help us distinguish the two. We can't say what is healthy for any one individual, of course, but we can find out what is healthy for society as a whole. Health, we can say, is that which is most adaptive to the particular environment and sickness is that which upsets that adaptation. Or, health is that state in which our chances of survival (as a society) are greatest. We do not mean the health of any one particular individual.

Two examples: old age is not a sickness, because it is a normal stage of the species. Menstruation is not a sickness, because it is a normal activity of women. The absence of either of these two normal phenomena would not mark “health,” but rather sickness!

How are we to recognize sickness then? We should look for some notable external sign (again, treating social facts as things). Those facts which appear common among a society (or a group thereof, such as women), we shall call normal, and the rest we can call pathological. Just as the physiologist looks at the average organism, so too does the sociologist. Furthermore, a social fact is normal in a given group in relation to particular context (temporal and spatial).

Why is the normal considered healthy? It would be surprising if the most widespread phenomena were not beneficial, at least at the aggregate level. Why else would they exist and persist for so long? The greater frequency of normal phenomena can be taken as proof of their health. During times of transition, however, what is normal is often hard to pin down. So, it is also important to take the following steps: (1) find a widespread social fact; (2) trace back the conditions of the past, the environmental context, which gave birth to this fact; and (3) investigate whether the environmental context has shifted. If the conditions that gave rise to it are still the same, and it is general, we can consider it normal. *If not, it may be maladapted to the present circumstances and in need of change.*

The Example of Crime. It would seem that crime would be pathological. Who would doubt that? But let us use our method and examine the question more closely. Crime is observed everywhere, in every society. It would indeed be hard to find a social fact that is more general. It is thus normal, and must be doing something for society, else it would not be normal for so long and in so many different places. It is normal because it is absolutely impossible for a society to exist without it. Crime offends our individual and collective notions about what is right. To have no crime means that every single person would agree what those notions are (which seems impossible, given that we are individuals). It would also mean that nothing would ever change, because no one would be doing anything against the collective will. To have no crime means we would have no originality, no thinking against the herd, and we must have some of this because nothing is good at all times without limits. Sometimes, too, crimes of today prepare the way for moralities of the future.

Looked at this way, the criminal must be seen as playing a normal role in society. We can follow the crime rate and be alarmed if it gets too high, or even if it gets too low – because something is out of balance then, and we may be stifling individuals too much. It may be that we are viewing punishment all wrong. If crime is not a sickness, then we can't "cure" it through punishment. We have to look elsewhere.

No longer should we desperately pursue an end which we might never grasp, but rather should we work diligently to keep things going and to recalibrate when necessary, and to recover our health when things change. The leader should not push us violently toward an ideal only she might hold, but be more like a doctor, who checks in on our health, and seeks to cure our illnesses when they are discovered.

Questions

1. How is sociology different from philosophy? From history? From psychology?
2. What are the three rules for doing sociology Durkheim presents in part 2? Do we still employ these rules? Why might they be helpful rules for conducting research today?
3. How do Durkheim's guidelines help us when studying a contested topic such as "marriage" today? Why might defining marriage for purposes of study be a helpful first step for the researcher?
4. What does Durkheim mean when he says that crime is "normal"? Does this help you understand what "normality" means for Durkheim? Is the distinction between normality and pathology a helpful one?

Definitional Concepts

Social Fact

Normal vs. Pathological

Sociology