

Topic-sociology as science

Part-B

SOCIOLOGY AS A STUDY OF 'SOCIAL FACTS'

In defining the subject matter of sociology two tasks are involved (a) defining the total field of study and (b) defining the sort of 'thing' which will be found in this field. In his book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, published in 1895, Durkheim (1950: 3) is concerned with the second task and calls social facts the subject matter of sociology. Durkheim (1950: 3) defines social facts as "ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion by reason of which they control him".

To Durkheim society is a reality **suigeneris**. Society comes into being by the association of individuals. Hence society represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. This unique reality of society is separate from other realities studied by physical or biological sciences. Further, societal reality is apart from individuals and is over and above them. Thus the reality of society must be the subject matter of sociology. A scientific understanding of any social phenomenon must emerge from the '**collective**' or associational characteristics manifest in the social structure of a society. While working towards this end, Durkheim developed and made use of a variety of sociological concepts. Collective representations is one of the leading concepts to be found in the social thought of Durkheim. Before learning about 'collective representations' it is necessary that you understand what Durkheim meant by 'social fact

Social Facts

Durkheim based his scientific vision of sociology on the fundamental principle, i.e., the objective reality of social facts. Social fact is that way of acting, thinking or feeling etc., which is more or less general in a given society. Durkheim treated social facts as things. They are real and exist independent of the individual's will or desire. They are external to individuals and are capable of exerting constraint upon them. In other words they are coercive in nature. Further social facts exist in their own right. They are independent of individual manifestations. The true nature of social facts lies in the collective or associational characteristics inherent in society.

Legal codes and customs, moral rules, religious beliefs and practices, language etc. are all social facts.

Types of Social Facts

Durkheim saw social facts as lying along a continuum. First, on one extreme are structural or morphological social phenomena. They make up the substratum of collective life. By this he meant the number and nature of elementary parts of which society is composed, the way in which the morphological constituents are arranged and the degree to which they are fused together. In this category of social facts are included the distribution of population over the surface of the territory, the forms of dwellings, nature of communication system etc. Secondly, there are institutionalised forms of social facts. They are more or less general and widely spread in society. They represent the collective nature of the society as a whole. Under this category fall legal and moral rules, religious dogma and established beliefs and practices prevalent in a society.

Thirdly, there are social facts, which are not institutionalised. Such social facts have not yet acquired crystallised forms. They lie beyond the institutionalised **norms** of society. Also this category of social facts have not attained a total objective and independent existence comparable to the institutionalised ones. Also their externality to and ascendancy over and above individuals is not yet complete. These social facts have been termed as social currents. For example, sporadic currents of opinion generated in specific situations; enthusiasm generated in a crowd; transitory outbreaks in an assembly of people; sense of indignity or pity aroused by specific incidents, etc. All the above mentioned social facts form a continuum and constitute social milieu of society. Further Durkheim made an important distinction in terms of normal and pathological social facts. A social fact is normal when it is generally encountered in a society of a certain type at a certain phase in its evolution. Every deviation from this standard is a pathological fact. For example, some degree of crime is inevitable in any society. Hence according to Durkheim crime to that extent is a normal fact. However, an extraordinary increase in the rate of crime is pathological. A general weakening in the moral condemnation of crime and certain type of economic crisis leading to anarchy in society are other examples of pathological facts.

Main Characteristics of Social Facts

In Durkheim's view sociology as an objective science must conform to the model of the other sciences. It posed two requirements: first the 'subject' of sociology must be specific. And it must be distinguished from the 'subjects' of all other sciences. Secondly the 'subject' of sociology must be such as to be

observed and explained. Similar to the way in which facts are observed and explained in other sciences. For Durkheim this 'subject' of sociology is the social fact, and that social facts must be regarded as 'things'. The main characteristics of social facts are (i) externality, (ii) constraint, (iii) independence, and (iv) generality.

Social facts, according to Durkheim, exist outside individual consciences.

Their existence is external to the individuals. For example, domestic or civic or contractual obligations are defined externally to the individual in laws and customs. Religious beliefs and practices exist outside and prior to the individual. An individual takes birth in a society and leaves it after birth death, however social facts are already given in society and remain in existence irrespective of birth or death of an individual. For example language continues to function independently of any single individual. The other characteristic of social fact is that it exercises a constraint on individuals. Social fact is recognized because it forces itself on the individual. For example, the institutions of law, education, beliefs etc. are already given to everyone from without. They are commanding and obligatory for all. There is constraint, when in a crowd, a feeling or thinking imposes itself on everyone. Such a phenomenon is typically social because its basis, its subject is the group as a whole and not one individual in particular. A social fact is that which has more or less a general occurrence in a society. Also it is independent of the personal features of individuals or universal attributes of human nature. Examples are the beliefs, feelings and practices of the group taken collectively.

In sum, the social fact is specific. It is born of the association of individuals. It represents a collective content of social group or society. It differs in kind from what occurs in individual consciousness. Social facts can be subjected to categorisation and classification. Above all social facts form the subject matter of the science of sociology

Externality and Constraint

We shall examine the criteria of 'externality' and 'constraint' in some detail.

A) There are two related senses in which social facts are external to the individual.

i) First, every individual is born into an ongoing society, which already has a definite organisation or structure. There are values, norms, beliefs and practices which the individual finds readymade at birth and which he learns through the process of **socialisation**. Since these social phenomena exist prior to the individual and have an objective reality, they are external to the individual.

ii) Secondly, social facts are external to the individual in the sense that any one individual is only a single element within the totality of relationships, which constitutes a society. These relationships are not the creation of any single individual, but are constituted by multiple interactions between individuals. To understand the relationship between the individuals and the society, Durkheim draws a parallel to the relationship between chemical elements and the substances, which are composed of combinations of them. According to Durkheim “whenever any elements combine and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements but in the totality formed by their union”.

A living cell consists of mineral parts like atoms of hydrogen and oxygen; just as society is composed of individuals. Just the living beings are more important than their parts, the whole (society) is greater than the collection of parts (individuals). The whole (society) differs from individual manifestations of it. You must have seen quite often in daily life that there is a difference between individuals and the group, especially when demands are made by a group. Individually members may agree on a thing, but collectively they may not. In wider society, we find a number of rules of behaviour which “reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts, i.e. its members”. In putting forward this criterion Durkheim wanted to show that social facts are distinct from individual or psychological facts. Therefore their study should be conducted in an autonomous discipline independent of Psychology, i.e. Sociology.

B) The second criterion by which social facts are defined is the moral ‘constraint’ they exercise on the individual. When the individual attempts to resist social facts they assert themselves. The assertion may range from a mild ridicule to social isolation and moral and legal **sanction**. However, in most circumstances individuals conform to social facts and therefore do not consciously feel their constraining character. This conformity is not so much due to the fear of sanctions being applied as the acceptance of the legitimacy of the social facts (see Giddens 1971: 88). Durkheim (1950: 4) concedes that to define the social in terms of constraint and coercion is to “risk shocking the zealous partisans of absolute individualism. It is generally accepted today, however, that most of our ideas and our tendencies are not developed by ourselves but have come to us from without. How can they become a part of us except by imposing themselves upon us?” Durkheim put forward his view to counter the utilitarian viewpoint, which was prevalent during his time, that

society could be held together and there would be greatest happiness if each individual worked in his self-interest. Durkheim did not agree. Individual's interest and society's interest do not coincide. For social order, it was necessary for society to exercise some control or pressure over its members. To confirm the coerciveness of social facts in their effects on individuals, Durkheim (1950: 6) looks at education's efforts "to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously..... the aim of education is, precisely, the socialisation of human being; parents and teachers are merely the representatives and intermediaries of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image". Durkheim (1950: 7) adds that social facts cannot be defined merely by their universality. Thus a thought or movement repeated by all individuals is not thereby a social fact. What is important is the corporate or "collective aspects of the beliefs, tendencies and practices of a group that characterise truly social phenomena". What is more, these social phenomena are transmitted through the collective means of socialisation. Thus social facts can be recognised because they are external to the individuals on the one hand, and are capable of exercising coercion over them on the other. Since they are external they are also general and because they are collective, they can be imposed on the individuals who form a given society.

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