**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 16: Durkheim: The Rules of Sociological Method**

Durkheim’s study of suicide points to the fruitfulness of his sociological method, an approach that focuses on the impact of social facts and forces

In his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim laid out explicitly the methodological ideas that had been implicit in his earlier work. He had 3 main aims in this work:

1. To establish the existence of social realities outside of the individual and begin the investigation of these realities by scientific methods (primary goal);
2. To make sociology independent of philosophy by replacing speculative thought with factual observation; and
3. To set out what he thought was the specific subject matter of sociological investigation.

Durkheim felt it was important for him to achieve these goals as:

* he saw himself as the leader of the sociological school
* methodological guidelines were important to enable sociology to develop into a science
* to avoid inconsistency in sociological work by setting out rules for investigation
* to make clear distinctions between sociology and psychology and underscore the importance of the study of society in its own right
* to counter the individualistic, utilitarian ideas then popular in intellectual circles (e.g. that individuals were autonomous, rational, acted on economic self-interest, and owed nothing to society)

Thus, in the *Rules*, Durkheim does four things. He:

1. Identifies the nature of social subject matter by putting forth a definition of social facts and collective representations;
2. Outlines the rules to be used in observing social subject matter;
3. Sets out criteria for making judgments about healthy and unhealthy societies; and
4. Identifies a system for classifying societies according to their structure and complexity (“social morphology”)

**The Existence of Social Facts:**

Beyond individual things like eating, sleeping, etc, there are a set of social phenomena, “defined externally in law and custom,” which may be studied independently. These have 2 distinct properties:

1. They exist outside the individual; and
2. Their existence is prior to the individual

Durkheim’s idea that social facts can be withdrawn from individual discretion shifted the focus from individual, utilitarian motives to the laws of society (i.e. individual action often derives from society/the framework of larger social rules)

Next, Durkheim classified things which are socially given (“collective representations”). These are anything into which the ideas of society have been condensed to represent collective values and beliefs (e.g. religion, legal rules, myths, legends, proverbs, customs, and traditions).

Collective representations reflect social subject matter in a number of ways:

1. They reflect a reality different from that of the individual;
2. They have characteristics of their own which are autonomous from individuals;
3. They can be investigated in their own right without being subsumed into psychological or biological laws;
4. They arise from group life; and
5. They exercise external constraint upon the individual. This is not due to individual disposition but to the prestige in which these representations are invested.

Durkheim adds that social facts are:

1. Diffused throughout society (e.g. ways of thinking, feeling, and acting);
2. Are external to individuals and exist independently of their will; and
3. Their external constraint over individuals is recognized by the power of external coercion, by the existence of some sanction, or by the resistance offered against individual efforts to violate them.

**Rules to be Used in Observing Social Subject Matter:**

Durkheim laid out five general rules for the observation and study of social facts:

1. Social facts are to be considered as real things, not simply ideas. Social facts are visible and observable realities, not abstract ideas (e.g. legal rules can be observed in action in a scientific sense).
2. Social phenomena must be considered as distinct in themselves, separate from any conscious or individual impressions in the mind of the observer.
3. Social facts must never be viewed as products of individual will, but as capable of shaping actions by external coercion.
4. By viewing things this way, we are merely adjusting our way of observation to the nature of social facts themselves.
5. Social facts must be viewed as having independent existence, treated separately of individuals and seen as part of a world whose regularity and patterning exists independently of psychological characteristics.
6. Functions and causes must be kept analytically distinct, be related to other social facts, and not reduced to the individual, psychological, or biological levels.

Some problems:

* Difficulty at times in grasping the direct causal nature of social facts by direct observation
* Need to make assumptions about this, which renders causality between social facts and restraint more indirect than Durkheim would have liked

- Difficulty in eradicating all preconceptions/being objective

when observing social facts

* Difficulty relying only on external, observable characteristics

**Distinction between Normal and Pathological:**

Durkheim went on to prescribe a set of criteria for making judgments about healthy and unhealthy societies (e.g. related to the organic analogy).

Morbidity=anything which impairs the functioning of society by inducing diseased states

All social phenomena assume 2 distinct forms:

1. A “normal” state, by which the social conditions are most widely distributed and occur in other societies under general conditions; and
2. A “morbid” or “pathological” state, which occurs when social phenomena depart from what is widespread and normative.

One can tell if a fact is normative or morbid by:

1. Determining whether a fact is generally disposed throughout the society;
2. Examining the conditions which led to the generality of this phenomenon;
3. See whether the fact has become more or less intense by determining the degree of its change; and
4. Compare the original facts with the present state of affairs and if the condition exists in relation to the original, the situation should be judged to be normal.
5. If, however, an original fact operating as an essential part of a prevailing social framework/dominant social institutions has disappeared, then its disappearance is pathological.

Durkheim uses the example of crime, arguing that is normal as it protects and reaffirms collective sentiments.

**Social Morphology:**

Finally, Durkheim classifies societies by the nature/type of their organization (i.e. simple vs. complicated social structures).

Starting with the most simple and moving to the more complex, these may briefly be listed as:

1. *Hordes:* a whole whose functions are not dependent on other parts/no regulating center
2. *Clans:* a combination of various hordes or segments whose union forms a more complex structure
3. *Polysegmentals:* societies made up of the combination of many groups forming a total social structure (e.g. confederated groups like the Iroquois nation/classical city states)

Durkheim always thought it was important to discover the distinct features of the social milieu being investigated

**Final Thoughts:**

Durkheim’s rules ultimately set out key parameters encouraging researchers to seek answers to social questions in social phenomena. Most importantly, he wanted to avoid the following mistakes:

1. Seeking causes in ultimate purposes which would hold that social phenomena serve some ultimate end in and of themselves (false teleology);
2. Equating causes with the functions associated with particular facts (tautology); and/or
3. Seeking causes in individuals.