

## **Durkheim and Sociological Method**

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### **Abstract**

This paper tries to throw a light upon various sociological methods which were used by great scholars. However, the main focus is on the use of sociological methods and what purpose do they serve in society. This paper also deals with the Durkheim's methodology, first section of this paper incorporates the views of Emile Durkheim on sociology. Further, this paper talks about the subject matter of sociology which, according to Durkheim is "social facts". In the later-half of this paper, sociological methods have also been discussed followed with the conclusion which basically talks about the limitations of sociological methods.

### **Introduction**

Emile Durkheim who is known as the founder of modern sociology (Collins, R. 1994) contributed a lot to the field of sociology. Durkheim aimed to make sociology a far more strictly empirical science than it had ever before been conceived. Yet, his own temper is rationalistic through and through. He approaches his subject with a scheme ready-made for carrying on the investigation of the facts, and a framework into which the results of his investigations shall fall. He is as rationalistic in sociology as Descartes was in physics and physiology. The idea of the "whole" being greater and different than of the sum of its parts, anomie, the concept that religion is equal to society and the sacred and the profane, are all contributions of Durkheim. These notions are of great importance in the field of Sociology, and the scholars like Robert Merton and many others still used this concept in their writings and works. Durkheim's principles apply over the whole of society, including its deviant aspects. Karl Marx had a great impact on him, Durkheim made use of Karl's theory of conflict ideologies. The Durkheim Era contributed in a major way to expand the perspective of the Social discipline by taking it to a new level when he applied scientific and empirical research. Durkheim is remembered as one of the sociologists whose interest lies in carrying out sociological research. Until Durkheim's work, social science was not studied empirically. Durkheim's theory of Functionalism would prove as a groundwork for other principles as well. Anomie, which was developed later, paved the way for other principles and objectives of Sociology. Durkheim adhered to the Macro-Sociological ideology unlike Weber who was more interested in Micro-Sociological ideology. Durkheim was concerned with the aggregate not the individual as his interests lay in the total picture of the

society, and not the individual parts. His scientific method of research demanded the segregation of Anthropology and Sociology. These principles and concepts regarding his study and research of society played a vital role which earned him the title of “Founder,” as this empirical view gave a new insight in the field of social sciences.

Durkheim first wrote “The Social Division Of Labour” (1893) two years later he published “The Rules Of Sociological Methods” (1895), in this work Durkheim laid down for the first time a methodological study of social science. The “Suicide” in 1897 can be seen as the best illustration of his ‘positivist’ methodology. In 1898 he started a journal called ‘le anne sociologique’ which became a platform for sociological research in 1902. In 1912 he published his last major work “The Elementary Form of Religious Life”, and it is from these that we draw his essential principles and building blocks that Durkheim had to offer the social sciences. Durkheim was of the view that in order to study a social phenomenon scientifically one must study it objectively i.e. from outside. Durkheim is anti-individualist in his understanding of society, he argues that society can’t be inferred from the individuals. According to Durkheim “sociological method” as we practice it rests wholly on the basic principle that social facts must be studied as things, that is, as reality external to individual” (Durkheim, 1964: 37). Since sociology is the science of society it focuses on the social facts, whereas on the other hand psychology deals with the individual’s independent from each other which is totally different from purview of sociology. We are to begin by laying down provisional definitions of the various phenomena to be studied, and these definitions shall not aim at complexity, rather it should be based on simple and comprehensible feature so we can define crime as the manner of action which is unlawful, inhumane and sadistic in nature. In the same way we can also define a family as the bond which is shared by a group of people and who are for the most part related by blood. We should go on to study every variety of case that is covered by the definition. Subject matter of sociology is based on this approach. Everything that comes under this definition is to be observed as belonging to the domain of the new science, anything outside of this should be excluded.

Durkheim’s sociological orientation was centrally based on „social facts“ with the imperative supposition of the domination of social facts over individualistic consciousness and states of Mind. According to Durkheim, Sociology can be seen as becoming an objective science as it primarily deals with the resilient social facts (Durkheim, 1964: 30-31). His study on suicide further exemplifies the view that even though it seems to be a personal phenomenon it is still dependent on various social facts as he believed that it can be explained in terms of social causes and circumstances.

### **Subject Matter of Sociology**

There can be no sociology unless societies exist, and . . . societies cannot exist if there are only individuals Emile Durkheim ([1897] 1951:38).

So, in Durkheim's view in order to conduct a sociological study one has to start with the society. One of the main aspects of Durkheim's methodology is the significance of social facts. Emile Durkheim coined the expression "social facts" (Halls, W. D. 1982; Durkheim "The Rules of Sociological Method, 1938) and asserted that the objective reality of social facts was the fundamental phenomenon of sociology, he demands that the objects of science should be studied as facts. Social facts are the concepts that do not come from individuals but come from the social community. Durkheim included elements of evolutionary theory into his own, he was not very keen in developing a grand theory of society rather he was inclined towards developing a perspective and a method that could be applied in multiple ways, the sociological methods which are formulated by Durkheim are very different in their own ways, these sociological methods are free of the metaphysical positivism of Comte and Spencer, thus it can be seen as the extension of scientific methods of the natural sciences. The study of social facts is of great importance that's what Durkheim says. Social facts consist of very unique characteristics. According to Durkheim, Social facts involve 'ways of acting' thinking and feeling, which is external to the individual and endowed with a power of compulsion, by reason of which they control him. Durkheim believes in the view that asks us to consider social facts as things and he tries to observe these social facts, adding to that view, Durkheim discards the notion of preconception, he asked not to presume beforehand that there exists an individual purpose behind the behaviour. All the preconceived notions about the social facts must be eradicated, another thing which are supposed to be kept in mind while observing social facts is, it should be observed in its collective manifestation not in their individual manifestation. In order to understand the

Nature and creation of social facts. One should study the whole society as it is the society that is shared at the psychic level, it shapes the behaviour of individual member, Durkheim says society is not merely a group of individuals living together rather it does imply an ensemble of ideas ,when individuals interact they share certain common features, which give rise to collective conscience, which persists throughout the society independent of the classes shared by all so its independent of particular condition, Durkheim supported the role of collective conscience because in his view when individual conscience overpowers collective conscience that's when crime occurs. However, we are not wrong in saying that Criminal behaviour is dynamic in nature where motive behind every crime varies which involves the reconsideration of the applicability of various laws. Crime gives rise to society solidarity where people take a stand and try to define a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour. weakening of social ties at the time of chaos would result into disintegration of the society, and it can be considered as one of the main reasons for anomie, high levels of criminal behaviour deteriorate the collective conscience and produce anomie. Nonetheless, there are various methods involve which gives a

clear picture of the occurrence of such behaviour in the society but we cannot deny the fact that taking a recourse to statistical method is the best way to analyze it, he relied on official statistics as the source of data. Durkheim used the quantitative method to study the nature of crime, he believed in the quantification of social reality in numerical terms as quantitative methods aims at causal explanation like what is the reason behind a crime? Quantitative method answers primarily to why? He was more interested in knowing about the certain actions being called as crime and the criterions which can be set to declare any action as crime. To an extent it's true, unless we know the reason of its existence in the society, we can't carry out a research. One has to start from the very scratch in order to know the truth. Durkheim made claims about the number of suicides occurred on the grounds of statistics report which says in order to talk about the rates of suicides one must look for the accurate figures for the total population of those areas which definitely involve comparisons, this would help in generating a hypothesis which could be tested further. As one of the rules of a research says, one is supposed to have more and more empirical data in order to prove something, for act of refutation is always possible, no matter what one has collected so far. However, there are certain constraints in carrying out a research, sociologists basically rely on human behaviour and it is not at all easy as human behavior is too intricate to allow sociologists to calculate precisely any individual's actions. So, one has to be cautious with the kind of information one is getting from the environment since social patterns never remain static. The researcher also needs to take into account the geographical set up of the area where the research is being conducted, it is not possible to work on population without knowing its ethnicity and culture, social pattern could be extracted by studying the environment only. Deviation of any kind from the set pattern would hamper the harmony and solidarity among the people thus becomes the matter of concern. However, it's very difficult to analyze human behavior as a lot of irregularities are to be found out in human beings also. Durkheim talks about the various sociological methods which ultimately help in carrying out the research these are as follows:

### **1. Rules of Observation**

Observation of social facts should be confined to external observable and hence verifiable aspects. Social facts should be observed in its collective manifestation as they exist outside the individual. Further, the social facts should be as definitive as possible and therefore we should begin with the clear definition of social facts, we understand social facts by saying it as the concepts that do not come out from the individuals but from the social community, social facts are consisted of actions, thoughts and feelings and try to control each and every action of a human being and put restrictions in terms of notion and rituals.

### **2. Rules of Classification**

One should always distinguish between normal and pathological social facts. "A social fact is normal in relation to a given social type at a given phase of development when it is

present in the average society of that line” [8], p.64. Normal social facts are the most general ones which are to be found on a large scale for example crime, it is rampant in nature and it is found in all the society, it shows crime is an integral part of the society. Whereas, on the other hand any deviance from the normal social facts is pathological in nature, for example we know divorces, suicides are some of the widespread phenomenon. Increase in the number of rates of suicides and divorces will have negative consequences on the society, so it is considered to be pathological in nature.

### **3. Rules of Classification**

Sociology is a distinct science. It has a distinct way of explaining things. As a sociologist we should look for the cause of social facts in the preceding of social facts only. While explaining the social phenomenon, we try to look out separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it accomplishes. If we are aware of the causes, then we will be able to explain it also. In fact, Durkheim elucidated every social phenomenon by its utility in preserving the existence and stability of a social organism. He did, however, attempt to create a positive social science that might direct people’s behaviour toward greater solidarity and harmony.

### **Sociological Methods**

#### **Quantitative and Qualitative Methods**

Some things are countable, and counts are intrinsically quantitative which can be categorized further in order to form groups and we can do the analysis by just studying those groups.

Whereas qualitative is empirical it involves observation by trained observers (Braithwaite 1953). But the real issue lies in the fact that something which is observable can be tallied and tally is a quantity. Sociological practice defines some empirical phenomena by treating them as if they were open numerical treatment. That should not be the matter of concern rather one should focus on the pragmatics what matters is that concepts and methods used are good enough to serve our purpose of knowing. Good research demands the deep observation of the things, how to identify them in general, what are the ways to characterize them. Durkheim used the quantitative method. He was of the view that one can categorise social reality in numerical terms in order to work effectively. Nonetheless many critics of qualitative sociology emphasized on the precision of estimates. One should make clear about the model one is referring to, but anything we do always require the correct insight to observe thing in its most natural way, it is very difficult to reach at an exact number but there exists probabilities which can be compared on the basis of properties of underlying processes. One of the greatest drawbacks of quantitative sociology is “reflexivity” studies on groups and society show that human nature is full of irregularities, so we calculate the sentiments of the people in numerical terms. In other cases,

people may not change or care, or may be unaware of being investigated. In other cases, people may not change or care, or may be unaware of being investigated. At most, reflexivity requires caution; it does not justify an anti- quantitative, pro- qualitative ideology (Nagel 1961). Indeed, it is as wrong to pose the dichotomy since quality and quantity are not in opposition. Indeed, it is wrong to pose the dichotomy. Rather, they are tied to the two inseparable fundamental concerns in all research, i.e., validity and reliability (Joel Smith; Social Forces, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Sep. 1991).

### **Comparative-Historical Survey Research Methods**

This method is based on forming a unique set of procedure for carrying out a study (Marsh 1982); Comparative – historical studies carry positive connotation where a rich variety of data is taken whereas surveys are being associated with quick data collections. The derogatory use of the term *survey* conceals the fact that every study should have a clear architecture. It must address a meaningful question, the question must be appropriate to a domain whose universe of phenomena can only be observed in part, observations must be made by means appropriate to the nature of what is being observed, observations must be interpreted and summarized, and meaningful conclusions must be drawn and shared. A survey, like any empirical inquiry, requires resolving a series of dilemmas - being clear about what is to be known and why, where to look, how much to look at, what aspects to examine and how, how to summarize observations and interpret their meaning, and how to report all this. The term survey method implies unique and routine ways to resolve these dilemmas. However, none of the usual activities sampling, interviewing with interview schedules, coding, tabular and statistical analysis - are unique to surveys. Nor are they routine. Rather, successful resolutions to the dilemmas that arise in surveys require clarity of question and assessment of the validity and reliability in that setting of all tactics that might resolve the dilemmas. The term survey is used for observational studies which take into account the variety of social problems. Some sociologists favor a comparative-historical approach simply because it is a well-conceived study, to serve some strategy of comparison.

### **Ethnomethodology**

Parson criticized some of Durkheim’s fundamental principles. Accordingly, American functionalism contained a hidden “negative image” of Durkheim. But, Parson’s student

Harold Garfinkel rejected Parson’s negative views on Durkheim and thus, played a greater role in turning Durkheim’s negative image back to positive through ethnomethodology. (Harold Garfinkel coined the term “ethnomethodology” in 1967 and laid out some of the ground rules and concepts which continue to be used in ethnomethodology even today.)

In addition, as a topic of general interest to sociologists and other social sciences, this field also has a number of various useful applications. Ethnomethodology is a branch of the



social science which investigates on how people interact with the world and how they perceive the reality. It does not intend to provide judgments on the human behaviour or its causes, but rather focuses on elucidating the interaction of people among each other and with society at large. Many people engage in a small degree of ethnomethodology every day, even though they aren't aware of it; for example, a parent explaining a concept to a child usually thinks about the way in which the child approaches the world and processes information to put the concept in terms the child will understand.

Researchers in this field are often interested in the conventions of society, and the rules which people use to place themselves and others in social contexts. An ethno-methodologist might, for example, look at social cues which people use to determine social class and occupation when interacting with someone for the first time. Ethnomethodology is also concerned with general social knowledge and concepts which are widely understood both in larger societies and smaller subsets of society. Ethnomethodology has made major contributions to sociological theory and to the empirical investigation of everyday life. Ethnography acknowledges the situation in subject terms and not re interpret them, it takes no notice of social and cultural situations. It follows an equalitarian approach as it places investigator and subject on the same level. Ethno-methodologists give emphasis to the problem of meaning, not a method. Ethnography provides various ways to conduct a research that could enrich their investigations urge that we approach social reality as ethnologists, for in the real world there are rarely actors and objective observers of action. The very idea of an objective observer distorts reality and, thus, impedes knowing it. For similar reasons, we should not apply theoretical categories to ethnographic data. Thus, in an ethno-methodological critique of organization theory, Bittner (1965) argues against the concepts of formal and informal organization on the grounds that for those individuals involved there is only a single experience. The rules, structure, and prescribed and actual behaviour for operating within and around organizations are understood quite differently by sociologists and competent persons. Ethnomethodological studies have now become ideological and politicized as they have shown that people may not use the rules or concept that we presume when they have to act in problematic situations (Collins 1981).

### **Micro and Macro Sociological Phenomena**

Macro sociology deals with the study of social structure and institutions and it also studies the human behaviour who all are a part of these institutions whereas on the other hand micro sociology takes into account the significance of social interaction for example the relationship between adult children and their parents ,or the effect of negative attitudes on older people.

Both the theories have perspectives which include interpretive perspective, normative, and conflict.

Normative perspective says in order to provide a social control in the society it is necessary to have a set of rules and status. This perspective mainly focuses upon macro-level. For example, structural-functionalism, role theory, modernization theory, and age-stratification. Interpretive perspective deals with the social interaction that we do while interacting with each other on a daily basis. It focuses upon micro-level. Conflict perspective deals with both the levels for example. Causes of poverty, health disparities, distribution of life chances via, social class, and gender. Micro level perspective studies the small scale structure in society which forms the basis of social interaction to be found on individual level. George mead said that objects do not have any meaning of their own rather people assign them certain meanings through daily interaction.

The study of macro social and micro social issues is different, since they have a different focus and methods but nonetheless both are interconnected one cannot exist without another as we know a society consists of the individual men, women and children for example individual's act of accepting an idea brings about a social change which is a macro social phenomenon and an act of persuading that individual is a micro social phenomena. Although in macro sociology you'll use a broad approach to study societies, you can apply all of what you learn to understand facets of micro sociology. The two disciplines work together, informing and pushing the study of human society. Micro sociologists can later disseminate a topic for deeper examination that macro sociology covers.

### **Limitations of Sociological Methods**

As discussed earlier, truth can be discovered by the observable facts which is an implicit assumption, this claim was later on refuted by scholars, critiques point out what you observe depends on the way you look at it, our perception is guided by prejudices in most of the cases. This limitation becomes conspicuous when we come to social sciences since objectivity is not possible in social sciences. The scientific approach believed that observation from outside can give us true knowledge, on the contrary in case of human beings there are no pattern of irregularities so it is very difficult to observe things which do not have fixed arrangements and patterns, only when the realities behave in a pattern way then we can have generalizations. Sociological methods also aim at discovering generalizations but in case of human beings only limited generalization is possible this is also one of the limitations of sociological methods, various other methods have been introduced in order to carry out a good research like macro and micro levels studied have been done where micro level studies include small level studies thus making it narrower in approach whereas macro level studies cover a wider area, so scientific method can be useful when we carry out macro level studies, but for micro level we may resort to other techniques.

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