

SOCIAL FACTS

In sociology, **social facts** are the values, cultural norms, and social structures external to the individual. For French sociologist Émile Durkheim, sociology was 'the science of social facts'. The task of the sociologist, then, was to search for correlations between social facts to reveal laws. Having discovered the laws of social structure, it is posited that the sociologist is then able to determine whether any given society is 'healthy' or 'pathological' and prescribe appropriate remedies. Durkheim made two main distinctions between social facts--**material** and **nonmaterial** social facts. Material social facts, he explained, have to do with the physical social structures which exert influence on the individual. It is something that can be touched empirically because of society's shared belief that it serves a purpose. Nonmaterial social facts are the values, norms and other conceptually held beliefs.

Among the most known of Durkheim's work is his discovery of the 'social fact' of suicide rates. By carefully examining police suicide statistics in different districts, Durkheim was able to 'demonstrate' that the suicide rate of Catholic communities is lower than that of Protestant communities. He ascribed this to a *social* (as opposed to individual) cause. This was considered groundbreaking and remains a much-cited work even today.

Initially, Durkheim's 'discovery of social facts' was seen as significant because it promised to make it possible to study the behaviour of entire societies, rather than just of particular individuals. Modern sociologists refer to Durkheim's studies for two quite different purposes, however:

- As graphic demonstrations of how careful the social researcher must be to ensure that data gathered for analysis is accurate. Durkheim's reported suicide rates were, it is now clear, largely an artifact of the way in which particular deaths were classified as 'suicide' or 'non-suicide' by different communities. What he had actually discovered then was not different *suicide rates* at all—it was different ways of *thinking about suicide*.
- As an entry point into the study of social meaning, and the way in which apparently identical individual acts often cannot be classified empirically. Social *acts* (even such an apparently private and individual act as suicide), in this modern view, are always seen (and classified) by social *actors*. Discovering the 'social facts', it follows, is generally neither possible nor desirable, but discovering the way in which individuals perceive and classify particular acts is what offers insight.

A **total social fact** [fait social total] is "an activity that has implications throughout society, in the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres." (Sedgewick 2002: 95) "Diverse strands of social and psychological life are woven together through what he [Marcel Mauss] comes to call 'total social facts'. A total social fact is such that it informs and organises seemingly quite distinct practices and institutions." (Edgar 2002:157) The term was popularized by Marcel Mauss in his classic *The Gift* where he wrote, "These phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present..." (Mauss 1923-34, translation by Cunnison, 1966: 76-77).