SOCIAL FACTS

In order to help sociology move away from philosophy and to give it a clear and separate identity (Cormack, 1996), Durkheim (1895/1964) argued in *The Rules of Sociological Method* that the distinctive subject matter of sociology should be the study of social facts (see Gane, 1988, for a discussion of the major criticisms of this work as well as a defense of it; for a different, "constructionist" view, see S. Turner, 1995). The concept of social fact has several components, but crucial in separating sociology from philosophy is the idea that *social facts are to be treated as things* (S. Jones, 1996). In that they are to be treated as *things,* social facts are to be studied empirically, *not* philosophically.[1] Durkheim believed that ideas can be known introspectively (philosophically), but *things* "cannot be conceived by purely mental activity"; they require for their conception "data from outside the mind" (1895/1964:xliii). This empirical study of social facts as things sets Durkheimian sociology apart from the largely introspective theorizing of Comte and Spencer (for a critique of Durkheim's positivism, see Boudon, 1995).

External and Coercive

Although treating social facts as things countered the threat from philosophy (at least as far as Durkheim was concerned), it was only part of the answer to the problem of dealing with the threat coming from psychology. Like Durkheimian sociology, psychology was already highly empirical. To differentiate sociology from psychology, Durkheim argued that social facts were *external to,* and *coercive of,* the actor (for a different view, see Rawls, 1996). Sociology was to be the study of social facts, whereas the study of psychological facts was relegated to psychology. To Durkheim, psychological facts were basically inherited phenomena. Although this certainly does not describe psychology today (and was not a very accurate description of the subject matter of psychology even then), it did allow Durkheim to draw a clear differentiation between the two fields. Psychological facts are clearly internal (inherited), and social facts are external and coercive. As we will soon see, this differentiation is not so neat as Durkheim would have liked us to believe. Nevertheless, by defining a social fact as a *thing* that is *external to, and coercive of, the actor,* Durkheim seems to have done a reasonably good job (at least for that historical era) of attaining his objective of separating sociology from both philosophy and psychology. However, it should be noted that to do this, Durkheim took an "extremist" position (Karady, 1983:79–80), especially in limiting sociology to the study of social facts. This position was to limit at least some branches of sociology to the present day. Furthermore, Durkheim seemed to artificially sever sociology from neighboring fields. As Lemert puts it, "Because he defined sociology so exclusively in relation to its own facts, Durkheim cut it off from the other sciences of man" (1994a:91).

[1]It is worth noting, however, that Durkheim did a lot of what may be described as philosophizing.

Material and Nonmaterial

We know that a social fact is a thing and that it is external and coercive, but what else is a social fact? Actually, Durkheim differentiated between two broad types of social facts—material and nonmaterial. *Material social facts* are the clearer of the two because they are real, material entities, but they are also of lesser significance in Durkheim's work. As Durkheim put it, "The social fact is sometimes materialized so far as to become an element of the external world" (1897/1951:313). Architecture and the law would be two examples of what he meant by material social facts. We will encounter other examples in this chapter.

The bulk of Durkheim's work, and the heart of his sociology, lies in the study of nonmaterial social facts. Durkheim said: "Not all social consciousness achieves . . . externalization and materialization" (1897/1951:315). What sociologists now call *norms* and *values,* or more generally culture (see Alexander, 1988a), are good examples of what Durkheim meant by *nonmaterial social facts.* But this idea creates a problem: How can nonmaterial social facts like norms and values be external to the actor? Where could they be found except in the minds of actors? And if they are in the minds of actors, then are they not internal rather than external?

To clarify this issue, we must refine Durkheim's argument by contending that while material social facts are clearly external and coercive, nonmaterial social facts are not so clear-cut. (For a similar distinction, see Takla and Pope [1985:82].) To at least some extent, they are found in the minds of actors. The best way to conceptualize nonmaterial social facts is to think of them as external to, and coercive of, psychological facts. In this way we can see that both psychological facts and *some* social facts exist within and between consciousness. Durkheim made this clear in a number of places. At one point he said of social facts, "Individual minds, forming groups by mingling and fusing, give birth to a being, *psychological if you will,* but constituting a psychic individuality of a new sort" (Durkheim, 1895/1964:103; italics added). At another point, Durkheim said, "This does not mean that they [nonmaterial social facts] are not also mental after a fashion, since they all consist of ways of thinking or behaving" (1895/1964:xlix). Thus it is best to think of nonmaterial social facts, at least in part, as mental phenomena, but mental phenomena that are external to, and coercive of, another aspect of the mental process—psychological facts. This confounds Durkheim's differentiation between sociology and psychology somewhat, but it does serve to make the differentiation more realistic and as a result more defensible. Sociology *is* concerned with mental phenomena, but they are usually of a different order from the mental concerns of psychology. Durkheim thus was arguing that sociologists are interested in norms and values, whereas psychologists are concerned with such things as human instincts.

Levels of Social Reality

Social facts, then, play a central role in the sociology of Emile Durkheim. A useful way of extracting the most important social facts from his work, and for analyzing his thoughts on the relationships among these phenomena, is to begin with Durkheim's efforts to organize them into *levels* of social reality. He began at the level of material social facts, not because it was the most important level to him, but because its elements

often take causal priority in his theorizing. They affect nonmaterial social facts, which are the real focus of his work. (Although we will focus here on both types of social facts, we will have some things to say later about Durkheim's thoughts on the more microscopic aspects of social reality.)

The major levels of social reality (Lukes, 1972:9–10) in Durkheim's work can be depicted as follows:

A. Material Social Facts
   1. Society
   2. Structural components of society (for example, church and state)
   3. Morphological components of society (for example, population distribution, channels of communication, and housing arrangements) (Andrews, 1993)

B. Nonmaterial Social Facts
   1. Morality
   2. Collective conscience
   3. Collective representations
   4. Social currents

The levels within the two categories are listed in terms of descending order of generality.

It is his focus on macro-level social facts that is one of the reasons why Durkheim's work played a central role in the development of structural functionalism, which has a similar, macro-level orientation (see Chapter 7, on structural functionalism). More specifically, drawing on biology and using an organismic analogy (Lehmann, 1993a:15), Durkheim saw society as composed of "organs" (social facts), or social structures, that had a variety of functions for society. Durkheim urged that we distinguish functions, or the ends served by various structures, from the factors that caused them to come into existence. Durkheim was interested in studying both the causes of social structures and the functions they perform, although he wanted to carefully differentiate between these two topics of study.

We can trace the logic of Durkheim's theory in his analysis of the development of the modern world. This is most clearly shown in one of his most important works, *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1893/1964), a work that has been called sociology's first classic (Tiryakian, 1994).

THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY

Durkheim based his analysis in *The Division of Labor in Society* on his conception of two ideal types of society (for a comparison with Spencer's evolutionary theory, see Perrin, 1995). The more primitive type, characterized by *mechanical solidarity,* has a relatively undifferentiated social structure, with little or no division of labor. The more modern type, characterized by *organic solidarity,* has a much greater and more refined division of labor. To Durkheim the *division of labor in society* is a material social fact that involves the degree to which tasks or responsibilities are specialized. People in primitive societies tend to occupy very general positions in which they perform a wide variety of tasks and handle a large number of responsibilities. In other words, a primitive person tended to be a jack-of-all-trades. In contrast, those who live in more modern

societies occupy more specialized positions and have a much narrower range of tasks and responsibilities. For example, being a mother-housewife in primitive societies is a much less specialized position than it is in a modern society. Laundry services, diaper services, home delivery, and labor-saving devices (dishwashers, microwave ovens, Cuisinarts, and so forth) perform a number of tasks that were formerly the responsibility of the mother-housewife.

The changes in the division of labor have had enormous implications for the structure of society, and some of the more important implications are reflected in the differences between the two types of solidarity—mechanical and organic. In addressing the issue of solidarity, Durkheim was interested in what holds society together. A society characterized by mechanical solidarity is unified because all people are generalists. The bond among people is that they are all engaged in similar activities and have similar responsibilities. In contrast, a society characterized by organic solidarity is held together by the differences among people, by the fact that they have different tasks and responsibilities. Because people in modern society perform a relatively narrow range of tasks, they need many other people in order to survive. The primitive family headed by father-hunter and mother–food gatherer is practically self-sufficient, but the modern family, in order to make it through the week, needs the grocer, baker, butcher, auto mechanic, teacher, police officer, and so forth. These people, in turn, need the kinds of services that others provide in order to live in the modern world. Modern society, in Durkheim's view, is thus held together by the specialization of people and their need for the services of many others. Furthermore, Durkheim was concerned with the specialization not only of individuals but also of groups, structures, and institutions. One final difference between mechanical and organic solidarity is worth mentioning: Because people in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity are more likely to be similar to one another in terms of what they do, there is a greater likelihood of competition among them. In contrast, in societies with organic solidarity, differentiation allows people to cooperate more and to all be supported by the same resource base. Thus a society characterized by organic solidarity leads to both more solidarity *and* more individuality than one characterized by mechanical solidarity (Rueschemeyer, 1994). In other words, Durkheim held the view that the social order and individual autonomy are compatible (Muller, 1994).

Dynamic Density

The division of labor was a material social fact to Durkheim because it is the pattern of interaction in the social world. Another, and closely related, material social fact is the major causal factor in Durkheim's theory of the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity—*dynamic density*. This concept refers to the number of people in a society and the amount of interaction that occurs among them. Neither population increase nor an increase in interaction, when taken separately, is a significant factor in societal change. An increase in numbers of people *and* an increase in the interaction among them (which is dynamic density) lead to the change from mechanical to organic solidarity because together they bring about more competition for scarce resources and a more intense struggle for survival among the various parallel and similar components of primitive society. Because individuals, groups, families, tribes, and so forth perform

on differences in nonmaterial social facts, and these differences have a direct effect on suicide rates. Durkheim was making two related arguments. On the one hand, he was arguing that different collectivities have different collective consciences and collective representations. These, in turn, produce different social currents, which have differential effects on suicide rates. One way to study suicide is to compare different societies or other types of collectivities. On the other hand, Durkheim was arguing that changes in the collective conscience lead to changes in social currents, which, in turn, lead to changes in suicide rates. This leads to the historical study of changes in suicide rates within a given collectivity. In either case, cross-culturally or historically, the logic of the argument is essentially the same: differences or changes in the collective conscience lead to differences or changes in social currents, and these, in turn, lead to differences or changes in suicide rates. In other words, changes in suicide rates are caused by changes in social facts, primarily social currents. Durkheim was quite clear on the crucial role played by social currents in the etiology of suicide:

> Each social group has a collective inclination for the act, quite its own, and the source of all individual inclination rather than their result. It is made up of *currents of egoism, altruism or anomy* running through . . . society. . . . These tendencies of the whole social body, by affecting individuals, cause them to commit suicide.
>
> (Durkheim, 1897/1951:299–300; italics added)

The Four Types of Suicide

Durkheim's theory of suicide, and the structure of his sociological reasoning, can be seen more clearly if we examine each of his four types of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic (Bearman, 1991). Durkheim linked each of the types of suicide to the degree of integration into, or regulation by, society (Thorlindsson and Bjarnason, 1998). *Integration* refers to the degree to which collective sentiments are shared. Altruistic suicide is associated with a high degree of integration and egoistic suicide with a low degree of integration. *Regulation* refers to the degree of external constraint on people. Fatalistic suicide is associated with high regulation, anomic suicide with low regulation. Whitney Pope (1976:12–13) offered a very useful summary of the four types of suicide discussed by Durkheim. He did this by interrelating high and low degrees of integration and regulation in the following way:

	Low	→	Egoistic suicide
Integration	High	→	Altruistic suicide
	Low	→	Anomic suicide
Regulation	High	→	Fatalistic suicide

Egoistic Suicide High rates of *egoistic suicide* are likely to be found in those societies, collectivities, or groups in which the individual is not well integrated into the larger social unit. This lack of integration leads to a sense of meaninglessness among individuals. Societies with a strong collective conscience and the protective, enveloping social currents that flow from it are likely to prevent the widespread occurrence of egoistic suicide by, among other things, providing people with a sense of the broader meaning of their lives. When these social currents are weak, individuals are able rather

easily to surmount the collective conscience and do as they wish. In large-scale social units with a weak collective conscience, individuals are left to pursue their private interests in whatever way they wish. Such unrestrained egoism is likely to lead to considerable personal dissatisfaction, because all needs cannot be fulfilled, and those that are fulfilled simply lead to the generation of more and more needs and, ultimately, to dissatisfaction—and, for some, to suicide (Breault, 1986). However, strongly integrated families, religious groups, and polities act as agents of a strong collective conscience and discourage suicide. Here is the way Durkheim puts it in terms of religious groups:

> Religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction. . . . What constitutes religion is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all the faithful, traditional and thus obligatory. The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community, also the *greater its preservative* value.
>
> (Durkheim, 1897/1951:170; italics added)

The disintegration of society produces distinctive social currents, and these are the principal causes of differences in suicide rates. For example, Durkheim talked of societal disintegration leading to "currents of depression and disillusionment" (1897/1951:214). The moral disintegration of society predisposes the individual to commit suicide, but the currents of depression must also be there to produce differences in rates of egoistic suicide. Interestingly, Durkheim was here reaffirming the importance of social forces, even in the case of egoistic suicide, where the individual might be thought to be free of social constraints. Actors are *never* free of the force of the collectivity: "However individualized a man may be, there is always something collective remaining—the very depression and melancholy resulting from this same exaggerated individualism. He effects communion through sadness when he no longer has anything else with which to achieve it" (Durkheim, 1897/1951:214). The case of egoistic suicide indicates that in even the most individualistic, most private of acts, social facts are the key determinant.

Altruistic Suicide The second type of suicide discussed by Durkheim is altruistic suicide. Whereas egoistic suicide is more likely to occur when social integration is too weak, *altruistic suicide* is more likely when "social integration is too strong" (Durkheim, 1897/1951:217). The individual is literally forced into committing suicide.

One notorious example of altruistic suicide was the mass suicide of the followers of the Reverend Jim Jones in Jonestown, Guyana. They knowingly took a poisoned drink and in some cases had their children drink it as well. They were clearly committing suicide because they were pushed, either forcefully or gently, into giving their lives for the tightly integrated society of Jones's fanatical followers. More generally, those who commit altruistic suicide do so because they feel that it is their duty to do so.

As was the case with egoistic suicide, the degree of integration (in this case, a high degree) is not the direct cause of altruistic suicide. Rather, different degrees of integration produce different social currents, and these different currents affect suicide rates. As with egoistic suicide, Durkheim saw melancholy social currents as the cause of high rates of altruistic suicide. Whereas higher rates of egoistic suicide stem from "incurable weariness and sad depression," the increased likelihood of altruistic suicide "springs

from hope, for it depends on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life" (Durkheim, 1897/1951:225).

Anomic Suicide The final major form of suicide discussed by Durkheim is *anomic suicide,* which is more likely to occur when the regulative powers of society are disrupted. Such disruptions are likely to leave individuals dissatisfied because there is little control over their passions, which are free to run wild in an insatiable race for gratification. Rates of anomic suicide are likely to rise whether the nature of the disruption is positive (for example, an economic boom) or negative (an economic depression). Either type of disruption renders the collectivity temporarily incapable of exercising its authority over individuals. Such changes put people in new situations in which the old norms no longer apply but new ones have yet to develop. Periods of disruption unleash currents of anomie—moods of rootlessness and normlessness—and these currents lead to an increase in rates of anomic suicide. This is relatively easy to envisage in the case of a depression. The closing of a factory because of an economic depression may lead to the loss of a job, with the result that the individual is cut adrift from the regulative effect that both the company and the job may have had. Being cut off from these structures or others (for example, family, religion, and state) can leave the individual highly vulnerable to the effects of currents of anomie. Somewhat more difficult to imagine is the effect of an economic boom. In this case, it might be argued that sudden success leads individuals away from the traditional structures in which they are embedded. Economic success may lead individuals to quit their jobs, move to a new community, perhaps even find a new spouse. All these changes disrupt the regulative effect of extant structures and leave the individual in boom periods vulnerable to anomic social currents.

The increases in rates of anomic suicide during periods of deregulation of social life are consistent with Durkheim's views on the pernicious effect of individual passions when freed of external constraint. People thus freed will become slaves to their passions and as a result, in Durkheim's view, commit a wide range of destructive acts, including killing themselves in greater numbers than they ordinarily would.

Fatalistic Suicide There is a little-mentioned fourth type of suicide—fatalistic—that Durkheim discussed only in a footnote in *Suicide* (Besnard, 1993). Whereas anomic suicide is more likely to occur in situations in which regulation is too weak, *fatalistic suicide* is more likely to occur when regulation is excessive. Durkheim described those who are more likely to commit fatalistic suicide as "persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" (1897/1951:276). The classic example is the slave who takes his own life because of the hopelessness associated with the oppressive regulation of his every action. Too much regulation—oppression—unleashes currents of melancholy that, in turn, cause a rise in the rate of fatalistic suicide.

A Group Mind?

Given the emphasis on norms, values, and culture in contemporary sociology, we have little difficulty accepting Durkheim's interest in nonmaterial social facts. It is true that