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Q5(c)

What are the problems in observing social facts in Durkheim's views?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What are the problems in observing social facts in **Durkheim's** views?
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Social facts are external and constraining; they are not introspected.

- **Problems:** **prenotions**, observer feeling, and office-made statistics.
- **Durkheim:** define externally and compare.

Blumer and **Weber** add meaning and value-relevance.

Oakley adds the interview as a social relation.

Suicide files illustrate the official-classification problem.

Introduction

- **Emile Durkheim** asked observers to treat social facts as things: external, constraining, and general. The problems he named, and those his method creates, sit in how we see those facts without turning them into private opinions or into the researcher's wish.

Body

Problems he himself flagged

- Social facts are not given to introspection. The observer's feelings are not the fact.
- Official statistics, as in **Suicide**, are already classified by offices. Definition and recording vary.
- **Prenotions**-everyday words such as crime or religion-must be discarded for constructed definitions.

Problems his rule creates

- Treating facts as things can freeze meanings that actors still negotiate, which Herbert Blumer later stressed.
- The observer is also in society. Value-relevance, as **Max Weber** argued, selects which fact is seen.
- Gendered and colonial **prenotions** hid women's work and caste as "custom".

Practical observation problems

- Access, lying, and the interview as a relation, after Ann Oakley.

- Rates without ethnography miss how a death became a **suicide** file.

Durkheim's remedies

- Define by external characteristics, compare, and seek **concomitant variation**.
- Use law, rates, and institutions as indicators, not as inner states.

Flow diagram

Social facts -> Observation

Prenotions feeling -> Problems

Official classification -> Problems

External definition comparison -> Durkheim remedy

Conclusion

For **Durkheim**, the problems of observing social facts are **prenotions**, inner feeling, and impure official files. His remedy is definition, externality, and comparison. Later sociology added standpoint, meaning, and gender as further problems his "thing" rule underplayed.

Facts & figures

Rules of Sociological Method

Treat social facts as things; discard prenotions.

Suicide (1897)

Used official rates while depending on those offices' definitions.

Prenotions

Everyday concepts that distort scientific observation.

Concomitant variation

Durkheim's comparative way of observing relations among facts.