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Q5(a)

Describe various characteristics of a 'social fact'. How is the rate of suicide a social fact according to Durkheim?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- State **Durkheim's characteristics of a social fact**: exteriority, constraint, generality
- Explain how the suicide rate, not the private motive, is a social fact in Suicide
- Keep the method of treating social facts as things

Revision summary

Social facts are ways of acting that are external, constraining and general.

Durkheim asked that they be treated as things, not as inner opinions.

A single suicide is a personal event; the suicide rate is a group property.

Rates vary with religion, family and crisis through integration and regulation.

Egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic types classify those social conditions.

The method explains rates by other social facts, not by biography alone.

Introduction

Emile Durkheim defined a social fact as a way of acting, thinking or feeling that exists outside the individual and that can exert constraint. In The Rules of Sociological Method he asked students to treat social facts as things. In Suicide he used the suicide rate as a clear example. The rate is a property of a group, not a private mood.

Body**Characteristics of a social fact**

A social fact is **external**. Language, law, currency and religious rites are already there when a person is born. The individual finds them, and does not invent them alone. A social fact is **constraining**. It can be felt as duty, shame, punishment or simple inability to do otherwise. One cannot drive on the wrong side of the road by private wish. A social fact is **general** in a group, yet it is not the same as a mere average of individual psychologies. It has a collective reality. **Durkheim** distinguished social facts from organic facts and from individual representations. Later readers such as Steven Lukes have noted that constraint can be moral as well as legal.

The suicide rate as a social fact

A particular suicide looks like the most private of acts. Durkheim did not deny grief or illness in the person. He showed that the **rate** of suicide varies in a stable way with religion, family status, war and economic crisis. Protestant communities, in his data, showed higher rates than Catholic ones. Married people with children showed lower rates than the unmarried. Rates rose in some crises and fell in others according to the degree of integration and regulation. These regularities cannot be read off one biography. The rate is therefore a social fact: it is exterior to any one victim, it constrains the group's chances, and it is general as a collective tendency.

- **He named types:** **egoistic suicide** when integration is weak, altruistic when the self is absorbed in the group, anomic when regulation fails, and fatalistic when regulation is excessive. The classification is debated. The methodological point of the question stands. Psychology may explain a case. Sociology explains a rate by other social facts, such as integration and regulation, not by weather or insanity as sufficient causes.

The Indian official suicide data of NCRB, used carefully, still invite the same Durkheimian question: which groups, regions and crises show stable differences that point beyond private despair.

Flow diagram

Social fact -> Exterior
Social fact -> Constraint
Social fact -> Generality
Suicide rate -> Social fact
Integration and regulation -> Suicide rate

Conclusion

A social fact is external, constraining and general. The suicide rate is such a fact because it belongs to the group and varies with social organisation. Durkheim's study of suicide is the classic demonstration of this rule.

Facts & figures

Exteriority and constraint

The two marks Durkheim stressed: social facts exist outside the person and press upon conduct.

Egoistic suicide

A type linked to weak integration, as in his reading of higher rates where individual ties to the group are thin.

Anomic suicide

A type linked to weak regulation, as in sudden economic boom or crash when norms fail to limit goals.

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