

Session 2 – The individual in social context

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53882 (Monday, 3.30 – 5.30 p.m.)

53883 (Monday, 5.40 – 7.40 p.m.)

21/01/2023 – 24/04/2023

Overview of the session

- 1) Presentation of a classical excerpt in sociology (20 min)
- 2) Discussion by the designated discussants (10-15 min)
- 3) Opening of the discussion to the whole class (15 min)
- 4) Short break (10 min)
- 4) Overview of the second mandatory excerpt (30min)
- 5) Short exercise on the methodology for a dissertation (20 min)



Allocation of presentations and discussions

Date	Session	Text excerpt
24/01	Sociological approaches	
31/01	The individual in social context	Douglas (Mary). Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. 2003.
07/02	Norms and deviance	Becker (Howard). Outsiders. 1963.
14/02	Stratification and inequality	Marx (Karl) and Engels (Friedrich). The Communist Manifesto. 1848.
21/02	Identity and identification	Brubaker (Rogers). Trans. Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities. 2016.
07/03	Urban sociology	Venkatesh (Sudhir) and Levitt (Steven). History and disjuncture in the urban American street gang. 2000.

Allocation of presentations and discussions

Date	Session	Text excerpt
14/03	The family	Edin (Kathryn) and Kefalas (Maria). Promises I Can Keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage. 2005.
21/03	Religion	Snow (David) and Machalek (Richard). "The convert as a social type". 1976.
28/03	Education	Khan (Shamus). Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School. 2001.
04/04	Economic sociology	Esping-Andersen (Gøsta). 'Hybrid or Unique?: The Japanese welfare state between Europe and America'. 1997
11/04	Society and the state	Dubois (Vincent). The bureaucrat and the poor. Encounters in French Welfare Offices. 1999.
18/04	Movements and revolutions	McAdam (Douglas). The Biographical Consequences of Activism. 1989.

Presentation of a classical excerpt in sociology

Today's presentation is on:

Douglas, M., 2003. Chapter 6: Power and Dangers. Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. Routledge.







Émile Durkheim

Born on April 15th, 1858 in the town of Épinal (Vosges). His father, a scholar, took charge of his religious education: learning Hebrew, the Torah and the Talmud.

Durkheim studied for three years of khâgnes at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand before entering the ENS in 1879, where he met with Bergson, Jaurès and Blondel.

Durkheim became Professor of philosophy at the lycée in Sens, then in Saint-Quentin and finally in Troyes, and prepared his main thesis, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) under the direction of Emile Boutroux.

Émile Durkheim

In 1887, he became lecturer in Social Science and Pedagogy at the Faculty of Classics in Bordeaux. His courses were mostly dedicated to "social solidarity", to "the family and the nature of kinship ties" and to "the physics of law and morals".

During this time spent in Bordeaux, Durkheim published the *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) and then *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897).

In 1898, he took part in the creation of the journal *L'Année sociologique* with some young collaborators (including his nephew Marcel Mauss).

Émile Durkheim

He was named lecturer in Science of Education at the Sorbonne University as a substitute for Ferdinand Buisson in 1902, and named Professor in 1906, with a title and a chair including for the first time Sociology as a discipline.

His involvement in public and political life was succinct: he supported Dreyfus by signing the petition for the "revision" of his trial and was in favour of secular education during the debates surrounding the law on the separation of Church and State (1905).

He died on November 15th, 1917.

What are social facts?

Social facts are values, cultural norms, and social structures that transcend the individual and can exercise social control which can either be physiological (i.e., they exist in the consciousness of agents), or morphological (i.e., they have a material existence).

To identify social facts, one can usually retain that they share three characteristics:

- Externality
- Constraint
- Generality

What are social facts? – Externality

Social facts are external.

This means that even if individuals wanted, on their own, to change either the morals, the cultural norms or the structure of society, they would have very little control over it.

The social fact has a sui generis existence, independently of the will of individuals.

What are social facts? – Constraint

Social facts are constraining (binding).

Social facts imposes themselves on the agent in an imperative way.

One way in which they impose themselves to individuals is through education. Education is the acquisition of "ways of acting, feeling and thinking" external to the individual, and that the child will gradually internalize.

In modern sociological language, however, one prefers the term of socialization.

What are social facts? – Generality

Social facts are general.

There is a certain degree of generality in social facts in the sense that they are collective. One is typically able to measure its frequency (a social fact can be measured statistically).

For example, very often, statistics make it possible to reveal the social norm, in particular when one looks at the average or most frequent behaviour (the mode).

Durkheim (Émile). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. 1897.

Durkheim analyses suicide in order to apply his sociological method developed in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). Here, suicide is taken as an object of study as it meets the definition of a social fact (i.e., values, cultural norms, and social structures that transcend the individual and can exercise social control).

Suicide can indeed be seen a social fact as:

- The rate of suicide is reasonably stable in time and only varies in the long-term
- The rates of suicide varies across countries
- There are disparities in suicide rates among different social groups

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

He posits that many of his contemporaries' studies on suicide are flawed.

For Durkheim it is for instance false to say that alcoholism causes suicide. Instead, suicide and alcoholism are for Durkheim two modes of expression of ill-feeling in society. To perform this study, Durkheim uses public statistics on suicide made available by the French Ministry of Justice.

His thesis is that suicide does not depend on individual characteristics but rather on the collective morality of society.

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

Hence, despite its name, the object of study of Durkheim is not individual suicides, but rather the rate of suicides.

As a matter of fact, suicide has, heuristically, existed in modern societies, and a non-zero rate of suicide is the most common situation.

On the other-hand, a significative increase in suicide rate can be interpreted as a sign of a weak social bond and be treated by the sociologist.

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

Durkheim's creates a typology of the forms of suicide by studying different variables and their relationship with suicide rates.

He identifies several preservation factors:

- Religion (suicide is forbidden in all faiths)
- Family relationships (people who are married or have children commit suicide less)
- Politics (the suicide rate decreases during wars and revolutions, as if by *collective effervescence*, a period of time where all individuals in a society simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action)

Preservation factors – Religion

“The beneficent influence of religion is therefore not due to the special nature of religious conceptions. [...] What constitutes this society 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, and also the greater its preservative value.”

Durkheim (Émile), *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897)

Preservation factors – Family

It is sufficient to assume that the habits, tastes, and tendencies formed during marriage do not disappear on its dissolution [...]. If the married man, then, even if childless, feels a relative security from suicide, he must inevitably preserve some of this feeling when a widower. [...] *The tendency to suicide in the state of widowhood is for each sex a function of the suicidal tendency of the same sex in the state of marriage.*"

"Suicide does not principally depend upon the congenital qualities of individuals but upon causes exterior to and dominating them!"

Durkheim (Émile), *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897)

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

The typology of Durkheim can be summarised as follows:

Form of suicide	Lack	Excess
Regulation	Anomic	Fatalist
Integration	Egotistical	Altruistic

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

For Durkheim, one can never truly know nor understand what happened in the mind of someone who has committed suicide.

Hence, the real (sociological) question is, for Durkheim, to understand why the individual can give in to the temptation of suicide, that is why the group could not prevent the individual from committing suicide, rather than understanding the thought process which led an individual to commit suicide.

Here, the cause of egotistical suicide for Durkheim is a lack of integration where individualisation is excessive and too strong.

Durkheim (Émile). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. 1897.

In this situation, which Durkheim calls *egotistical*, collective morality no longer protects individuals sufficiently against the temptation to commit suicide.

The example taken by Durkheim is that of an increased rate of suicide among people without children, where the fact of having children is for Durkheim a sign of greater integration into society.

Here, Durkheim shows us that there is a very strong link between agents' states of consciousness and the social structure.

Exercise – Constructing a plan for an essay / a dissertation

In groups of two (except one group of three), on the model of a draft presentation:

- Define and underline the notions at stake
- Find a question (problematic) about the subject
- Find some arguments around the question asked
- Think of material (e.g., statistics) you could find to highlight your arguments

Groups will be invited to present their draft and findings after 10 to 15 minutes.

Subject

Mental health and social inequalities



Notions at stake

Mental health

- Condition of someone's mind as well as whether or not they are suffering from mental illnesses as defined by medical sciences...
- ... hence sociology can treat mental health and mental illnesses as some, among many, conditions which are defined by health workers...
- ... but sociological approaches also regard mental health and illnesses as aspects of social circumstances, in the sense that mental health and illnesses are social constructs which can be approached through the lens of stigmas and labels...
- ... and sociological approaches emphasizes the influence of society via social contexts, relationships, roles, etc.

Notions at stake

Social inequalities

- Talking about inequalities implies a reference to values
- Inequalities are differences that are considered as disadvantageous by a group or by society as a whole
- There is rarely a consensus in society about what is recognised as a difference and what is perceived as inequality. The sociologist is part of this debate.
- For instance, reduced prices for train tickets for elderly people are very rarely labelled as inequalities, and are legally grounded; but some groups deem it unfair
- On the other hand, unequal access to jobs for people of different ages but with the same qualifications is often seen as an inequality

Main question

Examples of questions which can be asked include:

- How does mental health interplay with social inequalities?
- In what ways do mental health and mental illnesses interact with social inequalities, both as catalysts and as manifestations and consequences of them?
- Through which pathways do social inequalities act both as indicators and as drivers of mental health problems?
- In what ways do the definitions of mental health and mental illnesses reflect social inequalities?

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For next time...

- Read Goffman, E. 2002 [1959]. Introduction. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Garden City, NY
- Read Becker, H., 1963. “Deviance and the Responses of Others” (p. 8-14), “Marijuana use and social control” (p., 59-78). *Outsiders*. The Free Press
- When reading, remember to note the important elements of the text: question asked by the author(s), (hypo)theses of the author(s), methods used, references, writing style, argumentative construction, etc.
- Prepare the presentation and discussion (if concerned)