



Block 2

Émile Durkheim

UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ÉMILE DURKHEIM'S WORK*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- describe biographical details of Émile Durkheim;
- outline main ideas and perspectives that influenced his writings; and
- explain central ideas in his writings.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Émile Durkheim was a French sociologist. He maintained that it was possible to develop a scientific study of society. In fact, both Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim are known for their contribution in providing credibility to sociology and establishing it as an independent academic discipline. He is known for his writings on division of labour in society, religion, suicide, and education and morals. In this Unit we begin with a biographical outline of Durkheim in order to familiarize you with the social, economic, and political environment in which his ideas developed. We then examine the specific intellectual ideas that influenced him. Finally, we understand some important ideas in his writings.

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4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ÉMILE DURKHEIM

Émile Durkheim was born on 15th April 1858 in a small town in Eastern France called Epinal. He grew up in a Jewish family, and his father was a rabbi (i.e., a spiritual leader and religious teacher of Jewish community). As a child he studied the Hebrew and the Talmud. His early education was in a rabbinical school and he wanted to become a rabbi. Later, he lost interest in religious education and joined a local school instead. He grew up in a family with a high focus on morality and discipline.

As he grew up, he gave up Judaism and Christianity. He was of the opinion that these religions cannot provide answers to the problems of the modern World. However, he retained an interest in the intellectual investigation of religion and morality throughout his academic career. For higher education, Durkheim joined Ecole Normale Superieure, the most distinguished college in France in 1879. He was initially interested in psychology and philosophy. He enjoyed the intellectual discussions at Ecole Normale Superieure but was critical of the style of education there. He held that it was too literary and rhetorical and lacked scientific rigour. In his third year he decided to study sociology, which according to him was more 'rational', 'scientific' and 'practical' in understanding philosophical questions. At Ecole Durkheim was influenced by neo-Kantian scholars like Renouvier and Boutroux. Boutroux's thinking influenced Durkheim. Boutroux held that the subject matter of each discipline should be distinct. Durkheim was influenced by Renouvier's commitment to rationalism, scientific study of morality and secular education. Durkheim was also influenced by the historian Fustel de Coulanges who advocated the scientific method and laid stress on the importance of religion in social life.

From 1882-87 Durkheim taught philosophy in state-run secondary schools near Paris. By this time he had decided on a topic for his doctoral thesis: the relation between individualism and socialism. He later focused on the relation between individual and society. Finally he nailed down his topic to the relation between individual personality and social solidarity. He had completed the first draft of his dissertation in 1886 and the ideas subsumed in it were incorporated in his first book, 'The Division of Labour in Society'. Let us refer to Box 4.1 in order to find out little more about doctoral research work of Durkheim.

Box 4.1 Doctoral Research Work of Durkheim

"Doctoral candidates in France are required to write two theses, a small one, and a large one. Durkheim wrote the smaller thesis on a French political scientist, Montesquieu who had tried to explain different types of states through other facts. He was a premier political thinker who wanted to introduce scientific, comparative approach to the study of social (in his case, political) institutions (the state) and Durkheim considered him to be one of the forerunners of sociology.

The main thesis of Durkheim related to division of labour in Society. By that time, Industrial Revolution had occurred in England and Germany, and France was beginning to feel the effects both from within and from the neighbouring countries. In England Adam Smith, an economist, had written a century earlier the path breaking book *The Wealth of Nation* (1776), which provided a theory of division of labour. It helped in increasing production, efficiency and wealth. The revolutionary idea (division of labour) was given a social meaning by Durkheim who wrote about functions, causes and abnormal forms of division of labour, not in the economic, but in the social field, in society itself [...]

Durkheim explained the method of this study in a work that appeared two years later in 1895 in French. Its meaning in English was *The Rules of Sociological Method*. In this book, he defined the nature of social facts, laid down the rules for their observation, recognition of the normal and the pathological, and rules for their observation, recognition of the normal and the pathological, and rules for explanation of social facts. Durkheim wrote a work on *Suicide*. He wanted to show its social aspects, and tried to explain the social conditions under which suicide rates go up. He identified three types of suicides and said that each type had different causes". (Biographical Sketch of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Block 3, ESO 13:5)

Although Comte had coined the term 'sociology' in 1822, the discipline of sociology was still struggling for academic recognition. In order to visualize the influence of sociology, Durkheim focused on universities in Germany. From 1885- 86 he visited many German universities. Many German social thinkers were influenced by Herbert Spencer's organic analogy in the study of societies. In Germany, he was also impressed by the scientific study of morality of Wagner and Schmoller. He greatly appreciated Wilhelm Wundt's contribution to the sociological understanding of morality. Durkheim's articles on German social science and morality became quite popular.

It was in 1887, that Durkheim began his career as a Professor in University of Bordeaux. Durkheim spent very productive fifteen years in Bordeaux. He published his first book '*The Division of Labour in Society*' while in Bordeaux in 1893. It was based on his doctoral dissertation. Other books that he published in Bordeaux were '*The Rules of Sociological Method*' in 1895 and '*Suicide*' in 1897. In 1898, Émile Durkheim founded one of the first sociology journals in the World, called *L'Année Sociologique*. Durkheim faced opposition for supporting the cause of sociology in his lifetime.

Durkheim disliked politics but one of his articles on 'moral individualism' responded to the accusations against intellectuals supporting Dreyfus case. The article was titled '*Individuals and Intellectuals*'. Alfred Dreyfus was falsely court martialled during the First World War for selling secrets to the German embassy in Paris. Following Dreyfus affair Durkheim participated in various public debates and this led to his appointment at Sorbonne University in Paris in 1902. He taught '*Education and Sociology*' there. He became a Professor in 1906 and in 1913 Durkheim was named a chair in '*Science of Education and Sociology*.' Durkheim died of heart attack in 1917 after the death of his son in the First World War.

4.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After the French Revolution (1789-1799) and ushering of the enlightenment age there was an intellectual concern about the increase in individualism in society. There was increase in the assertion of the individual political rights and a decrease in the collective authority of the state. In 1871, France was facing a political crisis and there was a decline in national unity. France therefore worked towards political consolidation by focussing on social progress. Also it was held that the development of the scientific method would lead to social progress. Durkheim believed that the sociological method could provide solutions to the decay in moral order. He was interested in the recuperation of the republic through the establishment of a moral civic and secular order. Durkheim was concerned with ideas of how individuals related to the social life. In all his major works, he was concerned with analysing how the individuals maintained bonds with each other in the modern industrial age, characterized by increasing individualism. Let us refer to Box 4.2 to understand the social context in which sociology emerged in Europe.

Box 4.2 Social Context for the Emergence of Sociology in Europe

“The roots of the ideas developed by the early sociologists are grounded in the social conditions that prevailed in Europe. The emergence of sociology as a scientific discipline can be traced to that period of European history, which saw such tremendous social, political and economic changes as embodied in the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. This period of change in European society is known as the Enlightenment Period as it embodies the spirit of new awakening in the French philosophers of the eighteenth century.

The Enlightenment Period marked a radical change from the traditional thinking of feudal Europe. It introduced the new way of thinking and looking at reality. Individuals started questioning each and every aspect of life and nothing was considered sacrosanct - from the church to the state to the authority of the monarch and so on.

The roots of the ideas, such as the belief that both nature and society can be studied scientifically, that human beings are essentially rational and that a society built on rational principles will make human beings realize their infinite potentials, can be traced in the development of science and commerce in Europe. The new outlook developed as a result of the Commercial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution and crystallised during the French and the Industrial Revolutions gave birth to sociology as a discipline.

To understand the social changes that were taking place in European society, we will first look at the kind of society that existed in traditional Europe, i.e. prior to the Enlightenment period.

Old Europe was traditional. Land was central to its economic system. There were owners of land, the feudal lords and the peasants who worked on the lands. The classes were distinct and clearly demarcated. Religion formed the corner stone of

society. The religious heads decided what was moral, what was not. Family and kinship were central to the lives of the people. Monarchy was firmly rooted in society. The king was believed to be divinely ordained to rule over his people.

The New Europe ushered in by the two Revolutions, the French and the industrial, challenged each and every central feature of old Europe. Classes were recognised. Old classes were overthrown. New classes arose. Religion was questioned. Religion lost its important position. Family loyalties gave way to ideological commitments. The position of women changed. And finally monarchy was overthrown. Democracy was heralded in.

The central concepts of society, namely, religion, community, power, wealth, etc. were all taking on new bearings and new implications.” (ESO 13, Block 1:15-16).

As you learnt in section 4.2, Durkheim served as a Professor of Science of Education and Sociology. At that time, the French government sought to secularize education i.e., it tried to create a system of education that was not largely influenced by any religious faith. What Durkheim did was to incorporate secular topics in education. Schools were encouraged to teach reverence for society. He wanted students to respect institutions of society and at the same time be able to understand social change from a secular perspective.

We find that certain notions and ideas that appear in one form or the other in most of Durkheim’s writings. Some of these are: importance of ‘ideals’ and moral unity in society, significance of the individual as an active agent as well as a passive recipient of social influences, and attachment of the individual to society.

4.4 INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES ON DURKHEIM’S WORKS

Durkheim’s work can be appropriately understood in light of the intellectual context from which it emerged. Let us now look at the intellectual ideas that influenced Durkheim.

4.4.1 Social Realism

Durkheim provided social explanations for all phenomena. Durkheim was a social realist as he visualized society as *sui generis* and having an existence prior to the individual. He believed that economic and utilitarian explanations cannot explain individual phenomena. The utilitarian philosophers held that individuals engaged in economic exchange with society and are driven by their self-interest. Durkheim rejected the utilitarian social theory advocated by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. They held that individuals were autonomous and were not restrained by larger social rules. Contrary to them, Durkheim held that society precedes the individual. Society and individual are inseparable. There exists a social constraint on individuals and their actions are not strictly utilitarian or

economically driven. Durkheim was determined to establish the status of sociology as an independent discipline. He held that sociology studied social facts that were constraining and external. He believed that human action is not based on common motives or driven towards self-interest, but there is an external constraint that exists which leads us to engage in certain actions. This led Durkheim to write *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

The early French intellectuals who had an influence on Durkheim's works were J.J. Rousseau and Hobbes. J.J. Rousseau had an influence on Durkheim's thoughts on morality and society. Durkheim was influenced by Rousseau's belief that there is a need for common social and moral rules that can keep society together. However, Durkheim did not agree with Rousseau's individualist theories that looked for explanation of morality in 'original human nature' of individuals. Rousseau held that collective will draws from many individual wills and therefore society in that sense emerges from the individual will. Durkheim on the other hand analysed morality in relation to society. In his lectures on Moral Education at Sorbonne in 1902-3 Durkheim held that morality is linked with discipline and to a group.

Durkheim disagreed with Hobbes who held that individuals contract out of nature and paid emphasis on individual will as preceding social restraint. Hobbes developed a political and legal explanation for the emergence of society. Hobbes held that society comes into existence when individuals contract to common rules, the rule of a leader and agree to live in peace. Durkheim held that constraint emerges from the collective and not the individual. This constraint is external and does not emerge out of the individual.

Durkheim's social realism is opposed to the individualism or nominalism of Herbert Spencer. According to Spencer modern society is based on contracts and exchange of self-interested individual acts. He maintained that social order is established when individuals are engaged in a struggle for existence. Durkheim held that society preceded individual action. He thus, disagrees with Spencer who maintains that it is individuals who are engaged in self-interested acts who work towards maintaining the social whole. Durkheim held that social integration is not the result of individual actions but a shared sense of solidarity that keeps the society together.

In the book, *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim developed the methodological framework to study society. He held that sociology is a study of 'social facts' as suicide rates, religious affiliations, moral rules etc. These social facts exercise a constraint upon the individual. He held that the ultimate social reality is the group and not the individual. The social facts also cannot be reduced to or analyzed through psychological or physiological explanations. The social facts are external and cannot be reduced to individual facts. You will learn more about social facts in section 4.5.2. This intellectual influence in Durkheim's work led him to analyse the mental and moral qualities of individuals as social. The various concepts in Durkheim's works as collective conscience and social solidarity have the underlying assumptions that mental and moral qualities are social and not individual.

4.4.2 Scientism and Influence of Positivism

Till the late nineteenth century, sociology as an academic discipline was not studied in the universities in France. The term 'sociology' was founded by Auguste Comte in 1882 but the study of sociology was not introduced in the universities. Durkheim was influenced by Comte's idea of positivism. After Durkheim joined Bourdeaux as a Professor in 1887 he instituted the study of sociology as an academic discipline. For him, sociology could be established as a scientific discipline only when the causal relations underlying social activities could be studied. Positivist doctrine propagated that the speculative sciences as philosophy or history should search for law- like generalities based on relationship between observed facts (Morisson 1995: 123). Sociology which was emerging as an academic discipline could establish generalizations and not mere speculations.

In developing his understanding of sociology as a scientific discipline Durkheim was influenced by various intellectuals as Montesquieu, Saint Simon and Comte. Durkheim was influenced by Montesquieu's idea that a science of society was concerned with the exploration of facts rather than mere speculation. Montesquieu held that humans could not have existed without a society. Saint Simon contributed an idea of a science of society but it was Comte who developed a method and ranked the various sciences as positivistic and non-positivistic. It was Comte who put the various academic disciplines in a hierarchy and placed social sciences as occupying a lower position in the hierarchy. The sciences as mathematics and biology were seen as more developed and positivistic and the social sciences like philosophy and history were non-positivistic. Comte held that all societies passed through similar stages of evolution as the theological, metaphysical and the scientific. According to Comte, in the theological stage human beings explain causes in nature as the will of Gods. In the metaphysical stage, natural causes are explained on the basis of speculative truths. In the scientific stage society causes are explained on the basis of observation, classification and experimentation. Durkheim however held that it is questionable that all the academic disciplines will evolve simultaneously and achieve the status of a scientific discipline. It was also questionable that with historical progress all disciplines will evolve from a speculative to a positive stage.

Durkheim held that society was 'sui generis' and could be subjected to scientific investigation and could not be simply reduced to the individuals composing it or to individual acts. Durkheim has critiqued both Comte and Spencer for engaging in abstract theorizing and speculation rather than studying the society and changes therein empirically. Durkheim was working towards establishing the status of sociology as a scientific discipline separate from, and not subsumed by philosophy.

Durkheim along with his nephew Marcel Mauss adopted the comparative method to study societies. In order to understand the evolution of societies they applied the comparative method to understand the causal laws in the simple and modern societies. Durkheim and Marcel Mauss held that instead of holding an abstract concept of civilization it was necessary to engage in ethnographic studies and distinguish between the various states, nations and civilizations.

4.4.3 Functionalism

Durkheim incorporated Comte's and Spencer's organic analogy in the study of society. According to the organic view of society, society was analogous to an organism. The various parts of society are interrelated and work together to maintain a stable whole. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and cannot be reduced to its individual parts. The heart or the lungs for instance do not have a life on their own. These organs work together to maintain the whole and when seen on their own they are lifeless. Likewise, social phenomena cannot be explained through individual phenomena.

Social integration is possible as all parts of society function to maintain the social whole. In simple societies the beliefs and sentiments have a greater constraining force and all individuals involved in similar tasks work together to maintain the social whole. A simple society is homogeneous and individuals are not dependent on one another as everyone is involved in similar tasks. As the population grows society becomes more complex and tasks are differentiated. Division of labour and specialization of tasks entails that individuals are dependent upon one another. Whereas, Herbert Spencer, typified societies as simple and compound, Émile Durkheim typified societies on the basis of mechanical and organic solidarity. Durkheim drew the evolutionary view of society from Herbert Spencer. Durkheim believed that Spencer assumed that harmony existed in the social world and did not interrogate this preconceived notion by engaging in an empirical study.

Check Your Progress 1

1) In what way was Durkheim influenced by Comte's idea of positivism? Explain.

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2) Does society precede the individual? Discuss with reference to the viewpoint of Durkheim.

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4.5 CENTRAL IDEAS

Let us understand some of the important ideas in Durkheim's writings.

4.5.1 Division of Labour in Society

Division of labour exists in different sectors of society and Durkheim did not limit his understanding to strictly economic exchanges. He held that division of labour is a social phenomenon and merits social explanation. He held that as volume and density of population increases in a given area there is an increase in interaction and struggle for survival. Social differentiation is practised in modern societies to overcome this struggle for survival between individuals. The individuals are more dependent on one another for specialized functions and this leads to social cohesion and increase in individual autonomy. In modern societies there is an increase of individualism but there is also a need to maintain social solidarity. In his writings, Durkheim explained how individuals relate to one another and to society by the social bonds. His doctoral dissertation on Division of Labour in Society focused on the concept of 'social solidarity'. He was influenced by Rousseau's thinking that social solidarity is neither dependent on politics nor economy. Durkheim held that solidarity can be expressed in two distinct ways which are 'mechanical' and 'organic'. In small societies with mechanical solidarity, individual autonomy is lowest and society is characterized by likeness of beliefs. There is no specialization of tasks and very little division of labour. Collective conscience pervades amongst all individuals in the group. The links bonding the individual to the social whole is intense and there is perfect social integration. In such a society the institution of religion is dominant and an individual's place in society is determined by kinship. There is a system of penal law which punishes crimes violently so as to reaffirm the core beliefs and values. This law is repressive and severely punishes the offence.

On the other hand, in societies with organic solidarity there is greater division of labour and individuals are dependent on one another for specialized tasks rather than on society as a whole. Such societies are dense and cover a large geographical area. The political, legal and economic institutions are more specialized and the force of the collective conscience over the individuals is weakened. There are greater individual differences between individuals and the integration of individuals when the social whole is weakened. Restitutive law is operative and aims at restoring the wrongs to their original state.

4.5.2 Social Facts

Unlike the utilitarian thinkers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham Durkheim held that individuals were not autonomous or just engaged in utilitarian exchanges in society. Durkheim held that in society there are social facts that exercised a constraint on individuals. Durkheim wrote the Rules of Sociological Method because he wanted to develop a framework for the methodical investigation for the subject matter of sociology. He also wanted to establish the

status of sociology as a science of society which was separate from psychology. Just as physical sciences deal with natural facts, he held that sociology as a scientific discipline should deal with social facts and these social facts are things in society. He held that just as natural facts, social facts will be external. This means that they will have an independent existence regardless of the beliefs or opinions that we may have about them. Also social facts are ways of acting which are co external and exercise a constraint on the individual. Social facts are generally diffused throughout society. Eating for instance is an individual fact and parenting is a social fact that is engaged in the society at large. Social facts have an existence outside the individual consciousness and have an objective existence prior to an individual's birth. Therefore, they have an external existence and are passed on from generation to generation. Society precedes the individual and individuals born are subject to the laws of society. Durkheim laid down certain rules for the observation of social facts. These are that they should be treated as things and not ideas, should be distinct in themselves and should display a regular pattern in society.

In *The Rules of Sociological Method* Durkheim employed an organic analogy to the study of society and developed a criterion to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy societies. Durkheim's concern with the normal and pathological is influenced by Tocqueville's concern with the pathological and establishment of order in modern society. Durkheim was influenced by Tocqueville's view that the common values and beliefs have a role to play in social integration. According to Durkheim, social phenomena is said to be normal when it is generally distributed throughout society and also occurs in other societies under general conditions. Social phenomena is said to be pathological if it deviates from the phenomena that is generally diffused in society. Durkheim held that crime is normal social phenomena because it is generally present in all societies and serves a function in the social framework. Durkheim held that crime has a function in society to maintain the basic social values and sentiments. Crime therefore has a role in maintaining social integration. Crime in society entails a reaction that is punishment which establishes the collective values and sentiments offended by crime.

4.5.3 Suicide

Durkheim was interested in the study of suicide as there was an increase in the number of suicides with the coming in of industrialization in 1850, Europe. Industrialization led to increased individualism in society and the decrease of social integration. Suicide was attributed to individual phenomena like nervous disorder or alcoholism. Durkheim held that suicide could not be explained by individual or psychological factors but should be explained by analysing the link between social institutions and the individual. In order to study suicide, Durkheim analysed suicide rates from different European countries.

Durkheim was aware that experimental method could not be applied to the social sciences as it was in the natural sciences. Therefore, he undertook a causal analysis of suicide (Morrison 1995: 164). Durkheim used the term 'social suicide

rate' to refer to the number of deaths in a given society and the pattern of suicide in a given society. He held that the rate of suicide in a society is related to other social institutions like marriage, family and religious institutions. He therefore studied suicide collectively rather than individually. He studied the data on number of suicidal deaths in countries as France, England, Germany and Denmark and linked it to social factors. He held that it was a social fact that a particular society exhibited a certain suicide rate and that this social suicide rate led to a sociological study of suicide as distinct from a psychological study.

Durkheim explained various forms of suicide by looking at how individuals are able to develop bonds in society and how individuals are regulated by society. He described the egoistic and altruistic suicides by referring to the level of social integration of individuals. He examined the anomic and fatalistic suicides by referring to the level of social regulation of individuals. Because of the weakening of the social bonds, the individuals detach themselves from society. Individual turn towards themselves and individual goals dominate over social goals. The bonds of the individuals with familial, religious and political institutions are weakened and they depend upon themselves more. Egoistic suicide results from the absence of social bonds and the loosening of attachment of individuals to groups in society. For instance, Durkheim held that family life creates duties and obligations towards society and greater bonding with an institution outside of oneself. This has a restraining influence on suicide. The polar opposite of egoistic suicide is altruistic suicide in which individuals are excessively integrated with society and give up their life for society. Durkheim studied tribal societies to understand this form of suicide. For example, military soldiers in the battlefield give up their lives for the service of the nation state. Similarly, in earlier Hindu society widows became sati and sacrificed their lives on the death pyre of the husband. In such cases, individuals are obligated to give up their lives for society and are socially honoured to do so. The third form of suicide which Durkheim analysed was anomic suicide which occurs when there is a weakening of social regulation. For instance, in times of economic prosperity or hardship there may be an increase in levels of anomic suicide. Thus society sets goals and wants for individuals that are unattainable. Individuals may become disappointed and this reflects society's failure to regulate wants. This form of suicide occurs when wants are unbridled and the economy dominates over other institutions in society. Also, there is no justificatory mechanism as religion for the specific placement of individuals within the social order. The fourth form of suicide is the fatalistic suicide which occurs when individuals are excessively regulated by society. Durkheim explains this type of suicide by referring to the case of suicide by slaves.

4.5.5 Religion and Manifestation of the Social

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life was published in 1912. Durkheim was interested in the study of religion as early as 1902 because he regarded as a major institution in society. Also most of the articles in his sociological journal, *L'Année Sociologique* focused on the subject of religion. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* he wanted to explore the elements or the constituents of religion

which make religious life possible. He turned towards primitive religion and took an evolutionary approach by assuming that by studying the basic structure of primitive religion the constituents of religion in general could be understood. He propounded a scientific study of religion based on observation and exploration. For Durkheim, religion helped people make sense of the world and religion personifies the society. He held that religion is made up of beliefs and rituals. Beliefs for Durkheim were the ideas that were focused towards the sacred. Rituals on the other hand were the actions that were directed towards the sacred. He held that universally the religious worldview is divided into two domains that is the sacred and the profane. A thing, belief or act is sacred because it is believed to be sacred by the society. Let us refer to 34.2 to understand concepts of sacred and profane in more detail.

Box 4.3 Concepts of Sacred and Profane

“Some scholars have argued that there is a definite distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. The 'sacred versus profane' is an opposition which correspond to other oppositions like 'other worldly versus worldly', 'extraordinary versus ordinary'. The sacred, says Durkheim (1912), is set apart and forbidden from the profane. The world 'profane' refers to unholy, secular, mundane. Rituals are occasions during which communication becomes possible between the profane and the sacred. If one wants to approach the sacred, one must purify the set by undergoing penance or by any other prescribed means. Many scholars have criticised this strict separation made by Durkheim between the profane and the sacred. Such a strict separation emerges out of a church or temple-entered understanding of religion. It has been widely pointed out by scholars that sacred impinges on many profane activities of everyday life. In turn, profane communicates with the sacred even during this-worldly activities”. (ESO 15, Block 1: 16)

The ultimate basis of religion is therefore the social. The profane has the capacity to pollute the sacred. He thus held that religion provided human beings a basis of classification of their worldviews.

4.5.6 Collective Conscience

Another basic concept that Durkheim focused on the Division of Labour is the 'common conscience' or 'collective conscience.' The collective conscience according to Durkheim is the body of beliefs, practises and common sentiment held throughout society and it gives social purpose and structures social life. The collective conscience is characterized by a likeness of moral and mental sentiments. The collective conscience is different from individual conscience. It is diffused throughout society. The collective conscience has a role in maintaining social solidarity and also connecting different generations to each other. The greater the spread, intensity, uniformity of collective conscience the better will be the individuals attachment to collective beliefs and sentiments (Morrison 1995). Let us refer to Box 4.4 to learn more about collective conscience and society.

Box 4.4 Collective Conscience and Society

“Durkheim describes collective consciousness as ‘the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average of the members of a society’. The system of these beliefs and sentiments has a life of its own. It is distributed throughout the whole of the society. It has specific features, which make it a distinct reality. Collective consciousness is independent of the particular conditions in which individuals are placed. It is spread out over the whole of the territory of a society — to large and small towns and villages. It is common to all occupations or professions etc. It links successive generations to one another. Individuals come in and go out of society, however collective conscience remains. Although collective conscience can only be realised through individuals, it has a form beyond a particular person, and operates at a level higher than him/her.

Collective conscience varies in extent and force from one society to another. In less advanced societies collective conscience embraces the greater part of individual consciousness. In such societies the extent of collective conscience is stronger and greater. For example social controls and prohibitions prevalent in primitive societies are imposed upon individual members in strongest fashion and they all submit to it. It is the collective conscience, which governs the existence of individuals. The collective sentiments experienced in common have an extreme force and are reflected in the form of severe punishments on those who violate prohibitions. The stronger the collective conscience of a society, the greater the indignation against crime or against any other violation of the social imperative”. (ESO 13, Block 3:38-39)

Check Your Progress 2

1) What did Durkheim mean by ‘social fact’? Use the space below to write your answer.

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2) What is altruistic suicide? Use the space below to write your answer.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you learnt about the intellectual influences in Durkheim's works. Durkheim was influenced by Comte's positivism and Herbert Spencer's Functionalism. He was also influenced by Rousseau's views on morality and Tocqueville's views on generality of belief and values in society. He however, rejected abstract theorizing indulged in by earlier philosophers. He established the status of sociology as a positivistic science. He held that sociology was a science that studied social facts like natural sciences studied facts. In his work, 'Suicide', he analysed suicide as a social fact. You learnt that in all his major works Durkheim held that society existed prior to the individuals and society cannot be explained through individual phenomena. Social integration occurs when individuals are linked to society by strong social bonds. He held that morality is linked to society and does not originate in the individual. He therefore held that religion, morality, suicide, education should be understood in relation to social life.

4.7 REFERENCES

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4.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Durkheim was influenced by Auguste Comte's positivism. Comte held that all sciences could be subject to causal analysis and could provide law like generalizations. Comte developed a hierarchy of various sciences and placed social sciences in the lower level of the hierarchy and the natural sciences like biology as occupying higher position in the hierarchy. Durkheim believed that sociology could also discover law like generalizations as the natural sciences. Durkheim held that society had an independent existence from individuals and should be subjected to scientific analysis.
- 2) Durkheim believed that society *wassui generis* and has an existence prior to the individual. Durkheim rejected the utilitarian social theory advocated by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. They held that individuals were autonomous and were not restrained by larger social rules. Contrary to them, Durkheim held that society precedes the individual. He held that sociology studied social facts that were constraining and external. These social facts

cannot be reduced to individual facts. For example he held that morality can be explained by reference to the 'group' and not individual phenomena.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) According to Durkheim, social fact refers to general ways of thinking, behaving, feeling etc. that are prevalent in a society. They are external to an individual i.e., they exist independent of individuals' will or desire and exercise constraint on them.
- 2) By altruistic suicide Durkheim referred to those cases of suicide in which individuals give up their life for society. It is committed by those individuals who are excessively integrated with society.



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UNIT 5 SOCIAL FACT*

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

When you study this unit, you will be able to:

- locate the characteristics of science;
- identify the bases for defining social facts;
- point out how sociology is different from some other subjects of study;
- describe the types of society;
- classify social facts;
- list the rules of observation of social facts; and
- identify the rules for explaining facts.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) is best remembered for his efforts in making sociology accepted as an autonomous academic discipline. He won recognition for the idea of a science of society, which could contribute to the study of moral and intellectual problems of modern society. While discussing Durkheim’s conception of Sociology we shall focus on three important aspects (a) general conditions for establishment of social science (b) sociology as a study of ‘social facts’ and (c) the sociological method

* Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 10 of Sociological Thought (ESO 13) with modifications by Nita Mathur

5.2 GENERAL CONDITIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Human beings have always lived in societies, and as members of their societies, they have pondered about their nature. This is like saying that human beings have their own bodies and they always had some idea of the organism. The knowledge about different parts of the body, its anatomy, and its working or physiology developed as a special discipline much later. Thus scientific knowledge about our body and other things around us developed along with new methods of acquiring the same. This method began to be called the scientific method. Now we try to get knowledge about society, its working, its modifications and changes through a scientific method. In bringing scientific approach to the study of society, Durkheim played an important part. So we try to know what he did and how he did it.

Sociology was just emerging as a distinctive discipline in Durkheim's lifetime. To the vast majority of educated people including scholars in the universities, sociology was just a name. When Durkheim was a student at the Ecole Normale there was not a single professorship in sociology in France! It was only in 1887 that the first chair in social science was created for Durkheim by the French Government at the University of Bordeaux. It was many years later that he received the title of Professor of Sociology at Sorbonne in Paris.

Given the existing situation, Durkheim was explicitly concerned with outlining the nature and scope of Sociology. Durkheim considered social sciences to be distinct from natural sciences because social sciences dealt with human relationships. However the method used in the natural sciences could be used in the social sciences as well. He was concerned with examining the nature of Sociology as a social science distinct from Philosophy and Psychology. Philosophy is concerned with ideas and conceptions whereas science is concerned with objective realities. Philosophy is the source from where all sciences have emerged (see figure 5.1) Philosophy

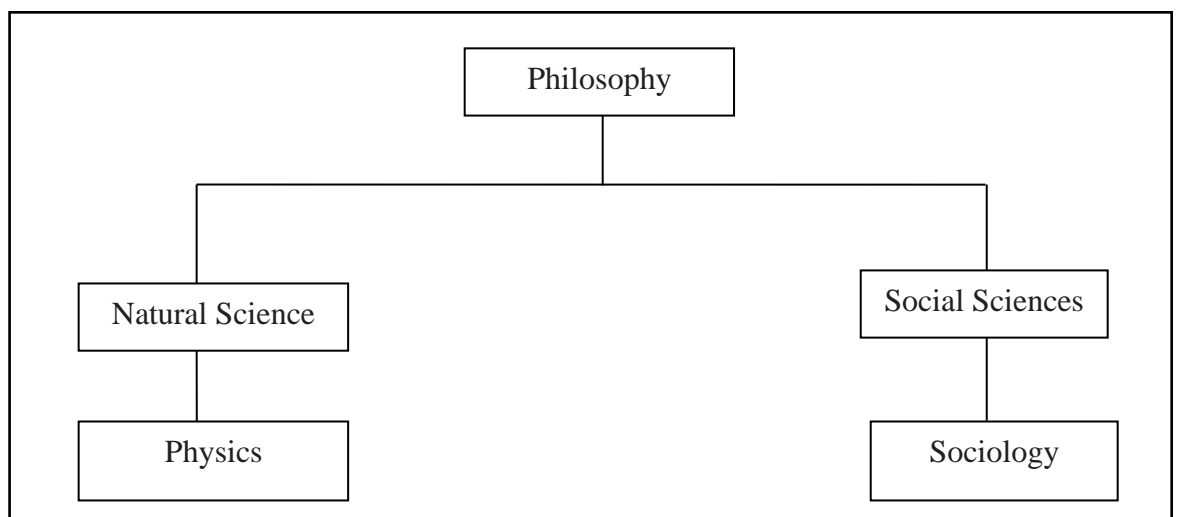


Fig. 5.1 Philosophy as a source of all sciences

In his book *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, published in 1892, Durkheim (1960: 3-13) laid down the general conditions for the establishment of a social science (which also apply to Sociology). Let us look at them.

- i) Science, he pointed out, is not coextensive with human knowledge or thought. Not every type of question the mind can formulate can be tested by science. It is possible for something to be the object of the philosopher or artist and not necessarily the stuff of science at all. Thus, science deals with a specified, area — or a subject matter of its own, not with total knowledge.
- ii) Science must have a definite field to explore. Science is concerned with things, objective realities. For social science to exist it must have a definite subject matter. Philosophers, Durkheim points out, have been aware of ‘things’ called laws, traditions, religion and so on, but the reality of these was in a large measure dissolved by their insistence on dealing with these as manifestations of human will. Inquiry was thus concentrated on the internal will rather than upon external bodies of data. So it is important to look things as they appear in this world.
- iii) Science does not describe individuals but types or classes of subject matter. If human societies be classified then they help us in arriving at general rules and discover regularities of behaviour.
- iv) Social science, which classifies the various human societies, describes the normal form of social life in each type of society, for the simple reason that it describes the type itself; whatever pertains to the type is normal and whatever is normal is healthy.
- v) The subject matter, of a science yields general principles or ‘laws’. If societies were not subject to regularities, no social science would be possible. Durkheim further points out that since the principle that all the phenomena of the universe are closely interrelated has been found to be true in the other domains of nature, it is also valid for human societies, which are a part of nature. In putting forth the idea that there is a continuity of the natural and social worlds, Durkheim has been strongly influenced by Comte.
- vi) Although there is continuity between the natural and social worlds, the social is as distinctive and autonomous a sphere of subject matter as either the biological or the physical.

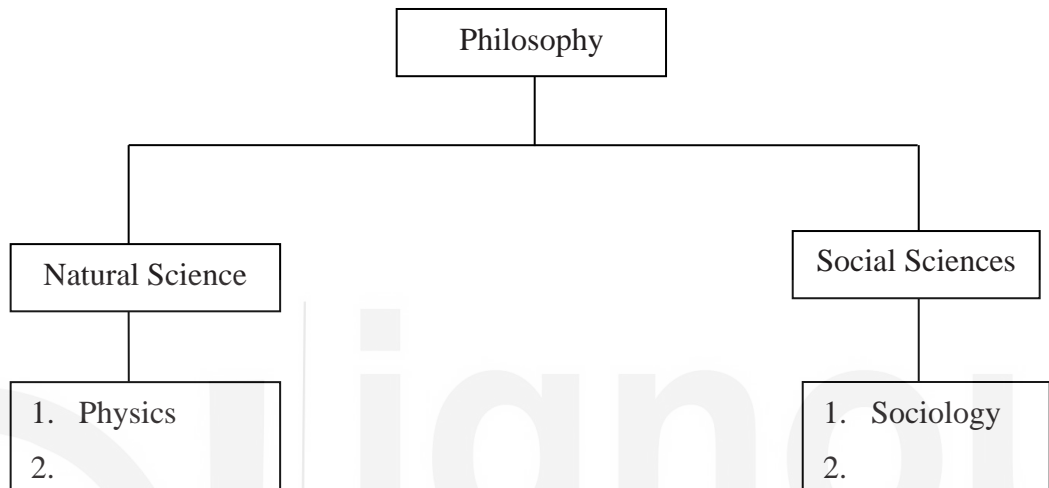
Durkheim was very much against the view held by some scholars that everything in society should be reduced to human volition. Categories of human will and volition, he points out, belong to psychology not social science. If social science is really to exist, societies must be assumed to have a certain nature, which results from the nature and arrangement of the elements composing them.

- vii) Finally, to discern the uniformities, types and laws of society we need a method. The methods of science applicable in the field of the natural sciences are valid within the social field.

The criteria of a social science which Durkheim set forth at the beginning of his first published work remained to the end of his life the fundamental criteria of social science and the identifying attributes of the field he called 'sociology'. Let us now complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

In the diagram given below list the different natural and social sciences that you know.



5.3 SOCIOLOGY AS A STUDY OF 'SOCIAL FACTS'

In defining the subject matter of sociology two tasks are involved (a) defining the total field of study and (b) defining the sort of 'thing' which will be found in this field. In his book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, published in 1895, Durkheim (1950: 3) is concerned with the second task and calls social facts the subject matter of sociology. Durkheim (1950: 3) defines social facts as "ways of acting, thinking and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion by reason of which they control him".

To Durkheim society is a reality *suigeneris* (see the meaning of this term in Key Words). Society comes into being by the association of individuals. Hence society represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics. This unique reality of society is separate from other realities studied by physical or biological sciences. Further, societal reality is apart from individuals and is over and above them. Thus the reality of society must be the subject matter of sociology. A scientific understanding of any social phenomenon must emerge from the 'collective' or associational characteristics manifest in the social structure of a society. While working towards this end, Durkheim developed and made use of a variety of sociological concepts. Collective representations is one of the leading concepts to be found in the social thought of Durkheim. Before learning about 'collective representations' (subject matter of Unit 12) it is necessary that you understand what Durkheim meant by 'social facts'.

5.3.1 Social Facts

Durkheim based his scientific vision of sociology on the fundamental principle, i.e., the objective reality of social facts. Social fact is that way of acting, thinking or feeling etc., which is more or less general in a given society. Durkheim treated social facts as things. They are real and exist independent of the individual's will or desire. They are external to individuals and are capable of exerting constraint upon them. In other words they are coercive in nature. Further social facts exist in their own right. They are independent of individual manifestations. The true nature of social facts lies in the collective or associational characteristics inherent in society. Legal codes and customs, moral rules, religious beliefs and practices, language etc. are all social facts.

5.3.2 Types of Social Facts

Durkheim saw social facts as lying along a continuum. First, on one extreme are structural or morphological social phenomena. They make up the substratum of collective life. By this he meant the number and nature of elementary parts of which society is composed, the way in which the morphological constituents are arranged and the degree to which they are fused together. In this category of social facts are included the distribution of population over the surface of the territory, the forms of dwellings, nature of communication system etc.

Secondly, there are institutionalised forms of social facts. They are more or less general and widely spread in society. They represent the collective nature of the society as a whole. Under this category fall legal and moral rules, religious dogma and established beliefs and practices prevalent in a society.

Thirdly, there are social facts, which are not institutionalised. Such social facts have not yet acquired crystallised forms. They lie beyond the institutionalised norms of society. Also this category of social facts have not attained a total objective and independent existence comparable to the institutionalised ones.

Also their externality to and ascendancy over and above individuals is not yet complete. These social facts have been termed as social currents. For example, sporadic currents of opinion generated in specific situations; enthusiasm generated in a crowd; transitory outbreaks in an assembly of people; sense of indignity or pity aroused by specific incidents, etc.

All the above mentioned social facts form a continuum and constitute social milieu of society.

Further Durkheim made an important distinction in terms of normal and pathological social facts. A social fact is normal when it is generally encountered in a society of a certain type at a certain phase in its evolution. Every deviation from this standard is a pathological fact. For example, some degree of crime is inevitable in any society. Hence according to Durkheim crime to that extent is a normal fact. However, an extraordinary increase in the rate of crime is pathological. A general weakening in the moral condemnation of crime and certain type of economic crisis leading to anarchy in society are other examples of pathological facts.

5.3.3 Main Characteristics of Social Facts

In Durkheim's view sociology as an objective science must conform to the model of the other sciences. It posed two requirements: first the 'subject' of sociology must be specific. And it must be distinguished from the 'subjects' of all other sciences. Secondly the 'subject' of sociology must be such as to be observed and explained. Similar to the way in which facts are observed and explained in other sciences. For Durkheim this 'subject' of sociology is the social fact, and that social facts must be regarded as 'things'.

The main characteristics of social facts are (i) externality, (ii) constraint, (iii) independence, and (iv) generality. Social facts, according to Durkheim, exist outside individual consciences. Their existence is external to the individuals. For example, domestic or civic or contractual obligations are defined externally to the individual in laws and customs. Religious beliefs and practices exist outside and prior to the individual. An individual takes birth in a society and leaves it after birth death, however social facts are already given in society and remain in existence irrespective of birth or death of an individual. For example language continues to function independently of any single individual.

The other characteristic of social fact is that it exercises a constraint on individuals. Social fact is recognized because it forces itself on the individual. For example, the institutions of law, education, beliefs etc. are already given to everyone from without. They are commanding and obligatory for all. There is constraint, when in a crowd, a feeling or thinking imposes itself on everyone. Such a phenomenon is typically social because its basis, its subject is the group as a whole and not one individual in particular.

A social fact is that which has more or less a general occurrence in a society. Also it is independent of the personal features of individuals or universal attributes of human nature. Examples are the beliefs, feelings and practices of the group taken collectively.

In sum, the social fact is specific. It is born of the association of individuals. It represents a collective content of social group or society. It differs in kind from what occurs in individual consciousness. Social facts can be subjected to categorisation and classification. Above all social facts form the subject matter of the science of sociology

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The following are a few statements based on what you have learnt so far. Fill in the blanks with suitable words.
 - i) Society is a mere sum of individuals. It is a system formed by the of individuals.
 - ii) Society is a reality

- iii) In society there are legal codes, customs, moral rules, religious beliefs and ways of feeling, acting thinking etc. Durkheim called
- iv) Durkheim treated social facts as
- v) Social facts are of the will or desire of individuals.
- vi) Social facts are to individuals. They are capable of exercising upon them.
- vii) There are normal social facts in society. Also there arefacts in society.

5.3.4 Externality and Constraint

We shall examine the criteria of 'externality' and 'constraint' in some detail.

- a) There are two related senses in which social facts are external to the individual.
 - i) First, every individual is born into an ongoing society, which already has a definite organisation or structure. There are values, norms, beliefs and practices which the individual finds readymade at birth and which he learns through the process of socialisation. Since these social phenomena exist prior to the individual and have an objective reality, they are external to the individual.
 - ii) Secondly, social facts are external to the individual in the sense that any one individual is only a single element within the totality of relationships, which constitutes a society.

These relationships are not the creation of any single individual, but are constituted by multiple interactions between individuals. To understand the relationship between the individuals and the society, Durkheim draws a parallel to the relationship between chemical elements and the substances, which are composed of combinations of them. According to Durkheim (1950: X), "whenever any elements combine and thereby produce, by the fact of their combination, new phenomena, it is plain that these new phenomena reside not in the original elements but in the totality formed by their union".

A living cell consists of mineral parts like atoms of hydrogen and oxygen; just as society is composed of individuals. Just the living beings are more important than their parts, the whole (society) is greater than the collection of parts (individuals). The whole (society) differs from individual manifestations of it. You must have

seen quite often in daily life that there is a difference between individuals and the group, especially when demands are made by a group. Individually members may agree on a thing, but collectively they may not. In wider society, we find a number of rules of behaviour which “reside exclusively in the very society itself which produces them, and not in its parts, i.e. its members” (Durkheim 1950: x/vii-x/viii). In putting forward this criterion Durkheim wanted to show that social facts are distinct from individual or psychological facts. Therefore their study should be conducted in an autonomous discipline independent of Psychology, i.e. Sociology.

b) The second criterion by which social facts are defined is the moral ‘constraint’ they exercise on the individual. When the individual attempts to resist social facts they assert themselves. The assertion may range from a mild ridicule to social isolation and moral and legal sanction. However, in most circumstances individuals conform to social facts and therefore do not consciously feel their constraining character. This conformity is not so much due to the fear of sanctions being applied as the acceptance of the legitimacy of the social facts (see Giddens 1971: 88).

Durkheim (1950: 4) concedes that to define the social in terms of constraint and coercion is to “risk shocking the zealous partisans of absolute individualism. It is generally accepted today, however, that most of our ideas and our tendencies are not developed by ourselves but have come to us from without. How can they become a part of us except by imposing themselves upon us?” Durkheim put forward his view to counter the utilitarian viewpoint, which was prevalent during his time, that society could be held together and there would be greatest happiness if each individual worked in his self-interest. Durkheim did not agree. Individual’s interest and society’s interest do not coincide. For social order, it was necessary for society to exercise some control or pressure over its members.

To confirm the coerciveness of social facts in their effects on individuals, Durkheim (1950: 6) looks at education’s efforts “to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously..... the aim of education is, precisely, the socialisation of human being; parents and teachers are merely the representatives and intermediaries of the social milieu which tends to fashion him in its own image”.

Durkheim (1950: 7) adds that social facts cannot be defined merely by their universality. Thus a thought or movement repeated by all individuals is not thereby a social fact. What is important is the corporate or “collective aspects of the beliefs, tendencies and practices of a group that characterise truly social phenomena”. What is more, these social phenomena are transmitted through the collective means of socialisation.

Thus social facts can be recognised because they are external to the individuals on the one hand, and are capable of exercising coercion over them on the other. Since they are external they are also general and because they are collective, they can be imposed on the individuals who form a given society.

Activity 2

Give some examples of social facts, which are external to individuals and can be defined in terms of constraints and coercion. How does an individual know about these? Write a one-page note on these questions and compare it with that of other students at your Study Centre.

5.4 THE SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD

Having defined the subject matter of sociology, Durkheim describes the method to study it. His sociological method rests firmly on the experience of biology, which had emerged by then as a science of living beings.

5.4.1 Rules for the Observation of Social Facts

The first rule that Durkheim (1950:14) gives us is: “consider social facts as things”. Social facts are real. However instead of being dealt with as things, as concrete realities worthy of direct attention and study, they have been dealt with by other writers in the light of concepts or notions. This is true of all sciences before they emerge as disciplines — thought and reflection precede science. The pre-scientific stage is broken by the introduction of the empirical method and not by conceptual discussion alone. This is perhaps even more important in social science than in natural science because there is a strong tendency to treat social facts as either lacking in substantive reality (as creations of the individual will) or, on the contrary, as already wholly known words like ‘democracy’, ‘socialism’ etc. are freely used as if they denoted precisely known facts, whereas actually “they awaken in us nothing but confused ideas, a tangle of vague impressions, prejudices and emotions” (Durkheim 1950: 22). To counter these tendencies, Durkheim said that social facts must be treated as ‘things’. As ‘things’ they have to be studied by the empirical method and not direct intuition; and also, they cannot be modified by a simple effort of the will.

While studying social facts as ‘things’ the following three rules have to be followed in order to be objective.

- i) All preconceptions must be eradicated. Sociologists must emancipate themselves from the common place ideas that dominate the mind of the layperson and adopt an emotionally neutral attitude towards what they set out to investigate.
- ii) Sociologists have to formulate the concepts precisely. At the outset of the research the sociologists are likely to have very little knowledge of the phenomenon in question. Therefore they must proceed by conceptualising their subject matter in terms of those properties which are external enough to be observed. Thus in Division of Labour the type of solidarity in a society can

be perceived by looking at the type of law — repressive or restitutive, criminal or civil — which is dominant in the society.

- iii) When sociologists undertake the investigation of some order of social facts they must consider them from an aspect that is independent of their individual manifestations. The objectivity of social facts depends on their being separated from individual facts, which express them. Social facts provide a common standard for members of the society. Social facts exist in the form of legal rules, moral regulations, proverbs, social conventions, etc. It is these that sociologists must study to gain an understanding of social life.

Social facts are seen in “currents of opinion”, which vary according to time and place, impel certain groups either to more marriages, for example, or to more suicides, or to a higher or lower birth rate, etc. These currents are plainly social facts. At first sight they seem inseparable from the forms they take in individual cases. But statistics furnish us with the means of isolating them. They are, in fact, represented with considerable exactness by the rates of births, marriages and suicides....” (Durkheim 1950: 7).

Social currents are theoretical variables, while statistical rates are the means of obtaining verification for propositions referring to these variables. Recognising the fact that social currents are not observable he insists that ‘devices of method’ must be introduced in order that empirical verification be made possible. It must be noted here that the case of the ‘suicide rates’ is the best example given by Durkheim of the way in which social facts can be studied.

5.4.2 Rules for Distinguishing between the Normal and the Pathological

Having given us rules for the observation of social facts, Durkheim makes a distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ social facts. He considers these aspects important because, as he points out, the scientific study of human beings has been held back to a large degree by the tendency of many writers to consider as ‘pathological’ forms of behaviour, which were different from their own. But Durkheim (1950: 64) explains that the social fact is considered to be normal when it is understood in the context of the society in which it exists. He further adds that a social fact, which is ‘general’ to a given type of society, is ‘normal’ when it has utility for that societal type.

As an illustration he cites the case of crime. We consider crime as pathological. But Durkheim argues that though we may refer to crime as immoral because it flouts values we believe in from a scientific viewpoint it would be incorrect to call it abnormal. Firstly because crime is present not only in the majority of societies of one particular type but in all societies of all types. Secondly, if there were not occasional deviances or floutings of norms, there would be no change in human behaviour and equally important, no opportunities through which a society can either reaffirm the existing norms, or else reassess such behaviour and modify the norm itself. To show that crime is useful to the normal evolution of morality and law, Durkheim cites the case of Socrates, who according to

Athenian law was a criminal, his crime being the independence of his thought. But his crime rendered a service to his country because it served to prepare a new morality and faith, which the Athenians needed. It also rendered a service to humanity in the sense that freedom of thought enjoyed by people in many countries today was made possible by people like him.

Durkheim was impressed by the way study of medicine had become scientific. The doctors study the normal working of the body and its pathological features. The study of both of these features helps one identify the nature of the body. He applied this method to study social facts. In his study of division of labour in society, he explained the normal features in the first two parts, and the abnormal features in the third part of the book. He considered crime and punishment both as normal.

How is a social fact normal? When the rate of crime exceeds what is more or less constant for a given social type, then it becomes an abnormal or pathological fact. Similarly, using the same criteria, suicide is a normal social fact (though it may be regarded as 'wrong' or 'immoral' because it goes against a set of values that makes preservation of life absolute). But the sudden rise in the suicide rate in western Europe during the nineteenth century was a cause for concern for Durkheim and one of the reasons why he decided to study this phenomenon.

5.4.3 Rules for the Classification of Social Types

There have been two opposing conceptions of collective life among scholars. Some historians hold that each society is unique and so we cannot compare societies. On the other hand philosophers hold that all societies belong to one species - the human species and it is from the general attributes of human nature that all social evolution flows.

Durkheim takes an intermediary position. He speaks of social species or social types. Though there is so much of diversity in social facts, it does not mean that they cannot be treated scientifically i.e. compared, classified and explained. If on the other hand, we speak of only one species we will be missing out in important qualitative differences and it will be impossible to draw them together.

Classification of societies into types is an important step towards explanation as problems and their explanations will differ for each type. It is also needed to decide whether a social fact is normal or abnormal, since a social fact is normal or abnormal only in relation to a given social type. Durkheim uses the term 'social morphology' for the classification of social types. The question is, how are social type constituted? The word "type" means the common characteristics of several units in a group e.g. "bachelors" and "married persons" belong to two types, and Durkheim was able to show that suicide rates are found more among the 'bachelors'. Please do not apply this to individual cases.

We must study each particular society completely and then compare these to see the similarities and differences. Accordingly, we can classify them. Durkheim

(1950: 78) asked, “Is it not the rule in science to rise to the general only after having observed the particular and that too in its entirety?” In order to know whether a fact is general throughout a species or social type, it is not necessary to observe all societies of this social type; only a few will suffice. According to Durkheim (1950: 80), “Even one well made observation will be enough in many cases, just as one well constructed experiment often suffices for the establishment of a law”. Durkheim wants societies to be classified according to their degree of organisation, taking as a basis the ‘perfectly simple society’ or the ‘society of one segment’ like the ‘horde’. Hordes combine to form aggregates which one could call ‘simple polysegmental’. These combine to form polysegmental societies simply compounded’. A union of such societies would result in still more complex societies called ‘polysegmental societies doubly compounded’ and so on.

Within these types one will have to distinguish different varieties according to whether a complete fusion of the initial segments does or does not appear. Regarding Durkheim’s procedure of classifying societies into social species or types, John Rex examines the usefulness of this ‘biological approach to sociological investigations’. He finds out cases where biological approaches would be useful in sociological investigations, and where it could become difficult. Cases of the first type are exercises in description, classification and formulation of average types. Difficulties occur in the use of biological approach to sociological investigations when history of societies becomes the subject matter of study. In such cases ‘species’ are discovered by authors out of the historical process; and a theory of evolution is therefore less helpful here (see Rex 1961: 14).

5.4.4 Rules for the Explanation of Social Facts

There are two approaches, which may be used in the explanation of social facts - the causal and the functional.

- i) Why: The former is concerned with explaining ‘why’ the social phenomenon in question exists. The latter involves establishing the “correspondence between the fact under consideration and the general needs of the social organism, and in what this correspondence consists” (Durkheim 1950: 95). The causes, which give rise to a given social fact, must be identified separately from whatever social functions it may fulfil. Normally, one would try to establish causes before specifying functions. This is because knowledge of the causes, which bring a phenomenon into being, can under certain circumstances allow us to derive some insight into its possible functions. Although ‘cause’ and ‘function’ have a separate character this does not prevent a reciprocal relation between the two and one can start either way. In fact Durkheim sees a sense in the beginning of his study of division of labour with functions in Part I and then coming to causes in Part II. Let us take an example of ‘punishment’ from the same work. Crime offends collective sentiments in a society, while the function of punishment is to maintain these sentiments at the

same degree of intensity. If offences against them were not punished, the strength of the sentiments necessary for social unity would not be preserved. (It may be pointed out here that functionalism which was dominant in sociology, particularly in the USA in the 1940s and 50s owes a lot to Durkheim's conception of function; we shall come to this point in the last two blocks of the course).

- ii) How: Having distinguished between the two approaches to explain social facts, Durkheim's next concern is to determine the method by which they may be developed. The nature of social facts determines the method of explaining these facts. Since the subject matter of sociology has a social character, it is collective in nature, the explanation should also have a social character. Durkheim draws a sharp line between individual and society. Society is a separate reality from the individuals who compose it. It has its own characteristics. There exists a line between psychology and sociology. Any attempt to explain social facts directly in terms of individual characteristics or in terms of psychology would make the explanation false. Therefore in the case of causal explanation "the determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness". In the case of functional explanation "the function of a social fact ought always to be sought in its relation to some social end" (Durkheim 1950: 110).

The final point about Durkheim's logic of explanation is his stress upon the comparative nature of social science. To show that a given fact is the cause of another "we have to compare cases in which they are simultaneously present or absent, to see if the variations they present in these different combinations of circumstances indicate that one depends on the other" (Durkheim 1950: 125).

Since sociologists normally do not conduct laboratory-controlled experiments but study reported facts or go to the field and observe social facts, which have been spontaneously produced, they use the method of indirect experiment or the comparative method.

Durkheim, following J.S. Mill's System of Logic, refers appreciatively to the 'method of concomitant variations' as the procedure of the comparative method.

He calls it 'the instrument par excellence of sociological research'. For this method to be reliable, it is not necessary that all the variables differing from those which we are comparing to be strictly excluded. The mere parallel between the two phenomena found in a sufficient number and variety of cases is an evidence that a possible relationship exists between them. Its validity is due to the fact that the concomitant variations display the causal relationship not by coincidence but intrinsically. It shows them as mutually influencing each other in a continuous manner, at least so far as their quality is concerned. Constant concomitance, according to Durkheim, is a law in itself whatever may be the condition of the phenomena excluded from the comparison. When two phenomena vary directly

with each other, this relationship must be accepted even when in, certain cases, one of these phenomena should be present without the other. For it may be either that the cause has been prevented from producing its effect by the action of some contrary cause or that it is present but in a form different from the one previously observed. For example, if a plant receives direct sunlight it grows straight but when the same plant is given indirect sunlight it bends towards that light. This shows the concomitant variation of plant growth and its relation to sunlight. Of course we need to reexamine the facts but we must not abandon hastily the results of a methodically conducted demonstration.

Concomitant variation can be done at different levels - single society, several societies of the same species of social type, or several distinct social species. However to explain completely a social institution belonging to a given social species, one will have to compare its different forms not only among the societies belonging to that social type but in all preceding species as well. Thus to explain the present state of the family, marriage, property, etc. it would be necessary to know their origins and the elements of which these institutions are composed. This would require us to study this institution in earlier types of society from the time domestic organisation was in its most rudimentary form to its progressive development in different social species. "One cannot explain a social fact of any complexity except by following its complete development through all social species" (Durkheim 1950: 139). This would show us the separate elements composing it since we could see the process of accretion. We would also be able to determine the conditions on which their formation depends.

The comparative method is the very framework of the science of society for Durkheim. According to Durkheim (1950: 139), "comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in-so-far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for fact."

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What rules have to be followed to observe social facts objectively? Answer in about eight lines.

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2) What are the two aspects of the explanation of social facts? Answer in about eight lines

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5.5 LET US SUM UP

To sum up our discussion of Durkheim’s conception of sociology we may say that Durkheim clearly considered sociology to be an independent scientific discipline with its distinct subject matter. He distinguished it from psychology. He identified social facts, laid down rules for their observation and explanation. He stressed on social facts being explained through other social facts. For him explanation meant the study of functions and causes. The causes could be derived through the use of the comparative method.

He demonstrated the nature of these studies through the study of division of labour in different types of solidarities, of suicide-rates in different types of societies, and the study of Religion in a single type. His life and works are regarded as a sustained effort at laying the legitimate base of sociology as a discipline. Further, it follows the empiricist method, which is valid in the natural sciences, biology in particular, observation, classification and explanation through the help of ‘laws’ arrived by means of the comparative method.

5.6 REFERENCES

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5.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) not, association
- ii) sui generis
- iii) social facts
- iv) things independent
- v) external, constraint
- vi) constraint
- vii) pathological

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) To study social facts objectively as things, Durkheim formulated the following three rules.
 - a) All preconceptions must be eradicated.
 - b) The subject matter of every sociological study should comprise a group of phenomena defined in advance by certain common external characteristics, and all phenomena so defined should be included within this group.
 - c) When the sociologist undertakes the investigation of some order of social facts he/she must try to consider them from an aspect that is independent of their individual manifestations.
- 2) The two approaches used in the explanation of social facts are causal and functional. Causal is concerned with explaining 'why' the social fact exists. Functional explains a social fact by showing the need of the society (social organism) that it fulfils. Both are required to give a complete explanation of a social fact. Logically causal explanation should come before functional explanation because under certain circumstances the cause gives us some insight into the possible functions. Though they are separate there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. For example, the existence of punishment (which is a social reaction) is due to the intensity of the collective sentiments, which the crime offends. The function of punishment is to maintain these sentiments at the same degree of intensity. If offences against them were not punished, the strength of the sentiments necessary for social stability would not be preserved.

UNIT 6 FORMS OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY*

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Mechanical Solidarity
 - 6.2.1 Concept of Collective Conscience
 - 6.2.2 Collective Conscience: On the Basis of Forms
 - 6.2.3 Collective Conscience: On the Basis of Contents
- 6.3 Organic Solidarity
 - 6.3.1 New Forms of Collective Conscience in Organic Solidarity
 - 6.3.2 On the Basis of Forms
 - 6.3.3 On the Basis of Contents
- 6.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.5 References
- 6.6 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to understand:

- the relationship between mechanical solidarity and its specific social structure;
- the repressive law as the means of strengthening the social solidarity in segmental social structure;
- the significance of collective conscience in simple societies;
- that organic solidarity, the characteristic feature of complex social structure, is based on division of labour; and
- the role of restitutive law in complex social structure with reference to the solidarity and the changed form of collective conscience in advanced societies.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, the economic and social solidarity as analysed in *The Division of Labour in Society* by Durkheim is discussed briefly. Durkheim was curious to know the forces, which regulate and control social life. To conceptualise his ideas he established dichotomy between segmental and complex societies. What are the characteristics of these societies and what types of solidarities are found among them? He answers these questions with reference to forms of solidarities. While explaining these affirmatively, he propounds that two types of solidarities i.e., mechanical and organic, can be identified through the types of law in different kinds of social structures. In this regard the repressive forms of the law,

* Adopted from IGNOU Course Material: Unit 13 of *Sociological Thought* (ESO 13) by Nita Mathur

painful to the criminals, are analysed with reference to the segmental type of social structure. The sub-sections of this part deal with the importance of the collective conscience in the social structure, the definition of collective conscience and its nature. In this part the restitutive aspects of law with reference to complex social structure which makes individuals interdependent and the way it unites them in complex society are also discussed. The sub-parts of this part bring out the contents of collective conscience with regard to the changed social conditions. Finally, the summary of the unit is given.

6.2 MECHANICAL SOLIDARITY

Mechanical solidarity is *sui generis* i.e. born in the natural course of events based on resemblances of individuals. It directly links them with the society. This type of solidarity has arisen out of a number of common experiences of like members in a given society.

Mechanical solidarity can be characterised by segmental system in which every segment is homogenous and involved in the social structure. Hence the society is divided into quite small compartments which envelop the individual completely. Originally, the segmental society was based on clans which were frequently found in less developed societies. But in the process of evolution, the segmental characteristics could not be confined to this one characteristic and started expanding on the bases of territories. Consequently, the division of the society was not solely according to the relation of consanguinity (real or fictitious) but also on territorial bases. The segmental social structure is characterised by a low degree of interdependence. What occurs in one segment hardly has any effects on others. Finally, it can be said that the segmental social structure has relatively low volume of moral and material density. This means that interactions take place among limited people (volume). It also means that the number of times people interact is also limited (density). The reason is that what one can do, the other can also do. So he does not need others until more people are needed in a work. If a man has to cut a piece of wood, or catch a bird, or pick a fruit from a tree in a forest, he can do this work by himself like any other. Thus people do the same type of work. They are similar; their inter-dependence is limited. Their density of interactions is low. Then a question arises what forms of custom regulate and control the conditions of people bound in mechanical solidarity? Durkheim answers this through collective conscience. Homogeneity of experience leads to the collective conscience. This gives rise to common beliefs and practices. The social life blended with religion and economic institutions of such a society, nearer to primitive communism as differentiations are few.

Most of the property is common, the experiences are similar, and rules and regulations too relate to common life. Customs and laws protect the group — its property and its sentiments. The nature of laws is thus collective — a wrong-doer is punished by the collectivity. Penal or repressive law is an indicator of mechanical solidarity. Legal sanctions derived from the penal are directly proportional to the number of social bonds, which are regulated and controlled by

collective conscience. Thus, we can understand the relative significance of the two. A wrong against the group is punished. On the one hand, punishment is given to the individual; on the other hand, punishment strengthens the beliefs and values of the society. Any wrong brings injury to the group sentiments; every punishment restores the authority of the collectivity.

If a group of individuals are less dependent and conversely more autonomous and if the density of volume of communication is less in such a society, or sect, how is it possible for it to develop collective conscience or social control across individuals or across groups or such sects?

6.2.1 Concept of Collective Conscience

Now what is collective conscience under mechanical solidarity at the cultural and ideological level? Durkheim defines collective conscience as a set of beliefs and customs, which on an average are common in a society and form a determinate system, which has its own life-style. Collective conscience exists in a general form in society and one can easily differentiate between the characters relating to its form and those to its content.

6.2.2 Collective Conscience: On the Basis of Forms

Durkheim views that the strength of social bonds is the feature of mechanical solidarity and is a function of three variables. They are:

- i) relation between the volume of collective conscience and individual's conscience
- ii) average intensity of the stages of collective conscience
- iii) the greater or lesser firmness of all those stages.

The more the beliefs and sanctions are present in the society, the less are the chances of freedom of an individual. Thus, where the mechanical solidarity is effective, there is strong and extensive collective conscience. It brings harmonious relationships in the activities of the people extensively. In such a social condition, it is difficult to distinguish individual's conscience from the collective one. Hence, collective authority becomes the mode of totality, whether it involves the whole of the community or it incarnates the chief of the community.

6.2.3 Collective Conscience: On the Basis of Contents

With regard to the content of the collective conscience there are distinguishable elements; mainly, its nature is rooted in the totality of a society. It is so because society is controlled by common beliefs and sanctions, which are unanimously accepted by the members of that society.

Indeed, in ancient era, the religious elements were spread in every aspect of the society and everything, which was social, was religious as well. Both words, religious and social, were synonymous in the simple societies. The source of super human features was deeply rooted in the constitution of conscience. Collective and the social characteristics of the latter were deemed to be transcendental values. These societal conditions lifted people even beyond their own conscience. The stages of the collective conscience were concretely associated with traditional (local) conditions, linking individual to racial and powerful objects in the universe viz., animals, trees and many natural forces such as sun, moon, clouds etc. People have always been linking himself to such objects. These phenomena affect every conscience in the same way Thus, the fusion of the individual's conscience with the collective indicates its form and object. Now it can be said that collective conscience acquires its specific features in different simple societies.

Check Your Progress 1

Read the following questions carefully and write the correct answers.

i) Originally the segmental society was based on

- a) caste
- b) vama
- c) race
- d) clan

ii) The objective of the repressive law was

- a) to give freedom to individuals
- b) to divide society
- c) to bring solidarity in the society
- d) to maintain division of labour in society

iii) What do understand by collective conscience?

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iv) What is mechanical solidarity?

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Durkheim viewed that division of labour is an essential condition of organic solidarity, and it gradually replaces that engendered by social likeness. Here individual depends upon those parts, which the society is composed of. In this respect a society is an arrangement of different and specific functions which are linked mutually by social bonds. In this conception the differences among the individuals are visible to the extent that everybody has his specific field of activities and confines himself or herself to that area only. Hence, the individual's conscience is distinct from the collective conscience.

6.3.1 New Forms of Collective Conscience in Organic Solidarity

Even simple societies are well organised in the society where organic solidarity is greater; the social structure is well organised and has the features opposite that of segmental social structure. Organised social structure is characterised by the system of different organs and each has a specific role. These organs are formed by different components, which are coordinated and subordinated to one another around a single central organ. This central organ influences the rest of the organism within reasonable limits. Organised social structure, in turn, gives rise to the fusion of the segments completely. Hence, an individual extends his sphere of interaction. As this process continues, it increases in its numerical strength and as such its impact is no longer restricted to the local place. The process of fusion of the segments leads to the fusion of markets, which crystallises a single market (city). This virtually embraces whole society, which contains the entire population within its boundary. Thus, the society itself resembles a large city. Now, individuals are no longer grouped according to their lineage, but to their specified activities. The existing social conditions and the nature of work do not confine the individual to his birthplace, but also bring him out of it to the place of work.

Organised social structure is thus characterised by high degree of interdependence. The increase in industrialisation corresponds to the progress of division of labour and the latter determine the concentration of the social mass. Any change at one place is rapidly transmitted to the other. Therefore, the intervention of state/legal sanctions is needed. Finally, we can say that organised social structure has relatively high volume (material and moral density). With the above mentioned advancements, societies become more and more voluminous and, in turn, work gets more divided. The population becomes even more concentrated with the advancement of the people as a whole. Whenever the social norms correspond to the organic solidarity, the division of labour gives rise to legal rules. These will determine the nature and relation of specialised functions and any violation is to be entailed through restitutive measures. Law, with sanctions of restitutive or cooperative nature, works as an index of organic solidarity; this index consists of civil, commercial, procedural, administrative and constitutional laws, which had been abstracted from the penal rules, found in the less-advanced societies. Here we find almost similar co-relation as was observed

between penal law and mechanical solidarity. The extent of co-operative law is proportional to that part of social life, which consists in the bond, engendered by the division of labour. Here one can reasonably neglect those interdependent relations, which are regulated by the customs binding the individuals through similarity of work. Nevertheless, the legal and customary rules are essential for organic solidarity. For the existence of such a solidarity it is necessary that different parts cooperate in a determined way (if not in all respects, at least in predetermined conditions). Therefore, the contract is not self-sufficient, but it presupposes a set of regulations, which are as extensive and complicated as the contracted aspects.

6.3.2 On the Basis of Forms

Now we turn to the question of what form the collective conscience takes in the condition of organic solidarity. Having considered the volume of collective conscience, its intensity and determinateness, Durkheim argues about the forms of collective conscience where volume remains constant or probably diminishes, while its intensity and determinate character decline. Advancement of society through progressive development in the division of labour leads to a decline in the intensity and determinateness of collective states. The collective conscience seems to have less strength to carry the individuals in collective directions; as the rules of conduct to that of collective conscience become indeterminate, an individual gets more chances for self-reflection which, in turn, provides more opportunity for self-freedom.

6.3.3 On the Basis of Contents

The content of collective conscience gradually becomes human oriented, secular and rational. These social conditions start weakening the values of collective curiosity from the society. The religious domain contracts in greater degree and the ever strong domain of collective religious beliefs and sentiments starts decreasing with the rise of scientific procedures. The transcendental characters of society, which were superior to the human interests, begin losing their lustre increasingly.

Durkheim has seen the features of collective conscience in the system of beliefs. In advanced societies the supreme values not only bring dignity to an individual but also equality of opportunity. This has been explained in his work Ethic and social justice.

Check Your Progress 2

Read the following statements carefully and write the correct answer.

- 1) Mechanical solidarity was found in that society where
 - a) the group was based on likeness and repressive law was in practice
 - b) the group was based on differentiation and repressive law was in practice
 - c) the group was based on likeness and restitutive law was in practice
 - d) the group was based on differentiation and restitutive law was in practice.

- 2) Durkheim has described mechanical and organic solidarity in his work on
- the suicide
 - the elementary form of religious life
 - the division of labour in society
 - the rules of sociological method.
- 3) Complete the following statement by filling in the gap:
Organic solidarity is found in that society where social structure is
- simple
 - organized
 - mixed
 - imaginary
- 4) Explain organic solidarity.

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6.4 LET US SUM UP

We now present the summary of the unit in a tabular form under three heads. This will help you recall the major differences between mechanical and organic types of solidarity. The first basis for this distinction is structural, the second deals with types of norms, and the third with characteristics of collective conscience — their form and content.

Bases of distinction	Mechanical	Organic
1) Structural bases	<p>Based on likeness (predominant in less-developed society)</p> <p>segmental type (firstly, based on clan then on territory)</p> <p>less volume of interdependence (relatively, weak social bonds)</p> <p>relatively, low volume of population</p>	<p>Based on differences and division of labour (predominant in society advanced societies)</p> <p>organized (firstly, fusion of markets and later development of city)</p> <p>high volume of interdependence (relatively strong social bonds)</p> <p>relatively, high volume of moral and material density</p>

2) Types of norms	rules with repressive sanctions practices of penal law	Rules with restitutive sanctions practices of cooperative law (cooperative, commercial, administrative and constitutional)
3) Characteristics of collective conscience a) form	high volume high density high determinants absolute collective	low volume low intensity low determinants more chances to individuals for self-reflection
b) content	highly religious (closed for discussion) attaching supreme values to the society concrete and specific	secular, human oriented (open for discussion) attaching supreme values to the individual abstract and general

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6.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) d

2) c

- 3) The totality of beliefs and sentiments in average individuals of the same society forms a determinant system, which has its own style of life, may be called collective or common conscience.
- 4) When the individual is bound to society without any intermediary which, in turn, gives rise to totality of belief and sentiments, i.e., the solidarity of likeness; because, the segments of the society have no special type of action of their own and the individual's conscience depends upon the collective one.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a
- 2) c
- 3) b
- 4) In organic solidarity the individual is dependent upon the parts of which society is composed. This, in turn, gives a system of interrelated and interdependent functions, which exhibit a division of labour. In such a society solidarity, however, based on differences is called as organic, because it produces the kind of integration where each organ has its own specific function.