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# 1

## The Individual vs Social Facts

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The most basic questions for any theory are: What is the object of study? Where does the process of description and explanation begin? Does it begin at the macro-level of entire societies or other large systems of action, or does it begin at the micro-level of individuals and the ways in which they take account of other individuals in constructing their unique lines of action? Or, is there some middle way between these two extremes that can identify an alternative unit of analysis, or that somehow combines both of them? In this chapter we will begin to see that there have indeed been very different answers to the question of what is the unit of analysis in sociology. This chapter examines the classical contrast between the Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, for whom the individual was the basic unit of analysis, and the work of Emile Durkheim whose units of analysis were holistic social facts. Durkheim's work is described in detail due to his profound influence upon the development of sociology.

The unit of analysis in any theory is the building block from which the theory is constructed. It is the fundamental phenomenon about which key assumptions are made, and from which key arguments are developed. Because of its foundational importance, the choice of unit of analysis has a profound effect upon the manner in which the theory is developed and the direction that it takes.

In sociology, there has been a classic division of opinion over the unit of analysis, between those who stress methodological holism and those who stress methodological individualism. According to the holistic thinkers, there are systems of action which possess properties (sometimes called 'emergent properties') that are different from those of the individuals who make up the system. It follows from this that a system of action cannot be explained by reference to the properties of individuals. Rather, it must be understood in its own terms and explained by reference to the connections between elements of the system.

On the other hand, according to the methodological individualists, any system of action can only be explained in terms of the properties of its constituent parts. In human societies, these parts are individuals. It follows from this

that the approach to explanation should be to reduce the study of the complex whole to the study of individuals (sometimes known as 'reductionism').

In practice, few theoretical approaches are entirely consistent in the choice of unit of analysis, but nevertheless the dominant thrust is usually clear enough. In sociology, the dominant tendency in sociological theory (though not necessarily in sociological research) has been some variant of methodological holism. Especially following the influential work of Emile Durkheim, many sociologists have concluded that social phenomena have a distinct reality which makes their study different from the subject matter of psychology (Poggi, 2000). However, there have always been important challenges to this point of view. It is with one of these challenges that we will begin our description of the changing positions in the debate on units of analysis.

## **John Stuart Mill**

In England in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the English philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) developed a theoretical approach that came to be known as Utilitarianism. The most important principle of this approach was the Greatest Happiness Principle. As expressed by John Stuart Mill, this principle held that 'the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments' (Mill, 1969: 214). This principle was thought to furnish both a standard of morality for ethical and political analyses and a guide to understanding the actual ends, or goals, of human action. In the latter sense, the Greatest Happiness Principle provided the key assumption in a theory of how and why people act in the ways that they do. The noteworthy characteristic of this approach is that the individual is the unit of analysis, as it is individuals who decide what things they feel are painful or enjoyable.

In the work of John Stuart Mill, methodological individualism was an important factor shaping how he looked at the relationships between different disciplines, including psychology and sociology. Mill did not take seriously the idea that sociology should be a separate discipline with its own research leading to the discovery of distinctive scientific laws. Instead, he thought of sociology as a deductive discipline, that is to say, as a discipline whose major propositions are deduced by logical argument from more basic propositions. And those basic propositions, he thought, must be psychological in nature.

According to Mill,

The laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state. Men, however, in a state of society, are still men; their actions and

passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance, with different properties... Human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual man. (Mill, 1974: 879)

Among the laws of the nature of individual man are what Mill called the laws of mind, studied by psychology. Psychology was conceived of by Mill as a basic science of observation and experiment, in which induction from observation could be used to discover fundamental, scientific laws about individual human beings.

In contrast, social science, including sociology, could not be a basic research discipline. Social phenomena are constantly changing, and it would be impossible to separate experimental changes from changes caused by other factors. Mill concluded that there were simply too many complicated factors to be taken into account to permit the use of experimental methods of investigation in sociology. As a result, conclusions about society must be arrived at in a different way, by applying the laws of mind to understanding individuals in their social relationships. According to Mill, sociology is a deductive science in which the actions and feelings of human beings in their social life must be explained from psychological laws, as well as derivative laws about the formation of human character.

John Stuart Mill's position on the nature of sociology, and its relation to psychology, has been most influential, including among some sociologists. We shall see later how certain utilitarian ideas re-appeared in sociology in the second half of the twentieth century, notably in exchange theory. However, this point of view has not gone unchallenged, and for much of the history of sociology the dominant point of view was quite different. Among the classical sociologists of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Emile Durkheim clearly departed from the utilitarian approach in insisting that sociology had an independent existence as a science of social facts.

## **Emile Durkheim**

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a French sociologist who was a methodological holist. He strongly believed that there are properties of society that are independent of the individual, and that sociological explanations therefore cannot be reduced to psychological explanations. Durkheim went further than this in his opposition to reductionism, by reversing the direction of causation. He argued that, in fact, the characteristics of individuals are often determined by their social conditions, which he referred to as social facts.

## ***Social Facts***

Durkheim adopted a rigorous view of sociology, in which social facts were identified as the proper subject matter for sociology. As a scientist, Durkheim thought that key concepts should be defined carefully, and he set out to do this in his book on *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1964a). He defined a social fact in the following way: 'A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations' (Durkheim, 1964a: 13). According to this definition, a social fact is different from an individual fact because: (a) a social fact is general, or in other words practiced by a number of people; (b) it exists independently of the actions of any particular individual; and (c) it constrains the individual, or in other words limits his or her freedom of choice.

The latter characteristic was especially important for Durkheim because it identified those facts which are truly collective in nature as opposed to being merely general, or common. It was in this way that Durkheim made his crucial distinction between the individual and the social fact as the unit of analysis. Social facts determine the individual, not the other way round. In an important statement, Durkheim says that a social fact 'is a group condition repeated in the individual because imposed on him. It is to be found in each part because it exists in the whole, rather than in the whole because it exists in the parts' (Durkheim, 1964a: 9). In other words, patterns of behaviour are to be found repeated in individuals because they are imposed by the whole society, and they are not found in society because they are practiced by individuals.

Because Durkheim did not take the individual seriously as the unit of analysis, he also rejected psychological explanations in sociology. Unlike John Stuart Mill, Durkheim argued that 'every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false' (Durkheim, 1964a: 104). There are three main reasons why Durkheim thought that psychological explanations must be inadequate. First, he believed that psychological facts are the results of social facts, not the reverse. Second, Durkheim claimed that social facts are external to individual consciousness. And third, he held that social facts impose themselves upon the individual. We will examine each of these claims in turn.

Durkheim was very concerned about the numerous psychological explanations for patterns of social behaviour that existed in his day. Examples that he gave included theories that explained family life from the natural feelings that parents have for their children and that children have for their parents and that explained economic life from the individual's desire for wealth. The problem with these, and similar explanations, in Durkheim's view, is that they are misleading because they have got cause and effect the wrong way round. Psychological states, Durkheim claimed, are not the causes of social phenomena,

but they are the consequences of social phenomena. The proof for this, Durkheim thought, lies in the fact that history shows any supposedly universal motive of individuals (such as love for parents) may sometimes be absent or only weakly developed. Therefore, we need to understand how certain motives are produced under certain conditions, but not under other conditions.

The conditions that Durkheim was interested in were, of course, social facts. Durkheim was convinced of the reality of social facts because he thought it was possible to identify properties of the whole society which are independent of the specific individuals in the society. According to Durkheim, these are 'ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness' (Durkheim, 1964a: 2). Durkheim advanced four main arguments in support of this claim.

First, social facts 'function independently of my own use of them', as Durkheim put it (1964a: 2). Examples that illustrate Durkheim's point well include language, law and money. These are all systems of symbols which are used by many, or all, of the individuals in society, but no one individual controls how they develop. All we can do as individuals is to participate in these systems, use them to our advantage, and perhaps contribute with others to their development. But we do not control them. The evident proof for this is that if one of us dies these systems do not stop. They continue to function without us.

Second, some social facts become crystallized and take a fixed form that does not vary between the different individuals who use them. Popular sayings which are repeated over and over again in the same form are one example. A more important example is when social facts, such as laws, are set down in writing. Passed from one person to another, and applied in different ways, the laws nevertheless remain the same in their written form. Furthermore, they remain the same even if they are never applied.

Third, many important social facts could not possibly have been created by the individuals who are alive today because they have been inherited from the past and passed on to us through education. Religious beliefs and rituals illustrate this point. The fact that many beliefs and rituals have ancient origins demonstrates the extent to which they are independent of the individual wishes of people today, even if people still conform to them and accept them.

Fourth, the independence of social facts from individual consciousness is demonstrated by the fact that certain social facts which are relevant to us may nevertheless be unknown to us. In that case, we would have to consult the people who Durkheim refers to as the 'authorized interpreters' (1964a: 1). People such as lawyers, counsellors and priests may need to be consulted about the rules that define the proper ways of managing death or divorce, for example. Our dependence upon these experts to interpret and apply the rules of our society shows, again, how separate the social facts and individual consciousness can be.

The separation of social facts from individual consciousness in Durkheim's theory paves the way for his claim that social facts impose themselves upon the individuals in society. Different kinds of facts impose themselves in different ways. The kinds of facts that Durkheim was often most interested in are the collective representations, which together make up the collective conscience, or collective consciousness. Collective representations are shared ways of thinking which are more or less obligatory upon members of a particular group or society. In many cases, these shared ideas are willingly accepted and agreed to by the individuals involved. It could therefore be argued that there is no constraint or coercion here, and instead we are simply looking at the combination of voluntary choices made by separate individuals. However, Durkheim argues that is not the case because the constraint exercised by society becomes evident as soon as anyone decides to think outside the box and act in a deviant way. Society then reacts against us, to prevent our actions or to repair the damage that we have caused. When we conform to what is expected of us we do not feel the pressure of society, but that does not mean that it is not there all along. The pressures of society may be subtle at some times, and brutally obvious at others, but they are always there, according to Durkheim. In Durkheim's view, if we willingly conform to society and are therefore unconscious of the power of external coercion exercised upon us, 'We are then victims of the illusion of having ourselves created that which actually forced itself from without' (Durkheim, 1964a: 5).

Durkheim saw himself as undertaking the task of dissipating such illusions and providing concrete explanations of how, exactly, collective representations constrain behaviour. He thought that there were four ways in which this happened. First, collective representations are taught to us through instruction, or in other words socialization of the individual. In Durkheim's view, parents and teachers are merely the representatives and intermediaries of society, whose job it is to produce a child who can take up a place within that society. Accordingly, the child is constrained from birth to begin eating, drinking and sleeping at regular hours which are convenient to others. Later, the child is taught other requirements, such as the need for cleanliness, the importance of doing what he is told to do, respect for others and so on. In all these ways, both small and large, the child is submitted to constant pressure from the environment. Eventually, if the process of socialization is successful, the child develops habits and patterns of self-control that make external controls unnecessary. Constraints from parents, and behind them society, are therefore felt less and the child feels to have more freedom. But the power of society is nevertheless the source of the socialization of the human being.

The second way in which collective representations constrain behaviour is internally, within the mind of the individual. As a result of the external constraints of socialization, 'society is represented inside us as well', as Durkheim put it (1995: 16). The authority of society represented inside us causes us to reject changes to fundamental ideas that we have learned. The fundamental

ideas that we have learned take on a sense of reality, to the point that we may question the sanity of anyone who challenges them, and doubt our own sanity if we are tempted to follow alternative beliefs. Our mind therefore resists any tendency to deviate from the basic moral and logical consensus of our society.

Third, if individuals do deviate from the norms of society despite the effects of socialization, then the power of society is exercised through surveillance and sanctions to limit the extent of their deviance. Durkheim is at pains to point out here that he is not referring only to the punishments inflicted by formal agents of social control. He indicates that subtle pressures of public opinion and ridicule are equally effective in dealing with minor offences against custom and conventional morality.

Finally, the fourth way in which collective representations constrain behaviour is the practical necessity they impose upon us to adapt our behaviour to existing practices, if we want to have a comfortable existence. The fact that everyone around us acts in a certain manner may mean that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to do otherwise. For example, if everybody is speaking English, then to persist in trying to speak French would be to invite misunderstanding and incomprehension. We would be unable to communicate our wants, and therefore unable to obtain the things that we need to live. The social fact of language thereby constrains us, and limits our freedom of action. Similarly, Durkheim points out that it would be difficult to survive by setting up a business using out-of-date technology. In practical terms, it becomes impossible to resist the dominant way of doing things because to change it would require widespread co-operation, and why would people want to change something that is successful?

We can see that Durkheim was convinced social facts have effects upon individuals that are both broad and deep. Durkheim therefore always looked to social facts first in order to explain patterns of behaviour. We can see this most clearly in his work on the division of labour.

### *Division of Labour*

The increasing specialization of work was a prominent topic for nineteenth century theorists because they could see that the world of work had been profoundly and irreversibly altered. Instead of subsistence agricultural economies in which most people grew or made most of the things they needed, the leading European societies had become industrial economies in which more and more people toiled away in factories and other establishments doing more and more specialized kinds of work, based on a detailed division of labour. Theorists therefore asked questions about this new type of economy. What factors caused the division of labour, and why was it progressing at such a rapid rate?

Economists of Durkheim's day explained the division of labour as resulting from the inherent characteristics of individuals. In the first place, individuals naturally possess different skills and abilities, as well as different interests and ambitions. Secondly, all individuals are presumed to be motivated by the desire for wealth, and they will realize that they can make themselves better off by specializing in making the things that interest them and for which they have higher productivity, and exchanging the products of their labours with others. Co-operation in the division of labour is therefore believed to be based on separate individuals rationally pursuing their private interests.

Durkheim dissented from this point of view in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1964b, 1997), and he claimed that the division of labour had to be explained by social facts. In his view, both the differences between individuals and the co-operative relations of exchange between them must be understood as the products of society.

Durkheim pointed out that individuals who decide to specialize in the work that they do are never truly isolated and independent. They are constantly engaged in transactions with other people, and indeed the division of labour is only made possible by agreements between them about who will do what tasks. Since ongoing interaction implies some kind of social organization, Durkheim concluded that the division of labour must be a social phenomenon and not an individual phenomenon. In his words, 'The division of labour can therefore only occur within the framework of an already existing society' (Durkheim, 1997: 218).

If the division of labour is to be harmonious, which Durkheim assumed is normally the case, then the individuals who are dividing their labour must engage in interaction with one another to ensure that everything that was previously done continues to be done, but now without any overlap in tasks between them. Furthermore, conflict will have to be avoided over which particular individuals do which specific tasks, and this too will require co-operative interaction. Durkheim was acutely aware of the possibility of conflict in human affairs whenever two or more individuals approach the same situation with different interests. Therefore, Durkheim concluded that there must be some force from society, greater than the individuals themselves, which compelled them to co-operate. As Durkheim put it, 'Thus there is a social life outside of any division of labour, but one that the latter assumes' (1997: 219).

This social life outside the division of labour, but upon which the division of labour depends, includes in the first place the legal regulation of contracts. Durkheim insisted that although economic life appears to consist of private agreements freely entered into without any social agency, nevertheless in the long run contracts are only made possible by legal regulations which ensure their harmonious nature. Legal provisions exist which enable people to enforce their contracts, or to obtain compensation if the contracts are broken. Durkheim referred to this type of law as 'restitutive law'. It is one of two types

of law that we will describe next, due to their importance for Durkheim's overall theory of society.

### **Mechanical Solidarity and Organic Solidarity**

It is a characteristic of Durkheim's theory, upon which we have already remarked, that he tended to stress the conditions favouring the harmonious operation of society. He was therefore very interested in the condition which he referred to as solidarity. Social solidarity refers to how people get along together, how they co-operate with one another and ultimately how societies hold together without being torn apart by conflict. For Durkheim, this is one of the most important things that we need to understand about society, for it is the basis for all social organization and all human progress. Solidarity is the essential basis for society itself, and therefore for all the human achievements that society has made possible.

Durkheim thought that history showed there were two types of solidarity, mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. These two types tended to occur at different periods of history, with mechanical solidarity coming first, followed by organic solidarity later.

Mechanical solidarity is based on people thinking and feeling in the same way, and therefore identifying with one another. People co-operate because they believe that they belong together as the same people. Mechanical solidarity is characteristic of traditional societies in which people share the same religious beliefs and myths. This type of society has what Durkheim called a strongly defined state of the collective conscience, or common conscience.

The collective conscience is an important social fact in Durkheim's theory of society. He used this concept to indicate that society is more than the sum of the individual minds, or consciences, of the people that make up society. There is also a collective pattern of thinking that goes on between people, for example, in their shared religious beliefs.

Durkheim thought that the collective conscience could be strong or weak. Where the collective conscience is strong, most people share the same ideas, and they take them seriously and act upon them. Where the collective conscience is weak, on the other hand, people believe many different things, and there are few ideas which are truly common. And, those ideas which are shared are not taken very seriously. A strong collective conscience is the essential basis for mechanical solidarity.

Organic solidarity, on the other hand, is based on interdependence. Here, people co-operate because they realize that they depend on each other. People depend on each other because they cannot make everything that they want for themselves, and they have to obtain most of the things that they need from other people. On this basis a positive attraction can develop between people who each lack something that the other possesses. Organic

solidarity, then, occurs as a result of people specializing in making different things, or in other words as a result of the division of labour.

Durkheim thought that the long-term trend in human societies was a gradual shift away from mechanical solidarity and towards organic solidarity. This was occurring for two reasons. First, the collective conscience gradually declines over time. As societies become more diverse, and as social controls become weaker, there are fewer beliefs which are truly collective. Second, the decline of the collective conscience does not produce a crisis of falling solidarity because at the same time organic solidarity is increasing due to the progress of the division of labour, which is constantly increasing.

Durkheim used his theory of the division of labour not only to talk about solidarity but also to discuss the law. Laws were important social facts in Durkheim's theory. He argued that societies based on mechanical solidarity and societies based on organic solidarity relied on different types of laws. Here Durkheim distinguished between repressive law and restitutive law.

Repressive law, as the name implies, consists of forcibly repressing people to follow the same rules as everybody else. It is the kind of law found in societies with mechanical solidarity. In mechanical solidarity, based on likeness, anybody who is different is a threat to social order and must be forced back into line, or expelled, or killed.

On the other hand, societies based on organic solidarity do not need extensive repressive law because it is more accepted that people will be different. People make different things, and therefore work in different ways, and probably think in different ways also. However, social order would be threatened in organic solidarity if people failed to honour their agreements in exchanging with one another. Therefore, societies based on organic solidarity need a different type of law, namely restitutive law.

Restitutive law consists of laws, such as laws of contract, which enable an aggrieved party to obtain recompense if an agreement is broken. The importance of restitutive law is that it provides the means for enforcing contracts, thus providing for orderly economic exchange between people who have divided their labour.

### **Immediate Causes of the Division of Labour**

Restitutive law plays an important part in Durkheim's theory of the causes of the division of labour. Without it, the contracts between people would only be promises that carry just as much weight as the word, and good will, of the parties involved. Durkheim clearly thought that such contracts would be unreliable. Restitutive law, on the other hand, lends the power of society to intervene and uphold contracts when necessary. Contracts therefore receive more respect than would otherwise be the case, and people can trust that the agreements into which they enter will be honoured. This encourages them to

consider new and more specialized ways of working that involve new forms of exchange, and thus promotes the extended division of labour.

In addition, trust in economic life is also encouraged by the way in which society adds to contracts and regulates them. As Durkheim put it, 'the contract is not sufficient by itself, but is only possible because of the regulation of contracts, which is of social origin' (Durkheim, 1997: 162). Examples with which Durkheim would have been familiar include rules defining legal weights and measures of goods for sale. Since Durkheim's time, this body of law has been greatly expanded and includes such things as truth in advertising laws, laws regulating the purity and safety of drugs and laws regulating the reliability and safety of automobiles. All these laws are reinforced by sanctions, such as compulsory recall for repair of motor vehicles whose parts are found to be defective. The sociological significance of this growing body of law lies in the way in which it minimizes the possibility for disruption and conflict in economic exchange. The effects of contracts on people in the present and in the future are controlled, reducing the possibilities for unpleasant surprises and a sense of injustice that would otherwise fuel dissatisfaction with economic life and lead to a breakdown in trust. In these ways laws play an important role in facilitating the progress of the division of labour.

Despite the importance which Durkheim attached to the law as a social fact in the division of labour, he did not think that it was entirely responsible for the regulation of contracts. In addition, there are the customs and conventions of occupational groups, such as professional associations. Good examples, which have become more prevalent since Durkheim's day, are the codes of ethics which have been developed by many occupational groups. Occupational codes of conduct require people in positions of responsibility to put the interests of other people ahead of their own under certain conditions. Such rules, therefore, have the effect of encouraging clients to trust those whose services they seek, and thereby encourage more people to seek out the services of specialized professionals.

Laws and occupational rules which regulate contracts are not the only social conditions favouring the division of labour. In an insightful analysis, Durkheim also argued that the division of labour can only develop if people are free to act differently. If everyone is required to think and act in the same way, then innovation is inhibited and new, more specialized ways of working will not emerge. In short, for the division of labour to occur, it is not enough for individuals simply to possess different abilities and interests. They must also be able to express those differences in practical behaviour.

Expressing individual differences is difficult whenever the collective conscience is strong and well defined. The stronger the state of the collective conscience, the greater the resistance will be to any attempts to act differently. And, the more well defined the collective conscience is, the less room that is left for individual variation. Therefore, Durkheim claimed that the expansion of the division of labour was unlikely under conditions of high mechanical solidarity.

It follows from this that Durkheim believed the progress of the division of labour must depend upon the decay of the collective conscience. Durkheim thought that this was indeed what was happening in France and in the other European societies with which he was familiar. His analysis of this shift was connected to his analysis of changes in religion. The decaying of the collective conscience was connected to the declining influence of traditional religion, and the associated rise in what Durkheim referred to as the worship of the individual. We will therefore turn next to examine Durkheim's theory of religion, before returning once more to complete our discussion of his theory of the division of labour.

## **Religion**

Emile Durkheim's emphasis on social solidarity as an essential feature of all societies is evident in his theory of religion, and especially in his definition of religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1965, 1995). Durkheim defined religion in the following way: 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, 1995: 44). In a religion, people gather together in large groups to carry out their major rituals, and thereby express their unity as members of a moral community. This is unlike magic, where magicians either practice their craft alone or with individual clients, Durkheim concluded.

Durkheim was looking for a very basic definition of religion that would be true for all societies. He thought he had found this in the universal belief in a division between sacred objects and profane objects. Sacred things are things which are protected and isolated, for example they must be treated in special ways and perhaps only by special people. Profane things are ordinary objects which do not receive any special treatment, and for this reason they must be kept at a distance from sacred things.

Religion is an important social fact, in Durkheim's view. Like any other social fact, Durkheim rejects a psychological explanation and he insisted that one social fact must always be explained in terms of other social facts. He therefore asked what social fact could be responsible for the feeling of dependence that people have upon their sacred objects and the divine beings and forces which they represent. Durkheim thought that this feeling of dependence upon something more powerful than themselves must have its origin in people's feelings of dependence upon society, which is so much more powerful than any individual. Therefore, Durkheim argued that it is the power of society itself which is the cause of religion.

Religion may be a universal phenomenon, in Durkheim's view, but this does not mean that it is equally important in every society. Durkheim was convinced that religion had been more important in earlier societies than it

was in modern societies. In his words: 'if there is one truth that history teaches us beyond doubt, it is that religion tends to embrace a smaller and smaller portion of social life' (Durkheim, 1964b: 169). Originally, religion pervaded all areas of social life. Then, political, economic and scientific functions gradually separated themselves out as specific activities which took on a more and more worldly character. This happened because the collective conscience has been steadily declining. There are fewer and fewer beliefs and values which are sufficiently widely shared and held strongly enough that they could provide the basis for religious faith. As a result, the individual really feels less acted upon, by God or society, and he therefore becomes more a source of spontaneous activity.

This does not mean that religion completely disappears, or that it is likely to disappear. Rather, the old religions tend to be replaced by a new type of religion that Durkheim referred to as the worship of the individual. Durkheim claimed that: 'As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion. We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person, which, like all strong acts of worship, has already acquired its superstitions' (Durkheim, 1997: 122). A contemporary example of the 'superstitions' that Durkheim had in mind is the tendency to introduce and expand human rights legislation. Such laws protect the individual against certain kinds of actions by powerful organizations, and thereby elevate the status and freedom of the individual.

The significance of this for the progress of the division of labour is that an acquired individual autonomy enables individuals to diversify in freedom, thereby developing the distinctive interests and abilities that are necessary for highly specialized ways of working. Here we see how effectively Durkheim challenges any reductionist theory of the division of labour that would begin with 'natural' differences between individuals. For Durkheim, whatever differences exist between individuals they are not truly natural or inevitable, but they are only made possible by society, under certain social conditions. Those conditions include the weakening of the collective conscience and the associated decline in the influence of religion.

### **Determining Causes of the Division of Labour**

We have seen that Durkheim sought to analyse the division of labour as a social fact to be explained by other social facts. The immediate causes of the division of labour therefore include such things as contract law, which facilitates orderly economic exchange, and individual liberty, which facilitates the development of a variety of individual interests and aptitudes. In addition, there are other causes of the division of labour identified by Durkheim, which lie at a deeper level.

Durkheim argued that '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' (Durkheim, 1964a: 110). In particular, Durkheim concluded from his investigations that the determining causes of social facts must lie in the fundamental properties of association between individuals in groups. Living in groups is the bedrock of human existence from which everything else flows, Durkheim concluded. He thought that it was impossible to conceive of the isolated individual as the basic unit of analysis for sociological theory, for the simple reason that individuals are never really isolated.

All we know about human beings presumes their association with others. As far back as we can look in history, our knowledge of human beings is a knowledge of people in groups, large or small. And, most importantly, Durkheim says that in the life of each individual, 'As a consequence of my birth, I am obliged to associate with a given group' (Durkheim, 1964a: 104). In other words, as soon as we are born somebody picks us up and cleans us, and feeds us, and from that moment on we are members of a social group. Durkheim's point is that to base any sociological theory on assumptions about isolated individuals is completely unrealistic because people have never existed in isolation. From the moment they are born, they interact with others and are continuously and profoundly affected by social life. It is therefore impossible to separate individual reactions from social facts because all individuals are inevitably social by virtue of living in groups.

Durkheim pursued this line of argument in a logical manner. If the basic fact of life is living in groups, he reasoned, then ways of living should vary according to variations in the patterns of association found in different groups. Or, in other words, the social environment should determine the ways in which individuals live. Durkheim then sought to identify what features of the social environment could influence the patterns of social life. He concluded that there are two pre-eminent factors. They are: (1) the number of people in a society, or in other words the size (or volume) of the society; and (2) the degree of concentration of a group, or what he referred to as 'dynamic density' (Durkheim, 1964a: 113).

The size of a population is self-explanatory, but Durkheim's concept of dynamic density is a little more complicated and it deserves a note of explanation. By dynamic density, Durkheim means the extent of interaction among the members of a group. That is because, as he puts it, 'Social life can be affected only by the number of those who participate effectively in it' (Durkheim, 1964a: 114). If people participate only marginally in the interactions within their group, then they are not likely to be affected much by it.

Dynamic density is given by the number of people in a group who have social relations with one another, or in other words it is a result of the number of social ties that exist between the individuals in the group. For example, in a group of four people if each individual forms a partnership with just one other person then only two partnerships will form and there will be only two social ties. This is a situation of low dynamic density. On the other hand, if everyone in a group of four people interacts with everyone else, then there

would be six social ties in total. That would be a situation of high dynamic density.

Dynamic density, and population size (or volume), are determining causes of the division of labour, in Durkheim's view. Durkheim expressed this point in the following general proposition: 'The division of labour varies in direct proportion to the volume and density of societies and if it progresses in a continuous manner over the course of social development it is because societies become regularly more dense and generally more voluminous' (Durkheim, 1997: 205). Durkheim believed that the size of a population and the extent of interaction within it are directly related to the extent of the division of labour. Furthermore, he thought that since population size and dynamic density were steadily increasing over time, it follows that the extent of the division of labour must also be increasing.

The reason why Durkheim believed that the size of a population and the extent of interaction within it are directly related to the extent of the division of labour is because these two factors caused a more intense struggle for existence, to which the increased division of labour is one solution. The more people there are in a society, and the more people who are in contact with one another through increased trade, transportation and communications, then the greater the number of potential competitors will be for each member of the society. Competition is a great stimulant to action, and we see here once again how Durkheim sees social facts, such as population size and dynamic density, as forcing individuals to act in ways that they might otherwise not have chosen. Faced with a large number of competitors, each individual is engaged in an intense struggle for survival. And the more the competitors, the more intense the struggle for survival becomes.

The struggle for survival is most intense for those individuals who have only very general skills which are also possessed by many other people. They will face a large number of potential competitors. By comparison, individuals who have very specialized skills that few other people possess will have far fewer competitors. Therefore, one solution to the struggle for survival under conditions of intense competition is to find a new, and more specialized way of working. Those who are least efficient in performing some function will be squeezed out of it, and they must seek some other position. If they try to take up one that is already occupied by a large number of others, they are unlikely to succeed. They can be successful only if they seek some new, more specialized task. Also, two equally efficient producers in the same field will find that things are easier on both of them if they specialize so that they do not compete head-on. Under the compulsion of the struggle for survival, many individuals will therefore choose to adopt a specialization strategy, and the division of labour will accordingly increase. Furthermore, since population size and dynamic density are constantly growing, fuelling a more and more intense struggle for existence, the division of labour will continue to increase, with no end in sight.

Durkheim recognized, however, that the increased division of labour was not the only possible response to the intensified struggle for existence. Other solutions included emigration and colonization of territories where the colonizers would face fewer competitors; apathy and resignation to a precarious existence; and even suicide. Any of these alternatives would be possible, under the right conditions. Durkheim assumed that people would tend to favour the division of labour as a solution, as long as it was easily available and there were no barriers that prevented its realization. The greatest barrier would be a strongly defined state of the collective conscience that would require everyone to think and act in the same way. Therefore, Durkheim concluded that the decline of the collective conscience and increased independence of the individual was an essential secondary factor contributing to the increased division of labour.

It is an important feature of Durkheim's theory that he thought the determining factors of greater population size and dynamic density not only caused the intensified struggle for existence, but they also caused the increased independence of the individual. There are several reasons for this.

First, greater population size normally means greater variety of the environments in which people live. As a result, the collective conscience must be more general and abstract if it is to encompass the totality of the conditions in which the people exist. As the collective conscience becomes more general, people can no longer follow simple instructions but they must think about how to apply abstract rules to their particular situations. Therefore, the abstractness of the collective conscience allows more room for individual initiative and it increases individual autonomy. Furthermore, reflection upon the collective conscience encourages critical thinking so that people no longer take the collective values and beliefs as seriously as they once did. The collective representations therefore lose much of their force to compel obedience and individual diversity increases.

Second, Durkheim claimed that greater dynamic density leads to a decline in the authority of tradition, which is followed by a greater acquired individual autonomy. He argued that the force of the collective representations depends for the most part upon their being handed down from previous generations, and thereby being taken for granted without question. However, increased dynamic density occurs, in part, as a result of greater population mobility, which breaks the ties between the generations and thus weakens the authority of tradition.

According to Durkheim, 'it is the authority of age which gives tradition its authority' (1964b: 293). In other words, it is the respect that younger people have for their parents and for elders in their communities which is the basis for the respect that people have for traditions. It follows from this that prolonged contact with parents and elders is usually necessary for respect for traditions to remain strong. Geographic mobility away from the family home and community of origin weakens the influence of the older generation, and thus leads to falling respect for the collective traditions.

Durkheim thought that population change was a major factor leading to the decline of the collective conscience and ultimately greater freedom of the individual. He could see that not only were people leaving their communities of origin in rural areas in large numbers but they were also moving to cities that provided a quite different kind of social environment. It is this last point that we take up finally in Durkheim's account of how growing population size and dynamic density were contributing to the emergence of a new, and more individualistic, culture.

Durkheim observed that the cities in nineteenth century Europe contained many migrants, and furthermore their populations tended to be relatively young, as younger people were more likely to migrate than older people. Since many people in the cities were detached from the influence of older generations, he concluded that respect for the traditions of the collective conscience must be weaker in the cities. Just as important, Durkheim thought that there is less control over social behaviour in large urban centres, and therefore that individuals have greater practical freedom in what they are able to do. The difficulty with social control in the cities, Durkheim argued, is that there are too many people for it to be effective. The attention of urban dwellers is distracted in too many directions at once, and furthermore each individual has little or no interest in most of the other individuals with whom he or she interacts. Therefore, each individual in a large urban centre is watched less than someone in a village, and most of the people who do watch have little interest in getting involved in the time-consuming and difficult task of trying to control someone else's behaviour. An acquired right to individual autonomy is therefore a prominent feature of urban life.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we introduced the problem of choosing the unit of analysis in sociology. We began by outlining the key elements of methodological individualism in Utilitarianism, as exemplified in the work of John Stuart Mill. For Mill, society is composed only of individuals, and therefore he thought that the study of social life should begin with the study of the individual. His approach placed the discipline of psychology in a leading role, as in principle supplying the basic propositions for the derivative discipline of sociology.

In contrast, Emile Durkheim wished to make a case for sociology as an independent discipline. He did not think that sociological studies could be reduced to psychological studies. Rather, he believed that society consists of social facts which are external to the individuals and constrain them. For Durkheim, the study of social life should begin with the description of social facts and account for how those facts shaped the lives of individuals.

In this chapter, we illustrated Durkheim's approach especially from his work on the division of labour. We saw how Durkheim claimed that the driving force for the division of labour lay in the intensified struggle for existence under conditions of increasing population size and increasing dynamic density. However, the division of labour is only one possible outcome under these conditions. The progress of the division of labour therefore depends upon the existence of facilitating factors. Durkheim argued that for the division of labour to develop there need to be differences among individuals, and co-operative relations of exchange between them. These conditions, too, have to be explained by social facts. For example, co-operative relations of exchange between individuals are made possible by the social regulation of contracts, in law, but also in professional relationships. Differences among individuals, on the other hand, are made possible by the loosening of social controls which allows individuals greater autonomy to diversify in freedom. Therefore, Durkheim thought that the weakening of the collective conscience was one of the preconditions for the rapid development of the division of labour. Durkheim believed that population change was a major factor leading to the decline of the collective conscience, and ultimately greater individualism.

Durkheim's discussion of the rise of individualism left his work with an ambiguous legacy. On one hand, he presents a logically coherent account of sociology as the study of social facts that constrain the lives of individuals. On the other hand, he acknowledges that the relation between social facts and individuals has been changing, and individuals are now less constrained than they used to be. This ambiguous situation has continued to trouble sociology through to the present day.

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