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Lee McIntyre, Alex Rosenberg



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Warren Schmaus

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2

DURKHEIM AND THE METHODS OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIOLOGY

Warren Schmaus

Introduction

Social scientists writing about Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) typically put him to some rhetorical use, either as a founder of the discipline of sociology or anthropology, to whom one can appeal in the justification of one's own methodology, or as a whipping boy to punish for all that is seen as wrong with the social sciences. He has been attacked for trying to model the social sciences on the natural sciences and for employing a functionalist model of explanation that provides a theoretical justification for the status quo and conservatism. Others have accused him of deviating in his empirical studies from his professed methodology in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895a)¹ or have argued that he was constantly changing his methods over the course of his career. Rarely has the aim of the social science literature on Durkheim been to give a careful exegesis of his works. In Anglophone social sciences, the problem has been compounded by theorists building on unreliable translations, which sometimes go so far as to translate a French term with its exact opposite in English. Durkheim has been made out to be such an incoherent and unattractive thinker—at least in Anglophone sociology—that one can only wonder how he managed to be included in the Holy Trinity of founding fathers: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber.

Some of the problems of interpretation can be explained at least in part by ambiguities in Durkheim's methods. In order to evaluate Durkheim's social science methodology, we need to keep several cross-cutting and overlapping distinctions in mind. First of all, we need to distinguish methods of investigation, methods of persuasion, and methods of explanation. By methods of investigation, I mean the ways in which he analyzed empirical data and used it to support his theories. His methods of persuasion have to do with how he argued that his theories were superior to alternative theories in the field. His methods of explanation are those by which he accounted for social phenomena. Second, we need to distinguish his professed methodology in *The Rules* from his actual working methods in his empirical studies. *The Rules* covers primarily his methods of investigation and explanation, whereas his substantive works like *The Division*

of *Labor in Society* (1893b), *Suicide* (1897a), and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912a) make use of methods of persuasion. Also, the order in which he presented his results in these works is not necessarily either the temporal order in which he arrived at them or the logical order in which he derived them. Finally, the methods by which he explained the phenomena may not be exactly what he prescribed in *The Rules*.

A third set of distinctions has more to do with the meanings of the terms Durkheim used. Durkheim was educated as a philosopher and he used philosophical terms in his sociological works. These terms often had different meanings in French philosophy during his lifetime than the meanings they have taken on in more recent social sciences. These terms can also have a third sense in philosophy today. For instance, philosophers approaching the sociological literature on Durkheim for the first time will be surprised to find Durkheim, with his rich ontology of collective representations, social forces, and suicidogenic currents, described as a “positivist.”

These distinctions should be kept in mind when evaluating the charge that Durkheim’s substantive works deviated from his expressed methodology. Durkheim never intended *The Rules* to be a text about argument strategies. When he criticized his opponents’ theories for things like ambiguity, inconsistency, question-begging, unwarranted ad hoc assumptions, and methodological weaknesses, he simply took it for granted that these criticisms are generally accepted modes of argument in academic discourse that need no special defense. Keeping these distinctions in mind will also facilitate determining whether, and in what sense, Durkheim’s methods may have changed over the course of his career.

Durkheim’s Reception in the Social Sciences

Durkheim’s works have been put to different uses according to country and discipline. He is considered a founding father in both anthropology and sociology, but the boundaries between these disciplines are drawn differently in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

In France, Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*, along with other works by Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, gave rise to a tradition of ethnological research that continued after Durkheim’s death up through the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. This tradition was characterized by a method of tracing concepts and social practices from their supposedly “elementary” forms in early societies to their more complex forms in more advanced societies. Social structures and functions were important explanatory concepts. Durkheim’s *Suicide*, on the other hand, was relatively ignored in France.

British social anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard who developed structural functionalism were influenced by this French tradition. The *Elementary Forms* was the first of Durkheim’s major works to be translated into English, in 1915. Subsequently, Durkheimian-inspired anthropology crossed the Atlantic, with Malinowski bringing it to Yale and Lévi-Strauss bringing it to the University of São Paulo. More recently, however, anthropologists have moved away from structural functionalism and questioned the assumption that some present-day cultures represent the way other present-day cultures were in the past. They have also criticized Durkheim for relying on questionable ethnographies.

American sociologists, on the other hand, were attracted to Durkheim’s earlier works. *The Division of Labor* and *The Rules* were first translated into English in the 1930s, around the time that Talcott Parsons published *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), drawing heavily on

Durkheim. *Suicide* was translated into English in 1951 and inspired a generation of quantitative work in sociology, despite Durkheim's unsophisticated statistical methodology. Parsons interpreted Durkheim's methods of explanation as having moved from an original "positivism" through "voluntarism" to "idealism" over the course of his career. Voluntarism corresponds to Parsons' own approach, in which the behavior of social actors is explained through postulating internalized norms and values. However, sociologists such as Whitney Pope (1973) and Stephen Turner (1986) have since shown that Durkheim never used this method of explanation.

Also, Parsons used the term "positivism" in quite a different sense than it had in Durkheim's time. For Parsons, it meant explaining social actors' actions in terms of their rational responses to conditions in the external environment, as if their relation to it were like that of natural scientists (1937, 61, 67, 438). Although the term positivism had taken on many different meanings in Durkheim's day through the works of Comte, Spencer, Mill, Bain, Mach, Avenarius, Ostwald, and others, no one at that time used it in Parsons' sense. For Durkheim, positivism appears to have meant treating moral philosophy as a natural science. In the original introduction to *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim had said that the aim of a "positive science of morality" is to arrive at general moral principles from the study of moral facts (1893b, 20). In this work, he sought to determine whether increasing specialization is morally desirable by comparing its causes and effects to those of other morally desirable phenomena (1902b, xxxvii, 4).

Social Facts

One thing on which everyone seems to agree is that Durkheim defended the autonomy of sociology by arguing that there is a distinct class of phenomena that constitute its field of study: social facts. He defined them as ways of thinking and acting that constrain individuals and that are external to each individual consciousness, taken singly (1895a, 6ff.; 1897a, 356). Scholars such as Steven Lukes have complained that Durkheim equivocated with regard to the meaning of constraint through the examples he provided, from performing duties prescribed by custom or law to having to use the national language (1973, 12–13). But these different examples could all be regarded as but the effects or visible signs of an underlying social reality that constrains individuals. Similarly, things like suicide statistics or codes of law are often taken to be Durkheim's social facts, but they are again only their external or observable signs.

Originally, Durkheim characterized this underlying social reality as residing in the collective consciousness. This soon led to charges of his having postulated a group mind. But for Durkheim, there was no such thing, especially no conscious entity that exists over and above individuals. Sociology required no ontological substance or substratum other than "that which forms through the uniting of all the individual consciousnesses" (1897a, 361) or "the whole of associated individuals" (1898b, 38–39). Society existed for Durkheim only in and through individual consciousnesses (1912a, 299). To avoid the group mind objection, Durkheim abandoned the term "collective consciousness" and wrote instead about collective representations, the constitutive elements of the collective consciousness. He explained that there are two kinds of mental representation in each individual mind: individual and collective representations. The latter are initially formed from the fusion of individual representations in periods of "collective effervescence," such as during religious festivals. Fusion occurs when individuals recognize that others share the same representations. The resulting collective representations have greater force or power than individual representations, which explains the coercive or constraining

power of social facts, which they exert unconsciously over individual minds (1912a, 297; 1955a, 173; 1902b, 67). To be sure, Durkheim did not shrink from taking a realist interpretation of collective representations, as well as social forces and suicidogenic currents. But these entities did not exist independently of the minds of individuals.

Methods of Inquiry

It is also generally recognized that Durkheim advised sociologists to consider social facts as things, that is, as just as real as things in the material world (1895a, xi, 20). This has been interpreted in several ways, concerning both methods of inquiry and methods of explanation. With regard to the former, it has been read as endorsing a form of naïve inductivism and empiricism. This reading is reinforced by Durkheim's criticism of those who would proceed from ideas to things, rather than from things to ideas, and then, sounding a bit like Bacon, his advice to discard all prenotions or preconceptions and to define groups of social phenomena in terms of their external characteristics (1895a, 20ff.).

In the passages in question, Durkheim was simply arguing that sociology is an empirical science and not just a form of social theory that proceeds by analyzing our ordinary notions of things and then turns to the facts only as illustrations or confirmations. Often what went under the name of sociology at that time—such as the works of Comte and Spencer—looked more like philosophy than science. Similarly, Durkheim saw political economy as more ideological than empirical, claiming that even the law of supply and demand had never been experimentally confirmed (1895a, 31–34). For Durkheim, mathematics is the only science that can proceed through mental analysis alone, since we construct its objects ourselves; sociology must use the empirical methods of physics, chemistry, and physiology (1895a, xi–xiii).

The naïve inductivist and empiricist interpretation is just as wrong for Durkheim as it has proven to be for Bacon. The kind of induction Durkheim endorsed was eliminative, not enumerative induction, that is, a method of eliminating putative causal explanations and not one of simply generalizing from particular experiences. Durkheim explicitly criticized approaches that seek exhaustive detailed accounts of every society, and argued that what sociology should seek instead are what Bacon called “decisive or crucial facts” (1895a, 98), that is, the kinds of facts that can decide between competing hypotheses in a crucial experiment. In *The Elementary Forms*, he called this a “well-made experiment” (1912a, 135, 593). In this work, Australian religions provided the crucial test for whether totemism, animism, or naturism is the earliest form of religion. According to Durkheim, only the totemistic hypothesis could explain the origins of the distinction between the sacred and the profane as well as the origins of the ideas of souls, sacred beings, and religious forces. Far from generalizing from facts, Durkheim was not above “correcting” the facts. For instance, he “inferred” that despite the lack of evidence, Australians must have had totems for phratries as well as for clans, like the Amerindians do (1912a, 157).

After all, how else would Durkheim have been able to arrive at unobservable entities such as collective representations except through the method of hypothesis and test? One cannot get there by simple induction and generalization from observations. Nor can collective representations be known through introspection, as they work unconsciously. Collective representations and the relations among them must be postulated in hypotheses. Durkheim argued that what gives sociology the status of a science like the natural sciences is the use of hypotheses about

unobservable entities in an “unknown world” to explain the phenomena (1897a, 349, 351; cf. 1912a, 597; 1898b, 33). It is true that Durkheim often used “hypothesis” as a term of abuse when attacking his opponents. But this was in the context of criticizing people like Spencer who would borrow hypotheses from other sciences such as biology without verifying them in sociology (1895d, 608).

Durkheim’s method of hypothesis and test is not quite the more current concept of hypothetico-deductivism, in which test consequences are derived from hypotheses in conjunction with statements of initial conditions. Rather, Durkheim seems to have thought that effects may be derived directly from their causes. Disconfirmation was more important to him than confirmation: although several corroborating facts will not prove a hypothesis, a single fact may suffice to refute it (1895a, 163), assuming that the disconfirming fact is reliable (1888c, 265–66; 1895d, 608) and does not allow for alternative interpretations (1912a, 515), and the hypothesis is not confirmed by many other facts (1902a(i), 321). He also stressed the importance of defining terms in one’s hypothesis clearly in terms of observable characteristics in order to be able to tell whether facts indeed confirm it (1895a, 43–44, 54).

Durkheim thought one could not actually perform experiments in sociology (1895a, 159). But instead, one can appeal to ready-made experiments provided by statistical, historical, and cross-cultural comparisons. For Durkheim, the logic of the experimental method was captured by Mill’s canons of induction. Of Mill’s methods, the method of concomitant variation was the most useful for sociology (1895a, 158ff.). Durkheim used this method for testing causal hypotheses, not for mechanically generating laws from observations (1895a, 161). He never sought precise mathematical laws where one value varied as a function of the other. For two phenomena to vary in direct or inverse proportion was sufficient to indicate a causal relationship for him. Durkheim showed no knowledge of developments in statistical methods by mathematicians such as Adolphe Quetelet and Francis Galton.

However, Durkheim recognized that the presence of a concomitance will not alone prove a causal relationship. He stipulated that it is better to have not just one but a series of concomitant variations for comparison, from the same society, from other societies of the same type, and from other types of societies (1895a, 165–69; 1909e, 156). For example, if we were to find an inverse relationship between the size of families and suicide rates, we should investigate whether this also holds in countries other than our own. On the other hand, his arguments against factors like alcoholism or climate as possible causes reveal that he thought the absence of a concomitance could disprove a hypothesis. A hypothesis can also be rejected if it says nothing about a concomitance or if an alternative provides a better fit. *Suicide* adds three further conditions on the acceptability of a causal hypothesis: there must be a sufficient number of facts so as not to be attributable to accidental circumstances, the facts must not allow of some alternative explanation, and the hypothesis must not be contradicted by other facts (1897a, 71–80).

Durkheim actually did little original empirical work himself. *Suicide* contains some previously unpublished evidence, but also draws on published works by criminologists such as Enrico Morselli’s *Il suicidio* of 1879. Durkheim obtained 26,000 dossiers from Gabriel Tarde at the French Bureau of Legal Statistics and thanked Mauss for sorting them by age, sex, marital status, and number of children (1897a, xi, n. 2). *Suicide* uses a crude version of the method of concomitant variation that proceeds by grouping and averaging. For example, to investigate the effects of family size, he classified the eighty-two departments of France into six groups according to suicide rates, and then compared the average family size for each group (1897a, 209). Some other classification of the eighty-two departments would not necessarily have yielded the same neat

results. Of course, to question his use of suicide data is not to refute his theory of suicide, but only to leave it unconfirmed. (One could make a similar point about his use of unreliable ethnographic reports in *The Elementary Forms*.)

The Division of Labor and *The Elementary Forms* draw on published sources only. In the first work, Durkheim also used a form of the method of concomitant variation. One variable was the position of a society on a scale from primitive to modern, which Durkheim assumed reflected the degree of specialization of labor in that society. The other variable was the relative proportion of retributive law versus restitutive law, which for Durkheim indicated the relative strength of mechanical versus organic solidarity. The idea was to show that organic solidarity was replacing mechanical solidarity in modern society. Of course, there are other possible explanations of the differences Durkheim found in societies' codes of law.

After *The Division of Labor* and *Suicide*, cross-cultural comparisons took on more importance than the method of concomitant variations. *The Elementary Forms* employs a method of historical analysis, which he had characterized in *The Rules* as a method of sociological proof (1895a, 166ff.). In this method he arranged societies on a scale from simplest to most complex, and then traced the development of some social fact or institution throughout the entire series, as it adds elements becoming more complex. He thought that this method allowed one to analyze a social fact into elements that could not otherwise be easily distinguished (1912a, 4; 1888c, 264–65; 1909e, 153). This method of arranging things in series according to degree of complexity is traditionally French, going back at least to Descartes. Indeed, Durkheim called it a “Cartesian principle” that the first link in the chain plays an important role in getting at the real explanatory essence of something (1912a, 5). (Hence the title of Durkheim's methodological work, which alludes to Descartes's *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*.) Whether Durkheim followed the Cartesian model to the extent of accepting a classification of societies into linear series is not clear. At times, he disavowed the linear model in favor of an arboreal one for the evolution of human societies (e.g. 1901a(i), 245–46). Yet he appears to have assumed a linear classification of societies in both *The Elementary Forms* and *The Division of Labor*.

Methods of Persuasion

Durkheim began each of his substantive works with a preliminary definition of the social phenomenon in question, such as suicide or religion, in terms of its external, observable characteristics. Then he sought the real essence of this phenomenon, which will provide the causes of its observable characteristics. Along the way, he compared his theory with his competitors' alternative explanations, arguing that his own theory has wider explanatory scope and provides the best explanations of the phenomena in question.

Durkheim's method of comparative theory evaluation thus resembles the logic of crucial experiments, but is broader in scope. Competitors' theories are rejected not only when they are contradicted by the facts, but when they say nothing at all about them. They are also rejected for generating unsolved problems that Durkheim's theory does not face. For instance, Durkheim argued that the hypothesis that collective totems derive from individual totems has problems that his own hypothesis does not have to solve (1912a, 253). Alternative theories are criticized for conceptual as well as empirical problems. In *Suicide*, he rejected the hypothesis that the suicide rate varies with race because of the ambiguity of the concept of race (1897a, 54–68) and the

insanity hypothesis for not being falsifiable (1897a, 21ff.). Durkheim also rejected explanations that made use of ad hoc hypotheses, such as Lévy-Bruhl's conjecture that primitives have an alternative logic (1912a, 342).

The Elementary Forms provides perhaps the clearest example of Durkheim's procedure. It begins with a preliminary definition of religion expressed in terms of a distinction between the sacred and the profane, which is maintained by an institution such as a church. To find the essential nature of religion, it turns to what he took to be the earliest form of religion, represented by Australian totemism. He then defended the hypothesis that this was the earliest form of religion against the alternative hypotheses that either animism or naturism were the earliest form, as described above. Durkheim then explained the sacred character attached to certain totemic objects in terms of the social forces that are experienced in periods of collective effervescence during the performance of religious rites. Finally, he generalized this conclusion to include contemporary religions, maintaining that the feelings of well-being to which they give rise are but the result of social forces. What people take to be their religious experiences are in fact caused by an underlying reality of social forces, much as our sensory experience of colors is caused by an underlying reality of different wavelengths of light (1912a, 597).

Methods of Explanation

Durkheim's concept of explanation combines explaining the meaning of a concept with explaining a fact by subsuming it under a general expression, such as a causal law. In fact, he did not seem to distinguish definitions from explanatory generalizations, as he wrote about definitions in terms appropriate for empirical hypotheses, such as the verification of definitions and the ability of definitions to account for the facts (1902b, 73, 52, 32). Ultimately, to explain a social fact was to provide its underlying real essence, which one could only gradually approach and never completely arrive at, and which would define the fact and furnish its cause and function. To be sure, he clearly stated that the knowledge of laws was the goal of sociology, for instance when he said: "There is a whole part of sociology that should investigate the laws of collective ideation and that still entirely remains to be done" (1898b, 47, n. 1). These laws of collective ideation were supposed to explain how collective representations can give rise to other collective representations. However, it is not clear that he ever discovered any such laws, and the explanations he gave appear to involve the deduction of effects directly from postulated causes, rather than from laws and statements of initial conditions.

A second ambiguity in his method of explanation concerns causes and functions. Durkheim denied the possibility of a plurality of causes for the same effect (1895a, 155ff.), although he introduced a distinction between normal and pathological cases to deal with exceptions to this principle, that is, where the same effects appear to have resulted from different causes. But in the normal course of events, causes are both necessary and sufficient for their effects, and effects are not only logically necessary conditions of their causes, but sufficient indicators of their presence, making causes difficult to distinguish from effects. Since the function of a social fact is to be found among its effects, Durkheim's functional explanations are often mistaken for causal explanations, in spite of his warnings in *The Rules* against confusing causal with functional explanations.

For instance, *The Division of Labor* has been construed as showing that specialization is caused by increasing social, moral, or "dynamic" density, that is, the density of interpersonal relationships,

which in turn results from increasing physical population density. Alternatively, Durkheim could be interpreted as having claimed that the specialization of labor is an adaptation to increasing dynamic density rather than a result of it. The latter reading is suggested by Durkheim's reference to Darwin's principle of the divergence of character, according to which specialization is an adaptation to minimize competition with similar organisms. Similarly, the division of labor among humans could minimize competition among them (1902b, 248ff.). Durkheim is quite explicit that without the interpersonal relationships that make up social density, people could respond to increasing population density simply by dispersing (1902b, 270–71; 1895a, 115). The function of specialization is to maintain those interpersonal bonds, so that individuals continue to see themselves as members of the same society and stay together. As a result, population density may then increase. One could argue that Durkheim wrote *The Rules* precisely in order to try to defend *The Division of Labor* against the charge that it explains specialization ultimately in terms of physical causes. In *The Rules* he argued that the physical population density may serve as the means to measure the dynamic density, as they march together in lock step, but that it is not an exact measure (1895a, 140 and n. 1). However, that leaves the question of what gets the whole process started unexplained, that is, what causes the dynamic density to increase.

Sometimes Durkheim himself appears to have been led astray by the confusion of causes with functions, as in his theory of the categories in *The Elementary Forms*. The problem is only compounded by an ambiguity between the categories and their collective or cultural representations. Durkheim attempted to identify them, but this would be like confusing numbers with numerals. He seems to have wanted *The Elementary Forms* to be read as showing that the categories have social causes. But what he succeeded in showing is that the categories have important social functions and that their collective representations have social causes or at least social models. According to Durkheim, all societies appear to use the same categories of space, time, causality, and class because these categories have necessary social functions. For example, all societies need some way of communicating about spatial directions. However, different societies need not all represent space in the same way. Each society may have its own system of representing the categories. These representations make explicit what are already implicit in people's minds. Durkheim claimed that individuals have no more need than an animal does of a conceptual representation of space and time in order to orient itself and satisfy its individual needs (1912a, 632).

Although Durkheim's causal and functional explanations may not have always been distinct from each other, he was clear about distinguishing functional explanations from explanations in terms of intentions, goals, or purposes. For Durkheim, the function of some social phenomenon has nothing to do with anything that people may have intended. Facts about groups of individuals cannot be explained in terms of facts about the individuals that make up the group, especially not facts about their intentional behavior. To explain social phenomena in terms of individual intentions would be to mistakenly give them a psychological explanation. Sociology is an autonomous science for Durkheim, as social phenomena such as social suicide and homicide rates are not reducible to individual psychology.

What is Problematic about Durkheim's Methods

Durkheim's assumption that sociology must have its own, real theoretical entities in order to be considered a genuine science is problematic on several levels. He was modeling sociology on

the direction in which he saw the natural sciences moving in his day. But history suggests that positing theoretical entities and taking a realist stance towards them is not always the only or even the best way to go. Also, physics, chemistry, and molecular biology today all share the same fundamental entities, and the idea of ascribing causal powers to them in this stochastic universe is questionable. It may be that twentieth-century social scientists did not take Durkheim's ontology of collective representations, social forces, and suicidogenic currents seriously, focusing their attention instead on things like suicide statistics and population density in his works, precisely because they were more positivist in the philosophical anti-realist sense than Durkheim ever was.

There are further problems with collective representations. It is not clear how an unconscious mental representation can be the bearer of meaning, and even the identification of meanings with conscious mental representations faces philosophical difficulties. Yet Durkheim appears to have been closed to new ways of thinking about meaning, as he strongly defended the traditional concept of ideas representing reality against William James's pragmatic approach to meaning and truth (1955a). In all fairness, however, there is an alternative approach that is at least implicit in Durkheim's works, in which the meanings of collective representations can be defined in terms of their functions, their causes, and their relationships with other collective representations.

Durkheim thought he needed to posit collective representations in order to explain what he took to be the ideas that held a society together, thus making the Comtean assumption that it is shared ideas that accomplish this task. Perhaps the difficulty Durkheim experienced in finding any such shared ideas in contemporary society explains the fact that he subsequently turned his attention to the study of simpler societies such as the Australian totemists.

What is Valuable in Durkheim's Methodology

Perhaps Durkheim's most valuable contribution was his defense of a holist or collectivist alternative to methodological individualism in the social sciences. He demonstrated that there is a distinct class of social phenomena that cannot be completely explained in terms of individual behavior. Specifically, he argued that no account in terms of individual psychology can explain how different social groups have different suicide and crime rates, which goes a long way towards illuminating how *Suicide* became a classic and a model in American sociology. However, Durkheim perhaps did not quite see that this methodological principle does not depend on any ontology specific to sociology. This could be explained through an analogy with biology. Although biological organisms are nothing but physical and chemical entities, there are biological explanations that employ concepts like function and adaptation that cannot be reduced to physics and chemistry. Similarly, although there is no social entity over and above the individuals that constitute a society, the reason some cities have higher homicide rates than others cannot be explained in terms of individual psychology.

Durkheim also gave valuable advice about avoiding common-sense terms and concepts. That is, to really understand social phenomena such as suicide or religion, we must step back from our ordinary notions of these things, which may simply reflect cultural and other biases. For instance, we should not define religion in terms of beliefs in gods or other supernatural entities, as that privileges certain religions over others. Also, the fact that suicide may be viewed negatively while self-sacrifice may be viewed positively should not blind us to the possibility that

what looks to be a suicide bombing from one society's point of view may appear to be the noble act of a martyr to another.

One could object that Durkheim could not explain the social meaning of suicide and say that it was inappropriate for him to treat social facts in a natural scientific sort of way. However, there is no reason to think that sociology cannot concern itself with both meanings and causes. Durkheim at least attempted to combine the two; whether he was successful, of course, is a separate question. But one can ask just how successful other social theorists have been in trying to distinguish an "interpretive" from an "explanatory" social science. Often the arguments turn on contrasting the social sciences with an unrealistic picture of the natural sciences. For instance, Dilthey's hermeneutic method involves making an hypothesis about the whole in order to interpret its parts, and then using these interpretations to modify our original hypothesis about the whole, and endlessly repeating this cycle (Anderson 2003). But at a general enough level, this could describe the method of any science, natural or social, including Durkheim's sociology. Durkheim's hypothesis about religion is used to interpret different sorts of rites and practices, which reflects back on his concept of religion as a whole to form a new tentative hypothesis. There appears to be no set of methods that is specific to the social sciences that distinguishes them from the natural sciences, or set of methods that is common to all but only the natural sciences.

Note

- 1 I cite the original French versions of Durkheim's works, providing my own translations, since the available English translations are not always reliable. The reference numbering system is that originally established by Steven Lukes (1973) and subsequently updated by Robert Alun Jones and Daniela Barberis at <http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/>.

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Further Reading

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- Durkheim, E. *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, S. Lukes (ed.), W. D. Halls (trans.) (New York: Free Press, 1982) is the better of two English translations of Durkheim (1895a) and contains useful translations of other of Durkheim’s essays relevant to his methodology.
- Jones, R. A. *The Development of Durkheim’s Social Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) also interprets Durkheim’s work in historical context to provide a provocative alternative to standard sociological readings of Durkheim.
- Lukes, S. *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) is the most complete intellectual biography of Durkheim.
- Schmaus, W. *Durkheim’s Philosophy of Science and the Sociology of Knowledge: Creating an Intellectual Niche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) interpret Durkheim’s thought in the context of the philosophical and intellectual traditions of his time.