

KOLEKTİFİN ÖTESİNDE: BİREYSEL DENEYİMLER VE KÜRESEL PERSPEKTİFLER ÜZERİNDEN DURKHEIM'IN TOPLUMSAL GERÇEKLERİNİ YENİDEN DÜŞÜNMEK

Beyond the Collective: Reimagining Durkheim's Social Facts through Individual Experiences and Global Perspectives

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Öz

Bu makale, Emile Durkheim'in toplumsal gerçeklikler kavramını analiz ederek, bunların kolektif doğasını ve bireyler üzerindeki zorlayıcı etkisini vurgulamakta ve ardından sosyal inşacılık perspektifinden güncellenmiş bir eleştiri sunmaktadır. Durkheim'in esas olarak "Sosyolojik Yöntem Kuralları" adlı eserinde sunduğu çalışma, toplumsal gerçekliklerin bireylerden bağımsız ve onlara güçlü olan varlıklar olduğunu ve toplumun düzenini bunların sürdürdüğünü varsayar. Ne var ki, bu analiz, bireylerin birbirini etkileyen subjektif deneyimlerinin, anlamlarının ve anlayışlarının, bireysel düzeyde kolektif modelin üretim sürecinde dahil edilmesini savunmaktadır. Durkheim'in Avrupa-merkezciliğinin sınırlılıklarını göstermektedir; dışsallık, zorlayıcılık ve genellik üzerinde odaklanırken, Batı dışı dünyada mevcut olan deneyim farklılıklarını görmezden gelmektedir. Makale, Küresel Kuzey ve Güney'den bireysel deneyimlerin karmaşıklığını kabul eden ve daha geniş ve kapsayıcı bir genelleme elde etmeyi amaçlayan toplumsal gerçekliklere yönelik yorumlayıcı bir yaklaşım önermektedir. Fenomenolojik yönlerin dahil edilmesi ve dekolonizasyonun gerekliliği aracılığıyla, makale, subjektif deneyimleri ve çeşitli bakış açılarını dikkate alarak Durkheim'in şemasını geliştirmeye çalışmaktadır, bu da toplumsal gerçekliklerin daha kapsamlı ve duyarlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına yol açacaktır. Bu yaklaşım, bu nedenle, sadece Durkheim'a bir saygı değil, aynı zamanda bireysel deneyimlere ve kolektif anlayışta küresel perspektiflere dikkat ederek toplumsal gerçekliklerin sosyolojik analizini geliştiren bir araçtır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Toplumsal Gerçeklikler, Durkheim, Sosyal İnşacılık, Dekolonizasyon, Fenomenoloji*

Abstract

The present article analyzes Emile Durkheim's concept of social facts, emphasizing their collective nature and the coercive influence they exert on individuals, and then offers an updated criticism from the social constructivist perspective. Durkheim's work, mainly presented in "The Rules of Sociological Method", presumes that social facts are entities external to and powerful over individuals and they are the ones who maintain the society's order. Nevertheless, this analysis is in favor of including subjective experiences, meanings and understandings of individuals that influence each other in the process of collective model reproduction at the individual level. It shows the limitations of Durkheim's Eurocentrism, in which he seems to be focusing on externality, coerciveness, and generality, while he ignores the differences in experience that exist in the non-Western world. The paper suggests an interpretive approach to social facts which acknowledges the complexity of individual experiences from the North and the South, in order to achieve a broader and more inclusive generalization. Through the inclusion of phenomenological aspects and the necessity of decolonization, the paper is trying to develop Durkheim's scheme to take into account subjective experiences and diverse viewpoints which will result in a more comprehensive and sensitive comprehension of social facts. This approach, therefore, is not only an honor to Durkheim but also a tool

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that enhances sociological analysis of social facts by paying attention to individual experiences and global perspectives in the collective understanding.

Keywords: *Social Facts, Durkheim, Social Constructivism, Decolonization, Phenomenology*

1. Introduction

Locating the concept of social facts at the center of his analysis, Emile Durkheim argues that the study of social sciences should never be reduced to the individuals. Instead, recognizing the collective nature of the social phenomena, he underlines that a sociologist should consider the externality and coercivity of social facts over the individuals. With this conceptualization, Durkheim reformulates the positivist notions of Auguste Comte and brings a new perspective to the classical sociological theories in which a science of social facts is suggested over the study of individuals. Considering this, this paper delves into the discussion of the Durkheimian concept of social facts and provides an up-to-date critique of it from a more interpretive/social constructivist perspective.

The paper argues that while the study of social facts provides valid and useful ways to perceive social phenomena with a more universalist understanding, there is a necessity to go beyond the early conceptualization of social facts and to include subjective experiences, meanings, understandings, and knowledge at the individual level since the individual level provides a reproduction of the collective model. It further argues that Durkheimian theorization of social facts is highly Eurocentric in the sense that the current emphasis on social facts -- with the notions of externality, coerciveness, and generality -- ignores the diverse experiences and incidents taking place in the non-Western world. Therefore, it suggests a more interpretive perspective of 'social facts' by acknowledging the diversity and multiplicity of individual experiences, interactions, and events both in the Global North and South while also recognizing the necessity to make useful and valid generalizations. In that sense, it suggests an alternative version of studying social facts within the framework of Durkheim by bringing the multiplicity of subjective experiences into the analysis with a broader aim of making connections and generalizations.

As a theoretical analysis, this paper consists of the following sections. In the first section, I will outline and discuss the major content regarding Durkheim's conceptualization of social facts. In doing so, I will provide a closer insight into his book, *The Rules of Sociological Method* which will be the main source to be used for conducting a theoretical analysis and critique throughout the paper. In this first part, the brief discussion will be mainly devoted to Durkheimian theorization of social facts as "things", as well as his arguments on the association between the individual and collective entities.

This part will be followed by a more analytical section in which I will provide my main criticisms on the issue. Criticisms will include the above mentioned counter arguments, including the necessity to consider the individual experiences, meanings, and understandings at the individual level in the process of reaching those social realities, in addition to the incorporation of a more social constructivist/interpretivist perspective that addresses the neglected dimensions of social realities that exist in the Global South. As I argue, the existing theoretical framework of Durkheim on social facts can be updated by taking both of these steps into consideration, rather than purely rejecting his conceptualizations. For this process, it would be necessary to highlight the importance

of the individual experiences and connect them within a larger social context while also addressing the commonalities and patterns at the collective level. Only with the inclusion of individual, subjective, and multiple experiences in both Global North and South into the collective ways of knowing, I argue, it would be possible to study social facts in a more socially comprehensive and sensitive manner. These arguments will be analyzed in more detail in the following sections.

2.1. Durkheim and Theorization of Social Facts

In his book, *Rules of Sociological Method*, Emile Durkheim outlines the philosophical and epistemological foundations of sociology (Durkheim, 1895 ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007). In so doing, he locates the study of social facts at the center of his theorizations while arguing that social facts should be examined as “things.” Social facts, for Durkheim, are “any way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint... which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestation.” (Durkheim, 1895, p.147 ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007). In terms of the features, social facts have the aspects of externality and coerciveness. Externality refers to the existence of these social facts independent of human observation and perception where it is accepted that they exist in a world of their own regardless of the individuals. Cohesiveness, on the other hand, refers to the experience of power that makes the society act, think, and feel in certain ways determined by such social facts. This understanding and conceptualization of the social facts with coercive power involves the collective procedure at the social level that transcends the individual and provides particular social order through laws, regulations, customs, and obligations. At this point, it is important to highlight that people decide to be bound by particular social facts based on rational and conscious mind.

Durkheim suggests that social facts are consisted of certain tendencies, beliefs, and practices taken collectively by a group of people and further argues that such a duality between the collective entity and individual manifestations provide “a tangible form peculiar to them and constitute a reality *sui generis* vastly distinct from the individual facts which manifest that reality” (Durkheim, 1895, p. 144, ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007). With this, he addresses the state of dissociation in which there appears an argument that social facts can never be reduced to the individual phenomena as this would be a reductionist way of studying society. Such an understanding of Durkheim, however, also recognizes the varying degrees of distinctiveness between the collective/social phenomena and the individual manifestations based on particular cases. In line with this, he further adds that such distinctiveness and dissociation of the collective mind and individual may not be readily observable immediately. But through certain methodologies, such as statistics, it is claimed that it would be possible to make social scientific analysis at the collective level.

For Durkheim, there are five main rules to conduct a sociological scientific study around social facts. These include empirically observing social facts, distinguishing between normal and pathological social facts, rules for classifying societies, rules for the explanation of social facts, as well as rules for testing sociological explanations. As one of the representatives of positivist philosophy, Durkheim also underlines the importance of experimental methods that are seen as essential to study the social facts by highlighting the causal associations. At this point, however, he also distinguishes the field of sociology from psychology by bringing the scholarly attention from the individuals to the collective phenomena. In comparing the disciplines, Durkheim emphasizes the idea and study of collectiveness rather than individual level analysis. In that regard, his conceptualization deviates significantly from psychology in prioritizing the analysis of collective social phenomena, instead of individual focus.

2.2. The Association Between the Individual and Society

With regards to the conceptualization of association between individual entities and collectivities, more can be elaborated in his scholarly discussion of social facts. Durkheim's main argument, in this matter, is that the whole is greater than its parts. To be more specific, he uses an analogue of biology and states that there are different parts of molecules that constitute the living cell, however, it is the connection between the individual molecules which produces life (Durkheim, 1895 ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007). Connecting this biological analogy to human nature, Durkheim highlights the association of human beings that creates a new kind of social reality or fact (Durkheim, 1895 ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007). Accordingly, his view is that it is the facts of that association, rather than the essential, or particular nature, of the individual elements in which the adequate explanation of the social reality can be discovered.

In line with this discussion on the association between the individual and collective entities, it can be argued that Durkheim establishes his own conceptualizations of collectivity – which is above the individual level – based on social facts. Such conceptualization differs from other classical theorists, including Hobbes (Hobbes and Missner, 2016), Rousseau (1762 ctd. in Calhoun et al., 2007), and Spencer (1967). First, both Hobbes and Rousseau view the society as an artificial entity which is a product of a social contract that constrains individual behavior and manifestations. According to these theorists, individuals, as the natural forms, get together and establish an artificial society through a social contract with the objective of benefitting from the collective advantages such as the provision of food and security. On the other hand, for Spencer, the society is theorized as a natural entity, rather than being artificial, since such a social collective formation involves the individual, humanistic expressions and tendencies that prevails at the social level (Spencer, 1969). From Spencer's perspective, therefore, society is seen as a continuation of individual tendencies and manifestations that have their reflections within the collective sphere (Spencer, 1969).

Durkheimian perspective involves the aspects of both sides mentioned above. In theorizing social facts, Durkheim sees constraint as an essential element of social facts, and therefore agrees with Hobbes and Rousseau. However, he also views society as something natural—with the argued associations and connections between the individual and collectivities. In that regard, one can say that he also agrees with Spencer in his view of the formation of the society. What is different for Durkheim is the following: It is actually because of this constraint of the social level—which as a consequence of its natural superior position—that erases the necessity to utilize social contract to control and regulate the individual members of the society. In the Durkheimian sense, instead of such social contract, social realities have the coercive power over the individual to sustain order and regularity in the form of physical, moral, and intellectual.

3. Critique

3.1. Incorporating Subjectivities

Durkheimian conceptualization of social facts and the argued association between the individual and collective manifestations at the social level provide useful and practical ways to understand and study the social phenomenon. Such conceptualization reveals two different ways of theorizing the interconnection between the individual and social level. Indeed, on one hand, there appears to be a dissociation between the individual and collective mind in the sense that the social reality is *sui generis*, and, in a sense, in a peculiar form different than individual level. In that regard, Durkheim emphasizes the distinctiveness of the social facts as “things” to be studied in a different way than the study of individuals. With the use of rationality and collective conscience, indivi-

duals come together and constitute a level of reality at the social level, which is distinct from the individual forms of reality. On the other hand, by using the analogy of biology, he also underlines the existence of an association, but only with the factual features of the association itself, rather than the particular individual realities in constituting the collective manifestations and realities. At the end, for Durkheim, it can be said that there is both association and dissociation between the individuals and social realities.

While this view has valid and relevant points for the study of social phenomena at the collective level, I argue that there is a need to go beyond the current theorization and incorporate additional theoretical dimensions into the Durkheimian perspective of social facts. I suggest that these additional dimensions could include the recognition and utilization of multiple realities at the individual level. In that sense, with the view that individual level provides a reproduction of the collective level; subjective experiences, meanings, understandings, and narratives would have the scholarly potential to contribute to the development and maintenance of broader realities at the social level. This does not mean to suggest that Durkheimian conceptualization should be completely abolished. On the contrary, I acknowledge that his theory is valid and relevant with its emphasis on the need for universal knowledge production. However, in this process of universalizing the knowledge, a researcher analyzing social phenomena should not ignore the individual level of knowledge as they do matter in contributing to the universal knowledge production.

At this point, I suggest incorporating the main aspects of phenomenology into the Durkheimian theorization of social facts. In other words, following the main arguments of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz, I offer a relatively fresh and up-to-date perspective to the study of social facts without leaving the major framework of Durkheimian framework. This means that, with the overall objective of bringing the multiplicity of subjective experiences into the sociological analysis to make connections and generalizations, there is a necessity to recognize the individual level realities and experiences (Rojcewicz and Schuwer, 1989; Schutz, 1969).

These experiences can be both internal and external that are perceived and realized at the individual level (Gattone, 2021). Such an alternative view would prioritize the subjective perceptions and meanings from different standpoints highlighting the necessity of “learning more about the appearances of the social world as understood from the standpoint of those doing the perceiving” (Gattone, 2021, p.5). The recognition of different and multiple standpoints would not contradict with the Durkheimian understanding of studying social facts. In contrast, when it is classified and organized in a consistent and scientific manner through certain sociological methods, I argue that these multiple experiences with different meanings and understandings would contribute to the process of universalizing knowledge.

The above mentioned argument can be further clarified by an example. For instance, the majority of empirical studies focusing on immigration issues in the United States conduct empirical analysis on the immigrant populations by utilizing the nation-wide survey data such as American National Election Studies (ANES) or General Social Survey (GSS). These studies, from a Durkheimian perspective, reflect on the social realities at the collective level by making inferences and generalizations based on these large N studies. However, in addition to the fact that many immigrants are excluded from the data collection processes because of their immigrant/non-citizen status, there emerges a problem of neglecting the diversity of perceptions and experiences at the individual level. By studying these populations only at the collective level, these studies unfortunately ignore the diversity and heterogeneity of these marginalized groups. From a more up-to-date perspective that I suggested above, instead of a pure statistical analysis that oversees the issues of immigration at the broader level, a more comprehensive and precise analysis can be made by addressing the

multiplicity of experiences from different social identities.

This would not mean that such analysis would diminish the generalizability of the research. On the contrary, when conducted with a reliable and representative sample, it would have the scholarly potential to contribute to the universal knowledge production on the most pressing issues of immigrants and refugees. Such an alternative study that scientifically classifies and highlights the existing associations, relations, and connections between these multiple and subjective experiences would be beneficial to the process of knowledge production and validation at the collective level. Thus, I argue that a new perspective—which brings the perspectives of phenomenology and Durkheim’s understanding of social facts—would be possible and plausible in the process of searching for universal and generalizable knowledge.

3.2. Decolonizing Durkheim

Along with the call for the addition of individual-level subjective realities to the study of social facts in the Durkheimian framework, another crucial element is to question the Eurocentric bias in the conceptualizations that already exist. While Durkheim’s focus on externalization, coercion, and generality offers crucial insights, it does not address the intricacies of subjective knowledge production common in non-Western contexts. Notably, the decolonization of the Durkheimian thought becomes imminent through the adoption of an interpretive approach in the Global South.

Expanding on the arguments of W.E.B. Du Bois (Zuckerman, 2004), the suggestion would include the necessity to consider and reflect on the existing inequalities at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and other social identities. At this point, the Durkheimian view appears incomplete as it fails to take into account the serious inequalities that exist not only in the Global South but also in the Global North. Through incorporation of a decolonizing viewpoint while analyzing Durkheimian theory, one shall build an inclusive framework for universal knowledge construction (Go, 2017).

At the core of this decolonization movement is the acknowledgment of different social realities from distinct social standpoints. This involves recognizing the lived realities and the viewpoints of the marginalized groups as well as laying bare the colonial legacies that are responsible for the structure of power and domination (Hunt and Holmes, 2015; Darder, 2018)). Through the utilization of narratives and experiences of those who have been previously silenced, one can understand the depths of social issues and work towards a more equitable sociological worldview.

In addition, the decolonization of the Durkheimian view, requires reconsideration of methods and epistemologies in social research. Traditional Western approaches to research are often characterized by the emphasis on objectivity and quantitative analysis and therefore ignore the qualitative information that is generated by indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems. Decolonial methods of research would thus include the consideration of a wider spectrum of research tools that are responsive to local settings and contexts and which also require a variety of ways of knowing and validating knowledge. Additionally, the process of decolonizing Durkheimian thought must include a critical exploration of the power relations that underpin knowledge production and circulation (Sonn, 2009; Schiwy, 2007). This entails undermining the supremacy of Western academic institutions and creating a platform for collaboration with scholars and communities from the Global South (Richards, 2014).

To conclude, decolonizing the Durkheimian perspective means recognizing how Eurocentric viewpoints permeate existing conceptions and ensuring the lived experiences and voices of the marginalized are at the center. Through adhering to a more interpretive standpoint, reevaluating

the research methodologies and fighting power structures in knowledge building, one can lay the ground for an all-encompassing and equitable sociological basis that captures the complexity of social life around the world. Inclusion and recognition of inequalities while studying social facts would contribute to the overall process of decolonization in the Durkheimian sense.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research reconsiders Durkheim's understanding of social facts, highlighting their coercive nature and collectivity, and proposes a new critical approach based on social constructivism. Durkheim's work, which implies that social facts are external forces that are in charge of the social order, is both praised for its fundamental role and criticized for its limitations. This paper proposes that the subjective experiences, meanings, and understandings of individuals, which is one of the levels where the collective model is reproduced, should be considered as well. Through the integration of phenomenological notions and an emphasis on decolonization, this analysis will expand Durkheim's framework, including subjective experiences and multifaceted perspectives into the understanding of social facts beyond sociological perspective.

Durkheim's legacy is still hugely prevalent in the social sciences as his theory is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the dynamics between individual actions and social structures. While the above may be true, this paper argues that a different viewpoint is also needed. One which incorporates the personal and individual lived experience as well as Durkheim's positivist focus on collective social realities. This approach does not aim at replacing Durkheimian principles but at extending them by paying attention to his aspiration to achieve a general and universal knowledge without downplaying the role that individual experiences play in it. Through the application of scientific methodologies that categorize and classify these experiences, the article proposes a way of elaboration of universal knowledge production which results in a more comprehensive Durkheimian social facts.

To this end, the significance of decolonization is also underscored, urging for a more comprehensive approach that captures the intersecting inequalities and power structures that hold sway in the Global North and South. This means that social phenomena should be reconsidered in a way that acknowledges the numerous individual realities shaped by a multitude of identities and experiences. This decolonizing approach does not only challenge the Eurocentric nature of Durkheim's formulations, but also attempts to bring other social realities into the discipline of sociology.

This paper, in summary, presents an alternative perspective on the social facts proposed by Durkheim, one that takes into account the individualized experiences together with the global inequalities. Such a new framework proposes a more comprehensive and inclusive standpoint on how social phenomena are understood, which not only uses and develops Durkheim's theoretical works but also applies them to the current socio-cultural environment. Through the inclusion of individual subjectivities and the advancement of a decolonial approach, this method creates a more complete and universal understanding of social facts, which contributes to a more equitable and informed practice of sociology.

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