

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Deviance and Social Control

Unit M5: Suicide (1)

In this set of Teachers' Notes I want to start to focus specifically on a number of **theoretical questions** that have to be discussed as part of the **AEB "Theory and Methods"** section of the syllabus. In particular, we are going to look at the concept of **methodology** in some detail and, to help us do this we are going to use the area of **"sociological explanations of suicide"** as the means of understanding:

- a. The distinction between **"methodology"** and **"methods"** and
- b. The distinction we can make between various **different methodologies** in sociology (specifically, **positivism, realism** and **interpretivism**).

In basic terms, this will - for all intents and purposes - involve using the **study of suicide** as a means of illustrating a number of basic **differences** between the approach of **Structuralist** and **Interactionist** sociologists to the study of social phenomena. Thus, this section will do two main things:

1. Provide an understanding of the sociological analysis of suicide (as part of the Deviance section of the syllabus).
2. Provide an illustration of the way in which sociologists, using different methodological principles and methods for their analysis, go about the process of constructing knowledge about the social world. We can, therefore, use this concrete example of social behaviour to illustrate the way in which sociologists employing different methodologies have sought to apply these methodologies to the study of this particular social phenomenon.

In this respect, it should be possible to see the clear differences in approach between **positivist** and **realist** forms of **science** (both of which emphasise **"objectivism"** and a basically **Structuralist** approach to the generation of knowledge) and **Interactionist** forms of **science** (which emphasises **"subjectivism"** and an **interpretive** approach to the generation of knowledge).

Whilst I appreciate that ideas such as "objectivism" and "subjectivism" may be rather confusing to you at the moment, you should by now be reasonably familiar with the distinction that has been made between both Structuralism / Interactionism and Positivism / Interpretivism. In addition, you should also be familiar with the basic relationship that exists between:

**Sociological perspective,
Methodology and
Methods of research.**

If you do not feel confident that you understand these ideas, you should turn to the Teachers' Notes on **"Methodology: 1. Sociology and Science"** and **"2. Is Sociology Scientific?"**.

Sociological Analyses of Suicide

Most analyses of suicide tend to begin with **Durkheim** ("Suicide: A Study In Sociology", 1897) and this one is no exception, since Durkheim's contribution to both our understanding of suicide and the methodological principles involved in the study of social phenomena represent one of the most significant developments in sociological forms of analysis.

"**Suicide: A Study In Sociology**" remains one of the most significant books in the history of sociology for two main reasons:

1. It was the first attempt to apply a set of systematic principles of scientific investigation to a specific social phenomenon (suicide). These principles had been elaborated, by Durkheim in his earlier book "The Rules of Sociological Method", 1895.
2. Having outlined the principles involved in the scientific study of society, Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the way in which we could apply those principles to the study of any social phenomenon.

A phenomenon such as suicide, for example, could, Durkheim argued, be analysed scientifically and the causes of that phenomenon elaborated.

Durkheim believed that, in order to understand social life we had to analyse human behaviour in terms of its explicitly social characteristics and, for this reason, the study of suicide was a particularly appropriate choice of subject matter because:

1. Up until Durkheim's analysis, suicide had been "explained" in terms of:

a. **"Free will":**

The basic idea here being that people, as free-thinking individuals, simply made the choice of whether or not to kill themselves in a kind of "social vacuum". Suicide, in this respect, was seen to be a fundamentally psychological phenomenon.

b. **Biological determinism:**

In this respect, suicidal individuals were explained in terms of such things as "madness", racial characteristics, "innate predisposition's" and so forth. In this sense, suicide was explained in terms of individuals possessing some form of inherent biological condition that caused them to commit suicide.

2. Durkheim argued that if it could be established that suicide - apparently the most personal of individual, psychological, conditions - had social causes then it would help to establish sociology as both a new discipline and, most importantly, as the scientific study of social phenomena.

Imagine that you were going to do a sociological study of suicide and, given your knowledge of concepts such as norm, value, social relationship and so forth, how might you try and justify the idea that suicide has social causes?

(Hint: Think about the way in which social relationships involve routines / responsibilities.)

Before we start to look at the way in which Durkheim tried to analyse and understand the nature of suicide, it might be useful to look briefly at the background to both

Durkheim's basic work and his sociological perspective since this will enable us to understand:

- a. The relationship between his basic perspective and his methodology.
- b. The basic nature of Structural Functionalist thought.

Like **Comte**, **Durkheim's** ideas fall squarely into the Structural Functionalist perspective. Unlike Comte, however, Durkheim's contribution to the development of sociological theory and, most importantly, practice, was not only one that served as a classical exposition of the Functionalist / consensus sociological position; it remains a relatively influential force in the theory and practice of sociology to this day.

Following Comte, Durkheim viewed societies as "social systems" - systems that could only be fully understood in terms of the inter-relationship between various parts of the social system (institutions - patterns of shared, stable, behaviour). A fundamental problem, for Durkheim, was the need to explain both the way in which the various parts of society related to one another and why societies developed in different ways. In this latter respect, Durkheim was raising a fundamental problem for all forms sociological analysis, namely, what is it that holds people together as a society?

In simple terms, Durkheim wanted to explain the "**social glue**" that seemed to bind individuals together as a society and the answer to this problem (what is it that holds thousands / millions of individuals together in some form of common bond?) was to see social systems as "moral entities"; things to which people feel they morally belong. For Durkheim, society took-on the appearance - to its individual members - of a "thing". That is, society appeared to be something that existed in its own right, over and above the ideas, hopes and desires of its individual members.

We can perhaps best understand this idea by thinking about our own everyday conception of society. We talk, for example, about the need to protect "society" from criminals, just as we talk about criminals "paying their debt to society". When we complain about "having to go to work" or "being forced to go to school / College" we are expressing the idea of society pressurising and constraining our behaviour in various ways.

List some of the ways in which "society" seems to force you to do things that you would not do if you didn't "have to do them".

For example, I "have" to go to work each day, just as I "have" to obey the law.

In reality, of course, "society" does no such thing to us. It is only people (both ourselves and others) who have the power to make us do the kind of things I've just noted.

However, the most important idea to note here is that somehow the individual thoughts and behaviours of a population appear to us to be expressed in terms of some form of collective will that, to all intents and purposes, appears to take-on a form that is external to each of us as individual social actors.

Durkheim expressed this idea as a form of "**collective consciousness**" - the way in which individual thought and behaviour is apparently transformed into collective thought and behaviour. Whenever we take note of the behaviour of others (and modify our behaviour accordingly, whenever we assume responsibility for our actions

and so forth we are, in effect, helping to create a kind of "collective consciousness" that appears to exist over and above the consciousness of individual social actors. This, for Durkheim, was an important aspect of the "social glue" that held society together.

Durkheim was not, of course, alone in his thoughts about the nature of the "social glue" that held society together. Thomas **Hobbes** ("Leviathan"), for example, is a well-known(?) philosopher who pondered just this idea (albeit it in a different way and with different conclusions about it's nature) as is the French philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** - but what made Durkheim's analysis of this problem unique for his time can be summed-up in two main ideas:

Firstly, by seeing society as a fundamentally moral entity he could plausibly account for the development of any given society by delineating the basic principles underlying the process of social development. As we will see in a moment, he was able to map-out the logical principles underlying social development / evolution.

Secondly, unlike theorists such as Hobbes, Durkheim's account of social development did not rely upon untestable assumptions about the "innate rationality" of mankind. Hobbes, for example, saw social development as a form of "contractual arrangement" tacitly agreed upon by people in order to limit the potentially damaging pursuit of individual self-interest (people, in effect, basically agreed to submit themselves to the rule of law, for example). For Durkheim, people did not simply "agree" to social development but were, on the contrary, carried-along by it - and to understand this idea we need to look briefly at the logic that underpinned Durkheim's conception of human social development.

Durkheim began from the assumption that human beings are fundamentally social animals. That is, they exist in collective groups which, on the face of things, seems a reasonable enough assumption to make.

Next, he argued from this that when people live together (even in the most basic of collectivities) they develop relationships of various kinds. The more-complex the society (in terms of the number of people and the number of potential relationships), the more-complex are the relationships that develop.

In order for a relationship to exist, it is necessary that some form of routine is established, since without the routine reinforcement and affirmation of the existence of a relationship we would be continually forced to re-establish social relationships - something that is not possible if people are to live together and develop socially.

Imagine, for example, the problems you would have if every relationship you establish one minute simply ceases to exist the next - you would spend all your time establishing (and forgetting) your relationship to others. Thus, the logical basis for Durkheim's assumption about the way in which relationships are routinized can be found all around us. If our relationships with others did not have some kind of formal, routine, permanent, appearance then it would not be possible to develop complex forms of social relationships and arrangements.

Logically, if routine relationships are to develop then the basis of these routines must be some form of common pattern of shared assumptions about such relationships. Again, if you think about the relationships you create and recognise over time it is evident that the people that you form relationships with must reciprocate your recognition of that relationship. relationships are based upon some form of mutual recognition and affirmation (such as that between a parent and a child, for example).

Thus, the fact that you may (for the sake of argument) recognise a special relationship between yourself and your parents is an example of the routinisation of a relationship. Each person in the relationship recognises the particular social significance of their relationship (to both themselves and others) and, by so doing, affirms and reaffirms its significance through their actions.

A parent and their child have no special physical characteristic that marks them out as a related pair - the relationship exists only in the mind and, as such, needs to be continually recognised as being "special" if the relationship is to continue to have a social meaning. This is true of all social relationships (such as that between a teacher and student, student and student and the like) and it illustrates the way in which we create a "sense of society" and moral order through our continued recognition and reproduction of the ideas that underpin our social behaviour.

As these **patterned relationships** emerge and assume a routine nature in society, so the formal basis of social relationships develops until, in time, they take-on a universal or "society-wide" character. They become, in short, a **pattern of values** recognised by - and applicable to - the lives of all members of a society. As a society reproduces itself, of course, values, norms and beliefs are transmitted through the **socialisation** process to ensure that children are socialised into the cultural values of the society into which they are born and raised.

Durkheim's argument concerning social development (of which the above is only a very basic, over-simplified, outline) was based upon a form of logical proof called "**a priori reasoning**" (that is, the ability to "think back" logically from the present to the past). In this instance, Durkheim did not have to have a complete, empirical, knowledge of all human societies in order to explain social development, since the proof of his assumptions is contained in the fact of the present.

This kind of reasoning has tended to be a feature of Structural Functionalist thought right up to the present day and is probably most notable in terms of the idea that if an institution (such as the family) exists in a society it does so because it is functional for that society. It is functional for that society because it exists...

You might also like to note that this is an important **methodological** point, since it serves to demonstrate that logic represents one form of proof that can be applied to the (scientific) understanding of social development.

By way of this slight detour, we can now start to apply some of the ideas contained in the above to an understanding of Durkheim's analysis of suicide.

Durkheim's basic philosophical position can be summarised as follows:

1. Society is made-up of individuals.
2. However, it is something more than the simple sum of these individuals, since people form social relationships that involve rights, routines, responsibilities and so forth.
3. Society is not reducible to individual motivations, behaviours and so forth because:

People are born into societies that have a structure of: Rules, Relationships, Norms, Values and so forth.

4. People's behaviour is shaped, in some way, by the above factors. In effect, behavioural forms are subject to certain constraints that arise from the nature of the social relationships which they form.

Durkheim argues that if we can understand the **constraints** that shape individual behaviour, we can effectively study the causes of that behaviour. Outline some of the implications this might have for the scientific study of human behaviour:

“Suicide”: A Classic Sociological Analysis

In the following, I intend to do two things:

Firstly, to look at the way in which Durkheim argued that we should be concerned to understand suicide as a social phenomenon. This will include an outline of the different types of suicide that Durkheim elaborated in his study.

Secondly, to look in more detail at the logic of Durkheim's analysis - to understand the way in which he constructed his sociological study of suicide (Durkheim's methodology).

Durkheim's study of suicide was, and remains, an important example of the way in which sociological knowledge and methodological principles can be used to challenge commonly-accepted or "taken-for-granted" ideas about the nature of the social world. As he argued:

"Since suicide is an individual action affecting the individual only, it must seemingly depend exclusively on individual factors, thus belonging to psychology alone. Is not the suicide's resolve usually explained by his temperament, character, antecedents and private history?...If, instead of seeing in them [that is, suicides] only separate occurrences unrelated and to be separately studied, the suicides committed in a given society during a given period of time are taken as a whole, it appears that this total is not simply a sum of independent units, a collective total, but is itself a new fact sui generis [that is, unique in some way], with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature - a nature, furthermore, dominantly social."

From the above, briefly explain why you think Durkheim considered it important to study suicide as a collective, as opposed to an individual, phenomenon.

We can summarise the ideas contained in the above quotation in the following way:

1. The decision as to whether or not someone commits suicide appears, on the face of things, to be a uniquely individual choice.
2. However, if we change the focus of attention from the act itself and the individuals involved - to look at possible patterns of suicide - then the emergence of such patterns (if they exist) would be indicative of some form of social pressure acting upon certain individuals in such a way as to make them see suicide as the only solution to their problems...

For example, if we were to look at suicide **rates** (that is, the number of people per 1000 in a population who commit suicide) over time, two logical possibilities occur:

a. If suicide is simply an individual choice made without reference to, or regard for, any social pressures, then the distribution of suicides throughout the year, for example, should be random. No one period of the year, for example, would show a greater cluster or pattern of suicide than any other.

In addition, if we studied suicide rates in a society over a number of years, there should again be no discernible patterns emerging - all we would have is a random distribution of deaths based upon chance.

b. If suicide is not simply explainable in terms of individual predisposition's, motivations and so forth, then precisely definable patterns of suicide should be present. If individuals were effectively being forced, by some as yet unknown social pressure, to see suicide as their only option, then we would logically expect to see clusters of suicides emerge.

In addition, if such clusters do occur, it should then be logically possible to pin-point / identify the social pressures that effectively cause certain individuals to commit suicide.

Once we have done this, it should then be possible to theorise the nature of the relationship between social constraints / pressures and individual behaviour.

Why do you think Durkheim chose to study suicide rates, as opposed to simply the number of people committing suicide in any society in any one year?

As you might not be too surprised to discover, when Durkheim undertook the study of suicide rates (using published Official Statistics from a number of different countries), he did indeed find that suicides were not randomly distributed. At different times in a society's development, Durkheim discovered abrupt changes in the pattern of suicide - indicating that some form of social pressure had come into play which disrupted the lives of certain individuals, or even groups of individuals, and led some to the conclusion that suicide was their only option...

Having established that the **individual decision** to commit suicide was, logically, based upon the operation of some form of **external pressure** or social constraint, Durkheim needed to theorise the basic nature of the relationship between the two:

1. In the first place, Durkheim considered that the propensity of an individual to commit suicide (that is, the relative likelihood of one individual committing suicide whilst another does not), was related to two basic concepts:

a. Levels of social integration

By "social integration" Durkheim meant the way in which people come to see and feel themselves to be part of a greater whole (a "society", for example). As we have seen, the main mechanism for integrating people into society is the

socialisation process and, for our purposes here, we can consider "socialisation as an integrating mechanism" on two main levels:

Firstly, the kind of socialisation that is required to allow people to develop recognisably human behaviour. This form of the socialisation process is a mechanism for integrating people into the existing culture of the society into which they are born.

Secondly, although our initial socialisation teaches us the basic rules involved in "normal" cultural life, Durkheim argued that people had to continually reaffirm their "sense of belonging" to both social groups and society as a whole (since without this continual reaffirmation of their social existence people would lose sight of the fact that they belonged to a common collective). The function of social institutions (such as work, the family, education, religion and so forth) was partly an integrating one. Through collective activity, people were able to repeatedly affirm their membership of - and sense of belonging to - social groups / society.

An integrated individual feels secure because he / she feels wanted and / or needed by others. Without this "sense of belonging", Durkheim argued, people felt "lost" and "worthless" - cast adrift, as it were from the normal activities of the society into which they were born.

b. Levels of social regulation.

By "social regulation", Durkheim meant the ways in which social groups / societies attempt to control their members range of behaviour. This involves things like legal norms (laws), customs, traditions and the like, as well as the less-formal range of norms of behaviour that people routinely develop as a means of controlling both their own and others' behaviour.

Both of the above concepts could be applied to relationships at the level of society as a whole and at the level of group relationships within societies.

In the above respect, Durkheim was concerned to elaborate the principles upon which social order was based (how it was produced and maintained). The constraints acting upon individual behaviour, he believed, fell into the two broad categories noted above:

1. Society integrates people into collective norms, values, beliefs and so forth through the socialisation process.
2. Society regulates the potentially limitless desires of individual social actors by defining specific goals and the means of attaining such goals.

The following table illustrates the relationship Durkheim elaborated between the social order existing in any given society and different types of suicide:

Social Order	Integration

	When "in balance" the individual is "protected" from the likelihood of committing suicide.		Type of Suicide
Regulation		Lack of integration	Egoistic
		Over-integration	Altruistic
Normal Form		Lack of regulation	Anomic
	Pathological Form	Over-regulation	Fatalistic

In the above, we can see the way in which Durkheim argued that suicides could be classified in terms of different types, each of which was related to some aspect of social order (and some aspect of social pressure).

In some cases, for example, suicide rates might dramatically increase in a society that was undergoing widespread social upheaval (a political crisis such as a revolution or an economic crisis such as the collapse of the banking system).

In other cases, suicide rates might dramatically increase only amongst certain parts of the population directly and inextricably linked to a particular social crisis (such as the suicide rate increasing amongst stockbrokers - but not amongst other social groups - during a banking crisis that does not affect society as a whole).

Before we look at Durkheim's methodology, it might be useful to briefly elaborate the four types of suicide identified by Durkheim:

1. **Egoistic** (Lack of social integration):

In this instance, suicide results from a failure (within a social group whose membership the individual values) of group members to reciprocate (that is, return) an individual's intense feelings of responsibility for his / her actions. In this respect, egoistic suicide derives from a weakening of the social ties that bind the individual to the group (or indeed, society). When people become detached from group values and expectations they suffer what Durkheim termed an "excess of individualism", resulting in suicide becoming a strong behavioural response.

For example, Durkheim noted that amongst 19th century Protestants the suicide rate was significantly greater than amongst Catholics. He partly attributed this fact to the idea that Protestants were largely left, by their Church, to work-out the exact means towards their own salvation - the Church did not provide clear rules in this respect (unlike the Catholic Church). An individual unable to come to terms with shaping his / her faith may develop doubts about his / her ability to live-up to the expectations of other Church members and, in such a situation, egoistic suicide is likely to result.

Thus, because the Protestant Church did not lay-down such clear rules of integration, members of this Church were more-prone to egoism, were more-likely to be thrown back upon their personal resources in times of crisis and hence more-likely to commit suicide than Catholics.

"Protection" from suicide, therefore, came not from "faith" or religious beliefs, but from the integrating quality of the Catholic Church's way of life.

Similarly, married people with children were statistically less likely than single people or childless couples to commit suicide - again, the crucial variable is not marriage itself, but the integrating effects of family life, responsibility for children and so forth.

In addition, the fact that suicide rates decline in times of war was explained by Durkheim in terms of the integrating effect upon society of people having a "common cause" against a "common enemy".

2. **Altruistic** (Over-integration):

In this instance, suicide results from an over-integration of the individual into the norms and values of a social group. In this respect, it is the opposite of egoistic suicide insofar as the individual feels unable to resist the demands made upon him / her by the social group to which he / she is intimately attached. In a sense, a person's individual identity is submerged into the identity of the group itself. An individual who, for example, feels that they have disgraced the group may be driven towards suicide as a means of moral atonement.

In Japan, for example, the concept of honour may drive an individual to commit ritual suicide if they believe they have brought dishonour to their primary social group - the soldier who behaves in a cowardly way in battle, the general who suffers a crushing defeat and so forth may be driven towards suicide to atone for the social disgrace they believe themselves to have brought upon their comrades.

In this respect, suicide may well be looked upon as a deeply-honourable form of behaviour - something for which the individual is to be commended rather than despised. Unlike egoistic suicide, the taking of one's own life can be viewed as conforming to group norms, rather than deviating from them.

The example of Captain Oates suicide during Scott's expedition to the South Pole is often cited as an example of "altruistic suicide". Briefly explain:

a. The meaning of "altruism":

b. Why Captain Oates' behaviour can be considered as altruistic suicide

3. **Anomic** (Lack of social regulation):

The concept of "anomie" can be loosely translated as a state of "normlessness" and, in this instance, suicide is seen to become a possibility when an individual is suddenly cast adrift from the familiar normative surroundings in his / her life. As **Nisbet** ("The Sociological Tradition") notes:

"Anomic suicide is caused by the sudden dislocation of normative systems - the breakdown of values by which one may have lived for a lifetime."

In this respect, anomic forms of suicide become a possibility when an individual becomes uncertain about the world in which he / she lives. Durkheim observed that this form of suicidal behaviour was relatively common in times of both economic depression and prosperity. In keeping with his realist methodology, he argued that suicide did not result from either poverty or prosperity, but from the increased social instability that resulted from social change (in both individual and wider social terms).

For example, it is not poverty itself that produces "suicidal despair" in the individual. The poverty-stricken individual who is most likely to commit suicide is one who has seen a rapid deterioration in his / her individual circumstances (the classic example being the stockbroker who loses everything - job, status, income and so forth - in a banking collapse). Thus, it is not the fact of being poor that makes suicide an option, but the normative dislocation in an individual's life that results from a rapid change in social circumstances. In this respect, as male unemployment has increased in Britain over the past 15 years, we have seen a marked increase in suicides amongst this group of people.

Similarly, the rich are no-more likely to commit suicide than the poor. The rich suicidal individual is one who is likely to have seen a rapid change in their social situation (such as, for example, by winning the football pools) - a rapid change in which the norms and values that had stood them in good stead for most of their lifetime no-longer apply. Their changed social situation may make such norms less relevant to their new social situation and, in the relative absence of such social regulation, this may make such individuals more-prone to anomic suicide.

4. **Fatalistic** (Over-regulation).

This form of suicide was seen by Durkheim to be the opposite of anomic suicide and was seen to occur amongst social groups that suffered from oppressive social discipline and regulation. Although Durkheim considered this form of suicide to be almost non-existent in modern societies (and consequently did not it to any great extent), an example here might be the high rates of suicide amongst slaves.

The "causes" of suicide were seen, by Durkheim, to be located in the precise relationship of an individual to both society as a whole and the social groups to which the individual belonged. We can summarise this idea in the following way:

1. Although people are conscious beings, their consciousness is not rooted in some form of abstract set of ideas about the world. People develop norms and values through their social interaction and such ideas:

a. Act as guides for their behaviour.

b. Condition their response to social changes.

2. In this respect, people do not behave in "random" ways (unless they are "insane").

People behave with reference to the behaviour of others and, consequently, their behaviour is conditioned by the behaviour of others.

3. If this is the case, then it follows that the behaviour of individuals is closely related to the social circumstances within which they find themselves. A perfectly "normal", socially-integrated, individual may suddenly find themselves (through some form of rapid social change - a loss of employment, the death of a loved one, the collapse of a government and so forth) in a social situation where the old rules of behaviour no longer seem to apply. Their world is "turned upside down" and they are simply unable to adjust. In such circumstances, the taking of one's own life becomes a solution to an intolerable burden...

4. Thus, suicidal behaviour is a combination of both social circumstances and conscious choice (insofar as an individual - ultimately - can choose whether or not to commit suicide). Durkheim's basic argument, in this respect is that although the act itself is a personal choice, it is the social circumstances within which the individual finds him / herself that determine whether or not the individual is likely to see suicide as an option in the first place...

In the above we can see that Durkheim's methodology is a mixture of both positivist and realist principles of explanation:

"Positivist" in the sense that he tried to make the theoretical connection between an individual's social situation and their "state of mind", such that the latter was somehow determined (or conditioned if you like) by the former.

"Realist" in the sense that he argued that the relationship between an individual's "social being" as a member of society and their "state of mind" was connected by empirically unobservable factors - "hidden social forces" (or, as we will see in the next Study Pack, "mechanisms") that push and pressurised individuals into making choices about their behaviour.

It would be useful, therefore, to now outline the basic methodology Durkheim used in this study in more detail.

Durkheim's methodological principles were developed in "The Rules of Sociological Method", 1895, and his main argument in this respect was:

1. The focus of sociological enquiry is "social facts", not individual consciousness.

2. Social facts are the outcome of relationships between people. People themselves do not constitute social facts.

3. We must, therefore, study the consequences - both intended and unintended - of people's behaviour, not their individual consciousness, motivations and so forth.

4. Social facts, in this respect, are:

- a. External to individuals.
- b. Constraints on the behaviour of individuals.

In this sense, the "rules" that **Durkheim** elaborated fall into five basic categories:

1. The direct, objective, observation of social facts.
2. Description of these facts after the observation of many cases.
3. The classification of related facts into species of social fact.
4. The exploration of the causes of variation between species through a comparative method of observation.
5. Deriving general laws from the above.

However, a major problem in this respect is how can we observe moral phenomena directly?

The answer is that we cannot, but what we can do is to **infer** the existence of social facts from the direct observation of their effects.

Thus, the existence of patterns of suicidal behaviour, for example, means that something is causing this effect and, in this respect, we can "theorise backwards" (from the effect to the cause) using **inductive logic**.

The Logic of Durkheim's Analysis of Suicide.

1. Initial collection of data:

It was a fact that people killed themselves (a simple point, I know, but if we don't begin with this observation then there's nothing to actually collect data about).

To discover whether or not suicide was a social phenomenon, Durkheim required:

- a. A large amount of data (because he wanted to ensure that he had a sufficient sample of data for his analysis).
- b. Cross-cultural data (because he wanted to check that the causes of suicide really were social and for this he needed to compare different societies).
- c. Inter-societal data (data collected from different times within the same society).

For these purposes, he used **Official Statistics** relating to suicide.

2. Analysis of data:

Are there patterns or regularities in the suicide statistics?

If "yes" then this suggests some kind of social cause.

If "no", then suicidal behaviour has no social cause - it is a problem of individual psychology.

Thus, logically:

If suicide has no social cause, suicides would be randomly distributed in terms of such things as:

Time of year

Social characteristics of suicidal individuals (age, class, gender, etc).

3. Since Durkheim discovered patterns in the statistics, how could he account for these regularities?

- a. By analysing data and classifying these patterns.
- b. By analysing what was happening in society at the time such patterns emerged.

For example, if a pattern of suicide emerges around the end of December, it is necessary to analyse the situation to see if there is a correlation between the end of December and some social event:

If there is a **correlation**, then we need to specify the nature of their relationship

If there is **no correlation** between a pattern of suicide and a social event then the hypothesis is refuted and we need to construct a new hypothesis...

4. Once Durkheim had collected and analysed the data, he discovered:

- a. Patterns of suicide
- b. A correlation between these patterns and various "social events". for example:

Religious festivals,
Banking crises,
War, etc

5. The next step, therefore, was to try and account for this correlation. What, in effect, was special about these social events that led to an increase / decrease in the number of suicides when they occurred?

As we have seen, Durkheim rejected the idea that it was the event itself that was the cause of suicidal behaviour, since this would only account for why some people, but not others, committed suicide. Instead, he went back to the concepts of social integration and social regulation in the attempt to:

- a. Explain the correlation
- b. Identify any possible causal relationships.

Thus, Durkheim sought to explain suicidal behaviour in terms of the extent to which individuals were socially integrated and socially regulated at the time of a particular social event or social change. In this way, Durkheim was able to explain:

- a. Why patterns of suicide emerged from time to time
- b. Why some individuals were more-predisposed to commit suicide than others.

In methodological terms, Durkheim parts company with positivism when he theorises his explanation of suicide in terms of underlying, unobservable, social / moral causes (integration and regulation).

In this respect, Durkheim was arguing that there was nothing particularly significant about, for example, a religious festival, as such, and suicide. The significance of the relationship, for Durkheim, lay in the idea that religious festivals function to promote social integration / social solidarity and the potential suicide somehow feels left-out of the integrating process (cut-off from his or her fellow human beings).

In the above sense, Durkheim was not arguing (positivist terms) that there was a relationship between religion and suicide. On the contrary, he was arguing that:

Religion functioned to promote social integration.

Individuals who, for whatever reason, were not fully **integrated** ("normally integrated") suffered psychologically and, as a result of the combination of these factors (celebration of integration and the lack of integration experienced by the individual), suicide became a viable option as an expression of the individual's "unhappiness" / exclusion / discontent, etc.

The relationship between methodology and methods of data collection is a significant one in sociology. Using Durkheim's methodological principles, explain why you think he chose to use Official suicide statistics as the basis of his analysis of suicide:

Post-Durkheim Positivism and Suicide.

As **Taylor** ("Suicide", 1988) notes:

"Although there have been hundreds of subsequent studies of suicide rates (not all by sociologists), no one since Durkheim has attempted to construct a complete, embracing theory of suicide. Many later studies have restricted themselves either to 'testing' the relationship between suicide and particular variables, or to refining and developing aspects of Durkheim's theory."

There are a number of different studies which we can briefly outline, in the above respect:

1. **Halbwachs** ("The Causes of Suicide", 1930):

In this study, one aspect of suicide that Halbwachs identified was that related to the concept of "social isolation". Individuals who were socially isolated, in some way, suffered from a form of under regulation / lack of social integration and this made them more-susceptible to suicidal forms of behaviour.

2. **Sainsbury** ("Suicide In London", 1955) took the above a step further by trying to test the idea of the relationship between social isolation and suicide. Sainsbury found that there was a relationship between the two, insofar as the districts with the highest recorded levels of suicide also had the highest levels of social isolation (and social mobility).

3. **Gibbs and Martin** ("Status Integration and Suicide", 1964) argued that, since Durkheim gave no clear definition of social integration, it was not possible to operationalize (that is, test) this idea. As an alternative, they proposed using the idea

of "status integration", in order to measure the extent to which an individual's different social statuses overlapped.

The less the overlap (level of integration) between an individual's different statuses, the greater the likelihood of role conflict and, in this respect, there was less likelihood of support for an individual in times of social crisis / social dislocation.

As an example of this idea, a man who has been married for a number of years before his wife suddenly dies is confronted by a social crisis. His life may appear to lose its meaning and the norms by which he has lived his life over a number of years suddenly become almost irrelevant to him. In this situation, such a person is "at risk" of committing suicide. For Gibbs and Martin, the greater the level of social support he is able to get from his other statuses in life (father, employee and so forth), the less likely he is to actually commit suicide.

Thus, the decision as to whether or not to take his own life is conditioned by the relationships around him, insofar as if his other statuses are relatively well integrated, he is likely to draw social support from them (and hence reject the option of suicide). If, on the other hand, he lacks these statuses or they are not well integrated (he gets little social support from others concerning his loss) then suicide becomes a likely option.

Henry and Short ("Suicide and Homicide", 1954) argue that suicides occur to a greater extent amongst high status groups than amongst low status groups. Summarise, in your own words, their basic argument.