
UNIT 12 COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

By the time you complete the study of this Unit, you should be able to

- explain the relation between society and individual consciousness
- discuss Durkheim’s concept of ‘collective conscience’
- describe the meanings of ‘collective representations’
- explain the ‘collective’ nature of ‘concepts’ or ‘categories of thought’, and
- illustrate collective representations through religion.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 10 you have already learnt about Durkheim’s break with philosophy. You have also studied that he made efforts to raise sociology to the status of science. Now we come to the central theme of Durkheimian thought: the relation between individuals and collectivity. Durkheim wanted to develop a scientific comprehension of this relation in its various forms. However, he was not satisfied with all earlier social theories, which considered ‘individual’ as their starting-point. He rejected theories of society built upon the ‘will’, ‘desire’ or ‘volition’ of the individual and held that scientific understanding of all social phenomena must emerge from the collective nature of a social group, community or society.

In order to explain Durkheim's concept of collective representations, this unit covers five main areas of discussion. First, it tells you about society and individual consciousness. Then it mentions the concept of **collective conscience**. Next it discusses at length the main theme i.e. collective representations. Lastly, it speaks about collective representations in terms of cognition and religion.

12.2 SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Society has a nature, which is peculiar to itself. It is different from individual nature. Society pursues ends which are special to it. The compulsion of collective existence is such that individuals must forget their particular interests. Individuals must submit to some sort of inconvenience or sacrifice without which social life would be impossible. Thus society imposes upon individuals the nature of its collectivity. For example, at every moment in our life we are obliged to submit ourselves to the rules of conduct or behaviour, which we have neither made nor desired. Such rules of conduct are sometimes even in opposition to individual's instincts and interests. However, we are supposed to obey and follow them. For instance, you may want to lead a completely care free life, without work, studies or family responsibilities. But society forces you to behave in a responsible manner and fulfil your various obligations. In this process, the special reality of society moulds the thinking, acting and consciousness of an individual.

Society exercises the moral authority over individuals. This moral authority provides society venerable respect. The ideas, beliefs, emotions etc. which society imposes upon individuals are marked out for respect. Since such ideas, beliefs and moral codes etc. are upheld by the collectivity, an individual breach is liable to invite societal action or punishment. Thus everything which is good for the health of society is cultivated by it as something **sacred**. Religious dogma, totemic symbols or modern flag etc. are all sacred things. They inspire in the individual at once a feeling of awe and reverence. In opposition to sacred things there are **profane** ones. Profane things are not accorded similar reverence as given to sacred ones. Moreover society keeps profane things apart from sacred things. Durkheim held that sacred things are those, which the interdictions protect and isolate. Profane things are those to which respect is denied and at times people are told to keep a distance from them. Finally there are always rules of conduct, which prescribe how men should behave in relation to sacred things.

Society does not confine itself to demanding sacrifices or efforts from individuals. It does not act upon individuals wholly from without. Society exists in and through individual consciousness. Hence societal force must also penetrate individuals and organise itself within them. Thus it becomes an integral part of individual consciousness. This is the reason that societal beliefs, morals and rules etc. are elevated and magnified by individuals. Their source of origin cannot be traced or attributed to single individuals. Rather their perpetuation lies in collective existence. However such beliefs, ideas, emotions become a permanent part of individual consciousness.

Thus on the one hand, there is the sacred world of things. It is elaborated by a collectivity. It fuses individual consciences into communion. It imposes love and respect and transfers society into individual minds. It connects individuals with something beyond them. On the other hand there is the profane world of things. It gives expression to individual organisms. It also expresses all objects to which individuals are directly related. It relates to men's ordinary day to day life. It involves daily personal preoccupations. This way individual consciousness acquires from society a twofold world i.e. sacred and profane. After appreciating the difference between the sacred and profane, it is easy to complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

What is the difference between

- a) *Gangajal* and tap-water
- b) *Prasad* and refreshment?

Answer the above question and discuss, in about 100 words, which is sacred and which is not. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

12.3 COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE

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

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

or **solidarity** of a society. In primitive societies, collective conscience is strongest and all-embracing. However, in advanced societies there occurs a greater differentiation of individuals. Everyone becomes more and more free to believe, to desire and to act according to one’s own or one’s group preferences in a large number of circumstances. Thus the sphere of influence of collective conscience is reduced. There also occurs a weakening of collective reactions against violations of prohibitions etc.

The concept of collective conscience was originally used and developed by Durkheim in his first major work i.e. *The Division of Labour in Society* (1895). The strength of collective conscience will be later described through the nature of social solidarity which forms part of Unit 13. In his later works, Durkheim developed the concept of ‘collective representations’, which had greater theoretical potential.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Explain in simple words, in five lines, your understanding of Durkheim’s views on the relation between ‘society’ and ‘individual consciousness’.

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- ii) Define, in three lines, the concept of collective conscience given by Durkheim.

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12.4 COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Durkheim looks into the role of collective beliefs and sentiments and especially of morality and religion in all societies. How are they inculcated and how do they exercise control over society? How are they affected by society and how in turn do they affect other features of social life? How do collective beliefs and sentiments change during different stages of a society’s development? To prepare for such answers Durkheim used the French term ‘representations collective’, which translated into English is ‘collective representations’.

12.4.0 Collective Representation — Definition

The concept of ‘collective representations’ is a major contribution of Durkheim’s social theory. In fact, Durkheim’s later work (1897 onwards) can be seen as a systematic study of ‘collective representations’. Initial

definition forwarded by Durkheim (in his book *Suicide*) stated that 'essentially social life is made of representations'.

There is a difference between an object, and the way it is seen, the manner in which it is described, and its meaning understood commonly in a society. The object is thus presented again in terms of meanings, a word is given a meaning. The object or the word is thus 'represented'; for a scientist water is represented as the formula H₂O, for a doctor 'fever' is represented as 'temperature above 99°F., in case of religion a piece of stone may be represented as 'Mahadeva'. College or school teams are represented through their symbolic colours, light blue, dark blue, green and white, pink and blue etc. or in Asiad and the Olympics, national teams through their colours.

Collective representations are states of the collective conscience, which are different in nature from the states of the individual conscience. They express the way in which a particular group of individuals conceives itself in relation to the objects, which affect the social group. Collective representations are socially generated and they refer to, and are, in some sense, about society.

12.4.1 Individual Representations

Durkheim stressed the independent reality of collective representations. He used the example of individual representations. Now the substrata of individual representations are like the brain cells of the body. And they result from the combined activity of this substratum. But they cannot be wholly reduced to or explained in terms of the constituent parts of their substratum. In fact individual representations have their own characteristics and have relative autonomy independent of substratum. Further various individual representations (emerging from different persons) can directly influence one another and combine according to their own convenience.

12.4.2 Process of Constituting Collective Representations

Durkheim states that collective representations result from the substratum of associated individuals. But they cannot be reduced to and wholly explained by features of constituent individuals. They are 'sui generis' that is, they generate themselves. Original and fundamental forms of collective representations bear the marks of their origin. Hence the primary matter of all social consciousness is in close relation with the nature of the substratum. This substratum is constituted by the number and nature of social elements, the way in which they are grouped and distributed over a geographical area etc. However once the primary basis of representations has thus been formed, they become partially autonomous realities. Then they live their own life with the power to attract and repel one another. Further, they form synthesis of all kinds and engender new collective representations. As examples, Durkheim noted the enormous growth of myths, legends, theological systems and religious sects etc. which combine and separate and over a period of time get transformed and give rise to a complex of beliefs, values and morals etc. or concepts or categories of thought.

12.5 COGNITION AND COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Cognition is the act of knowing, taking note of things. It is a mental process through which we receive knowledge about events or happenings around us. In group situations people talk about these and thereby increase each other's awareness. Out of the inter play of minds come symbols or products of thought which are mutually owned and mutually proclaimed. Thus collective representation is either a concept or a category of thought held in a sufficiently similar form by many persons to allow effective communication. These collective symbols have force because they have been jointly created and developed. They are independent of any particular mind or set of minds. They possess tremendous force over individuals. They exercise an integrative effect on society, e.g. flag is a political representation; sacred texts are often a religious representation, like the Bible, the Ramayana, the Guru Granth Sahib, and so on.

We will elaborate in some detail the nature of the concepts of thought, and the way they become and act as collective representations.

Concepts of thought are in opposition to sensual representations i.e. sensations, perceptions or images etc. Sensual representations are in a perpetual flux.

They come after each other like waves of a river. Even for a little time they do not remain the same thing. We are never sure of again finding a perception in the same way as we experienced it the first time. On the other hand a concept has a particular stable existence, and it does not move by itself and resists change. It changes only when we discover some imperfection in a concept and rectify it. For example the system of concepts with which we think in everyday life is that which is expressed by the vocabulary of our mother tongue. Every 'word' is representative of a concept. Now language is something fixed. It changes very slowly and consequently it is the same with the conceptual system, which it expresses. Same is true of scientific terminology. After appreciating the relation between cognition and collective representation you can easily complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

Note the words used for father, father's brother, father's father, and mother's brother in your language and in two other languages. See how these terms are common and how people mean the same thing. Also note the words in three or four languages that describe marriage, and birth. These words express the idea of collective representation. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Further a concept is universal or at least capable of becoming so. An individual can hold a concept in common with other individuals. Individuals can communicate through a concept. On the other hand a sensation holds closely to an individual's organism and personality. It cannot be detached

and passed to other individuals. However, conversation and all intellectual communications between individuals are an exchange of concepts. Thus concepts and categories of thought are essentially impersonal representations. It is through these that cognition structure and human intelligence communicates.

Concepts are the work of the community. They bear the mark of no particular mind. They spring from the associational nature of a group or collectivity. Categories of thought are more stable than sensations or images. The reason is that collective representations are more stable than the individual representations. Only slight changes in environment can affect an individual consciousness, however, any change in the mental status of a society can only be effected through events of extreme gravity, e.g. revolutions or political movements, such as the National Movement for Independence.

Language and consequently the system of concepts, which it translates, is the product of collective elaboration. What it expresses is the manner in which society as a whole represents the facts of collective experience. The ideas which correspond to the diverse elements of language are thus collective representations.

Concepts are collective representations and belong to the whole society. If they belong to the whole social group, it is not because they represent the average of the corresponding individual representations. Because in that case collective representations would be poorer than individual representations in intellectual content. However, as a matter of fact, collective representations contain much more that surpasses the knowledge of the average individual.

Concepts as collective representations are more or less general ideas prevalent in a society. They express categories and classes rather than particular objects, because unique and variable characteristics of things only rarely interest society. Collective representations are the work of society and they are enriched by the societal experience. For example in the context of modern nation states, collective representations are social facts located in the constitutions, the national flag, and the national anthem. Before proceeding to the next sub-section let us complete Check Your Progress 2!

Check Your Progress 2

- i) We mention some of the concepts used in Sociology, for example socialisation, community, social system. Mention five other concepts in the subject.
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)
 - e)

ii) Fill in the blanks in the following sentence.

The of individual are like the brain cells of the body.

12.6 RELIGION AND COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Durkheim considered religion as a reflection of man’s relation with society and nature. Religion cannot be reduced to belief in God. Because there are religions without an apparent God. For example Buddhism denied the existence of God. Further, in all religions there are vital elements, which belong to the day-to-day life like food, drink, body, physical environment etc. which are in no way linked to a deity.

Religion has a foothold in the reality of society. The social basis of religion and the religious basis of society are explained by Durkheim. Religion is a consecration of society. Religion at bottom represents man’s respect for society, which is expressed through a high degree of symbolic intensity. Religion is a reflection of society, more specifically of collective representations.

At one level Durkheim considered the idea of sacred along with communal as the basis of his interpretation of the character of religion. The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane is the distinctive trait of religious thought. The beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are systems of representations, which express the nature of virtues and powers of sacred things. They also represent the relations between sacred and profane things.

Besides the notion of sacred, Durkheim noted the obligatory character of the religious beliefs lying behind religious practices. There was a pressure exercised by a society upon its members to prevent them from deviating from the common religious faith. Thus religious phenomena consist of organised systems and collections of obligatory beliefs united with definite practices which relate to the objects given in the beliefs. Religion is obligatory in nature and what is obligatory has its origins in ‘social’. The individual’s conformity to religion involves his/her deference to the moral power of society. Thus it is society which prescribes to the believer the beliefs and rites which he/she must observe. Hence the rites and beliefs are society’s creation. The determining causes of religious phenomena lie in the nature of society. The change and evolution in religious beliefs and practices etc. in different forms result due to transformations taking place in the social organisation of a society in the course of history.

The true nature of religion, Durkheim held, can be revealed by observing the ‘conditions of collective existence’. Religious representations must be seen as work of the nature of collective conscience. They help in the formation of ideas and developing deeper interest in collective representations in social life.

Out of the commonest object, collective representations can make a most powerful sacred being. The powers thus conferred on an object are based

on idea and yet they act as if they are real. They determine the conduct of men similar to physical force. Thus social thought acquires the imperative authority over and above the individual thought. Social thought can add to reality or deduct from it according to circumstances. This way, an idea becomes a reality within the social kingdom. Hence religious ideas or beliefs are fixed on any material things which symbolise them.

Religious force is primarily the sentiments inspired by the group in its members. It is projected outside of the consciousness of individuals. These religious sentiments get fixed upon some object, which becomes sacred. Any object can fulfil this function. The religious belief has nothing to do with the inherent properties of the object of worship. The world of religious beliefs is added and superimposed on the articles of worship. They are simply the symbolic forms of collective representations.

In a primitive society, members of a clan feel that they are somehow related through a common symbol, like a plant, an animal or an object. One group is called 'Crow' yet another 'Eagle' or a 'Snake'; there are others that take a place name. This name helps them in many ways. Their attitude towards the totem is one of respect. They will not harm that plant or animal. If there is a grave emergency, they will first worship it and offer collective excuse before killing it. They have a system of rituals for preserving their totem symbol. In this way the totem of a clan outwardly is an expression of totemic principle i.e. a superior power. However it is also the symbol of the determined society i.e. the clan. It is the flag of the clan. It is the sign by which the clan distinguishes itself from other clans. It is the visible mark of the personality of the clan. So it is at once the symbol of the supernatural and of the society. The god of the clan, the totemic principle, is therefore, the clan itself. The clan gets personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or plant, which serves, as the totem. The collective representation of the sacred is the cult. The idea of religion originates, perpetuates in and through collective representations of beliefs, ideas, values and religious thoughts and practised through cults and rituals by the community of believers (also called a Church in a wider sense).

Durkheim considered the relationship of man, society and nature. He noted that the study of nature had increasingly been taken over by science. Thus the extension of science reduced the sphere of religion. Earlier religion represented all forms of knowledge — sacred and secular. With the growth of science, the sphere of the secular increased. Earlier morality was considered as religious duty. Durkheim rejected the religious part of that duty and expressed his faith in secular morality. In the modern times secular morality would, according to him, provide the basis for the moral order in society. Thus secular morality could become a new form of group conscience. After learning about Durkheim's view on religion and collective representation, it is a good idea to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) What is meant by secular morality? Write your answer in five lines.

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ii) How does religion become the soul of society? Write your answer in ten lines.

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12.7 LET US SUM UP

Durkheim viewed the relation between the society and the individual and started with society, not the individual or his will. Language, grammar, and categories of thought are meaningful when more than one individual uses them. Thus thought is collective in its usage and origin. Religion is also a collective mode of behaviour and thought — best illustrated in the religion of the simplest societies — the tribals of Australia. Common cults represent the collective identity of people organised in clans. The ‘totem’ reflects that identity and religion becomes the soul of society. As man’s knowledge of nature improves, science adds secular vision to the people, and they begin to look to secular morality for maintaining their social order.

12.8 KEY WORDS

Collective Conscience According to Durkheim, collective conscience refers to the totality of belief and sentiments common to average member of a society.

Profane The elements of a social system, which are not connected with religion or religious purposes. In other words, they are secular.

Sacred	Those elements of a social system which relate to religion or are set apart for the worship of deity.
Solidarity	It refers to unity (as of a group or class) that is based on or produces community of interests, objectives and standards.

12.9 FURTHER READING

Lukes, S. 1973. *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*. Allen Lane and The Penguin Press: London.

Nisbet, R.A. 1974. *The Sociology of Emile Durkheim* Oxford University Press: New York.

Raymond, A. 1979. (reprint). *Main Currents in Sociological Thought-11*. Penguin:

Harmondsworth. See Emile Durkheim, pp. 21-108.

12.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Society has an existence of its own which is different from the collective existence of individuals in society. Society imposes certain restrictions on individual consciousness and compels them to conform to social rules of conduct or behaviour. Thus, the compulsion of collective existence due to which individuals conform to social rules is such that individual interests get subordinated to the collective interests of society.
- ii) According to Durkheim, collective conscience refers to the body of beliefs and sentiments, which are found in the average members of a society. It is independent of the particular existence of individuals in society.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) a) function, b) structure, c) stratification, d) social change, and e) conflict
- ii) substratum, representations

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Moral force controls individual's behaviour. This force makes a person obey the social commands or norms. In earlier societies this force was sanctioned through religion. In modern societies, religious force has become weaker. Yet society controls a member's behaviour. Morality continues to be there, but is now delinked from religion. Such morality is secular.

- ii) Society has collective sentiments. Certain objects, places, times are considered sacred, respected and some times associated with worship of deities and Gods. There are other sets of objects that are considered impure like dead body of animals, dirty clothes, and burning ghats (cremation grounds). Contacts with such things or places are considered polluting. The definition of the pure and the impure, the desirable and the undesirable is collective. Thus society creates the idea of heaven or hell, even of God and the Devil. These ideas and practices like cult and worship or purification unite the people into a common group sentiment. The group is then known for its beliefs and cults, and religion thereby expresses the soul of the society.